

EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Concerning Learner Autonomy: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract: Learner autonomy has been a key area in foreign language teaching for more than 30 years. Researchers agree that learner autonomy could make learning more effective and that teachers play very significant role in improving learner autonomy. In many cases teachers' beliefs concerning learner autonomy would influence their teaching practices. Many existing studies regarding learner autonomy are conducted from the perspective of students. However, fewer researches have been carried out from the perspective of teachers' beliefs, especially in China. In order to address the gap, the present study tried to explore the EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers' beliefs and practices concerning learner autonomy. Four English teachers from two universities were purposefully selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data were analyzed by a narrative inquiry. Findings suggested that participants held positive attitude towards developing learner autonomy. Teachers' roles as a facilitator, a counselor and a resource got general approbation. Yet their teaching practices showed different degrees of intervention in promoting learner autonomy. In addition, due to some difficulties they had encountered there were some mismatches between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices. Even though their practice provided some support of learner autonomy, they adopted traditional teaching more frequently and seldom provided learners with opportunities for decision making. It is hoped that this study can provide some inspirations for the future research.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Teachers' Belief, Teaching Practice, Teacher's Role

1. Introduction

In the past 30 years, increasing attention was paid to communicative language teaching and learner-centered teaching mode, which put stress on the need for developing learner autonomy. The concept "learner autonomy" was first introduced by Henri Holec into foreign language teaching in the 1980's. He defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" [1]. With learner-centered teaching mode widely accepted, there is a consensus among researchers that learner autonomy could make learning more purposeful, increase motivation and lead to effective learning [2-4]. In 2007, the Ministry of Education of China issued College English Curriculum Requirements, which clearly pointed out that one of the goals of College English teaching is to promote students' learner autonomy [5]. Accordingly, great

importance is attached to the promotion of learner autonomy. However, it is difficult to carry out in the English classroom, which is probably caused by the longstanding exam-oriented education and traditional teaching. It drew researchers' attention. Consequently studies on the learner autonomy were booming in the first decade of 21st century in China [6]. Many studies investigated students' learner autonomy or tried to find out the strategies to promote such ability [7, 8]. Most of them are non-empirical researches. However, fewer empirical researches have been carried out from the perspective of teachers' beliefs with regard to learner autonomy, especially in China. Yunus and Arshad found that teachers' beliefs and practices of autonomous learning vary in different cultural contexts. [9] They suggested that research on teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy should be gradually extended to different countries in the world. Therefore, it is significant to do related research in Chinese context. As mentioned earlier,

in China there is very limited empirical research on teachers' beliefs regarding learner autonomy. In 2018, Huang Min and Francis Bond Borg explored college English teachers' beliefs and practices about autonomous study in the classroom by the mixed method. [10] Their results showed inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices. However, it only focuses on teachers' practices in class. Situation out of class was not mentioned. As is known, learning is never confined to classroom. To fill the gap, the present study explored EFL (English as foreign language) teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy and their teaching practices in and out of class. Meanwhile, it aimed to provide some inspirations for the future research.

2. Literature Review

Researchers carry out a large number of discussion and empirical studies on learner autonomy [8, 9, 10]. Many studies have focused on its concept, teacher roles in developing learner autonomy, teachers' practice about learner autonomy, etc. In recent years a small number of researches concerning teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy have emerged in foreign countries. The following is the detailed review from three aspects.

2.1. Concept of Learner Autonomy

There is no consensus among linguists and educators about the concept of learner autonomy. One of the most influential definition is given by Henri Holec. As in [1], he defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Meanwhile, it involves learners' decision-making during the process of learning, especially in setting learning goals, determining content and progress, selecting learning methods, monitoring and assessing learning. Benson and Voller hold that learner autonomy is a kind of potential self-learning behavior [14]. What's more, Dickinson claims that learner autonomy is a kind of learning behavior or mechanism, and that it is both a learning attitude and an independent learning ability [2]. "Attitude" refers to the learners' responsibility of making decisions for their own learning. "Ability" is reflected in the process of decision-making and reflection on the learning. Shu Dingfang claims that the main components of autonomous learning in foreign language learning include attitude, capacity and environment [15]. Attitude refers to the positive attitude towards learning; capacity is that learners can independently fulfill their tasks; environment denotes that learners should be given a lot of opportunities for practice. In sum, although no single definition of learner autonomy is widely accepted, most researchers agree that autonomous learners can take responsibility for learning, identify learning goals, design plans, adjust learning strategies and assess their learning progress [2, 3, 16].

2.2. Teachers' Role in Developing Learner Autonomy

The shift of emphasis from teacher-centered teaching to

learners' autonomous learning doesn't mean that teachers no longer play any role in the process of learning. Many researchers claim the significance of teachers' intervention in guiding and improving learner autonomy [12, 17]. Ganza argues that learner autonomy is determined by the learner ability and the teacher to "generate and keep a particular interrelational climate defined in terms of influence or restraint from influence" [18]. In addition, Xiang Maoying and Wu Yiping found that most teachers agree that teachers should provide guidance and help in learning methods, resources and goal-setting in the learning process and that there are divergences in the degree of teachers' intervention [19]. Voller summarizes teachers' roles in developing learner autonomy as facilitators, counselors and resources [20]. As a facilitator, a teacher can enlighten and motivate learners in the decision-making process. As a counselor, a teacher can give advice and feedback when it is needed to help effective learning. As a resource, a teacher can offer information as much as possible. All in all, instead of being undermined, teachers roles become more varied in developing learner autonomy.

2.3. Teachers' Beliefs and Practices About Learner Autonomy

Belief is defined as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in the sense that it is accepted as true by individuals, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" [21]. In recent ten years, considerable attention has been given to teacher beliefs. Existing literature on EFL teacher beliefs roughly deals with content, affecting factors of teacher beliefs and the relationship between teacher beliefs and their classroom practices [19].

Relatively less attention has been paid to teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy except in a handful of recent studies in foreign countries. Yoshiyuki examined teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy-promoting strategies and their teaching practice [22]. He found that teachers did not make full preparations for promoting learner autonomy. Duong and Seepho investigated 30 and 8 EFL teachers in a Thai university by a questionnaire and an interview respectively [23]. The findings showed the positive attitude of the participants towards the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning and that there are some mismatches between teachers' perceptions and teaching practice. However, it didn't explain more about why. Anthony attempted to identify 5 English teachers' perceptions about learner autonomy as well as the strategies they use to develop autonomy learners in Malaysian setting by an interview [24]. The findings revealed that university teachers has an understanding of what learner autonomy involves. Although teachers use many strategies, there is a lack of focus to develop learner autonomy because of a lot of challenges. Yasmin & Sohail examined the strategies English teacher use to promote learner autonomy in Pakistan. They found that teachers mostly apply teacher-centered approach and would

rather serve as facilitators than as counselors or resources [25].

All in all, many related researches examined teachers' beliefs regarding autonomous language learning by adopting quantitative or mixed method of quantitative and qualitative studies. Most data were collected by questionnaires and interviews. The research setting are universities in the western countries or Southeast Asia. The general findings show teachers' positive attitudes toward learner autonomy. Yet, there are some challenges in teaching practice to prompt learner autonomy.

3. Methodology

In this study, a narrative inquiry is used to investigate EFL teachers' beliefs and practice regarding learner autonomy. According to Connelly and Clandinin, narrative inquiry is "first and foremost a way of thinking about experience" [26]. In educational research, it is usually used in descriptions and

analyses of teacher knowledge [27]. With regard to learner autonomy, individual language teachers may cling to different beliefs and have their own pathway to develop learner autonomy. A narrative inquiry can be more revealing and may provide insights into the complexities of the issue.

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted with four teachers who have been teaching English in two universities. Teacher A and B come from Inner Mongolia University of Technology while Teacher C and D are from Jining Normal University. They were purposefully selected by their teaching experience, gender, title and teaching courses. All of them were informed of the procedure of the research. They showed willingness to participate in the study. In order to ensure their confidentiality, teachers' names were replaced by random alphabets. The following is the detailed teachers' background information.

Table 1. Teachers' background information.

	Gender	Title	Teaching Experience	Teaching Courses
Teacher A	Female	Professor	31 years	Introduction to Linguistics
Teacher B	Female	Associate Professor	20 years	Intensive Reading
Teacher C	Male	Lecturer	15 years	Intensive Reading College English
Teacher D	Female	Teaching Assistant	1.5 years	Intensive Reading Advanced Reading American Literature

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected by semi-structured interviews which consisted of five open-ended questions involving topics like teachers' roles, practices and problems in promoting learner autonomy. The researcher is familiar with the four participants, which can make the interviewees feel at ease and freely narrate their teaching experience. Narrative approach gives more interest in personal experience. Therefore, in this study the researcher tried to avoid subjective judgment and presupposition. For smooth communication, all the interviews were conducted in Mandarin. Each participant was required to narrate their perception and practices in promoting learner autonomy. With their consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure the authenticity of data, the transcribed narratives were sent to each teacher to verify.

There are two kinds of data. One is from the interviews where each teacher gave information of related questions; the other is derived from casual communications with teachers in which they shared their teaching experiences after interviews. They were analyzed through a narrative inquiry on the basis of teachers' stories about their beliefs and teaching practices concerning learner autonomy.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Teacher A's Belief and Practice

Teacher A has taught English for 31 years. She is teaching

introduction to linguistics to the senior students majoring English. When she was a student, she got used to traditional teacher-centered teaching and thus led to over-dependence on teachers and passive learning. After graduation, she became a teacher. During her teaching, she still adopted traditional teaching mode which was taken for granted. Her belief about English teaching and learning didn't significantly change until her experience of further education at a university in Russia. She surprisingly found that teachers there never used spoon-fed way of teaching, that is, teachers only cram knowledge from textbook into students and require rote learning when students fail to understand it. Instead, they assigned many meaningful tasks and asked students to do in or out of the class. At first Teacher A considered such teaching as an irresponsible behaviour. But when she returned to teaching, she found it effective for learners because she acquired more knowledge from the new teaching approach and could learn autonomously. Since then, her teaching beliefs have changed.

Teacher A believed that learner autonomy refers to learners' responsible attitude toward their own learning which is specifically reflected in the process of goal-setting, self-evaluation and other aspects of learning. According to her, the ability of learning autonomy consisted of learning ability, the ability to plan and manage learning. Students' autonomous learning abilities were varied in her class. Most of her students lacked such ability in spite of relatively high proficiency. To motivate their potential, she agreed that a teacher should act as a facilitator, a coordinator and a resource-provider.

During her practice, she realized the importance of learner

autonomy. Thus she attempted to give students opportunities to do tasks on their own. Before class she asked some questions related to teaching focus for students. In class she would help them with guidance if they met problems. Besides, she would assign a general topic for students to do research. Students were encouraged to choose a specific perspective when conducting their tasks. In class students would make presentation of their investigation. From presentation students' ability to solve problems could be shown. However, she also met some obstacles in her promotion of learner autonomy. One problem was the contradiction between more content and the limited course hours. It was difficult to carry out tasks in class. The other problem derived from the students' low-motivation caused by many tasks. Many of her students expected to learn by teacher guide instead of conducting tasks by themselves. Due to that, she attempted to train their ability to work on their own by gradually reduced guidance.

4.2. Teacher B's Belief and Practice

Teacher B has been teaching English for 20 years. At present she teaches freshmen intensive reading. She regarded learner autonomy as an ability to learn independently which requires learners to realize that they play the center roles in the process of learning and thus develop their ability of independent thinking and cooperation. According to her, autonomous learning should involve learners' ability to setting goals, adjusting learning process and evaluating learning effect. Besides, she added that autonomous learning was also reflected in ability to actively accept information and cooperate with others. In her opinion, most students were too dependent on teachers to learn autonomously. That might be caused by their long-established learning habits and beliefs. She pointed out that teachers should raise students' awareness of autonomous learning and guide students and demonstrate how to learn autonomously.

Teacher B attempted to promote learner autonomy in and out of class. In class, she emphasized the development of students' ability of independent thinking. By raising and answering questions by themselves, their learner autonomy might be improved. Out of class she would assign some tasks which require students to collect resource and solve problems through cooperation. She mentioned an example in this regard. She had asked students to search the library for information about global warming. Students were required to sum up the cause and effect of global warming and try to give some solutions. By doing that, students could not only be familiar with the some terms and other information related to the topic but learn to generalize, analyze and solve the problems on their own. Nevertheless, sometimes her expectation was at variance with reality. She aimed to improve students' ability of autonomous learning through tasks. When they worked alone on a task, they were able to fulfill the task. But when they worked together, most students couldn't do things very well. She analyzed that it was probably because they didn't develop the habit of learning cooperatively. She was surprised that many students in her class didn't know each other in spite of the half-year university life. Another challenge for her was her

weak skills in using modern technology. The combination of various teaching media and teaching can stimulate learning interest, enrich information resources and create a good environment for language learning. With so many strong points, application of information technology in teaching can facilitate students' autonomous and cooperative learning. But for her, it is a big challenge because of her lack of ability and motivation to learn new things.

4.3. Teacher C's Belief and Practice

Teacher C teaches intensive reading to freshmen of English major and college English to sophomores of non-English major. During interview, he mentioned that he didn't know learner autonomy very well. He showed his awareness of importance of learner autonomy for learners. In his point of view, learner autonomy indicated that learners can take initiative for their own learning in their spare time. That is, with high motivation, learners can make plans, monitor the process, evaluate method and effect and overcome difficulties in the process of learning. In his eye, there is a gloomy picture of students' autonomous learning. Most students in his class couldn't learn autonomously. Some of them lacked awareness to learn on their own. Others might realize that but didn't know how to learn on their own initiative or couldn't persist. The situation made him depressed. In terms of teachers' roles in developing learner autonomy, he agreed that teachers role is important and they could act as motivators, guides, supervisors and evaluators. As a motivator, a teacher should help students to raise awareness of autonomous learning and give them encouragement. As a guide, a teacher should guide them to achieve learning objectives. As a supervisor and an evaluator, a teacher should check the development or progress of learning, and sometimes give comments on it.

With regard to teachers' practice, Teacher C attempted to stimulate students' motivation of autonomous learning and awareness of how useful English is. In addition, he assisted students in making and carrying out learning plans. What's more, he tried to develop learner autonomy by adjusting teaching content and arrangement, assigning tasks such as presentation with freely-chosen topics, encouraging discussion, etc. The major problem he met was that many students lacked clear goals, firm beliefs and great interest in language learning. Also, many of his students got into the habit of passively receive knowledge instead of taking control of their own learning process. As for teachers, he's not sure to what extent can make balance between learner autonomy and teachers' intervention. Another challenge for him was the limited timing of English course within university curriculum. Thus tasks and activities concerning learner autonomy were mainly conducted out of class, which increased the difficulty in monitoring learning progress.

4.4. Teacher D's Belief and Practice

Teacher D has been teaching English for over 1.5 years. She teaches intensive reading, advanced English and American literature to juniors of English major. In her opinion, instead of

forced learning, learner autonomy refers to students' ability to take the initiative to learn. It is based on their interest and purpose of learning. According to her, learner autonomy was mainly embodied in the ability to define learning goals, to make feasible plans, to adopt proper method, to discipline oneself and to reflect on the learning. She found that many of her students made impracticable plan for learning and almost impossible to apply, which made them depressed. Besides, there were problems with their learning methods, self-discipline etc. Although most of her students could not learn autonomously, she took a positive attitude toward promoting learner autonomy. She held that every student has potential to learn autonomously. Most of her students were willing to learn English. They could not learn autonomously because they were too dependent upon teachers and never aware of their own interest and active learning. Teachers should motivate them and help to achieve their full potential. She mentioned a teacher's role as a guide, a counselor and a model for students. Teachers should realize that students are the center in learning. In autonomous learning, students try to achieve learning goals through independent exploration, analyses, questioning and creation. What teachers should do is to help students set up awareness of autonomous learning and provide more free space for students. If necessary, teachers should give advice or help but cannot take over learning. What's more, she mentioned that teachers ought to practice what they preach and learn autonomously, which set a good example and motivate students. Thus, students could learn from teachers about the process of autonomous learning.

In respect of teaching practice, Teacher D tried to promote students' autonomous learning in and out of class. In class, she sometimes assigned tasks which had broad scopes in order to give students more freedom of choice. For example, when her students were about to learn Mark Twain, she required them to choose any piece of Mark Twain's work to read and write reflection about any characters or plots or narration and then share in class. By doing that, students had deep impression of the author. After class, she often communicated with students in which she would give advice about learning methods or plan-making. In addition, she encouraged students to broaden horizon by recommending some English TV serials and films and some online courses which are interesting and easy to understand. Surely she's still facing some challenges. The biggest challenge was student's lack of interest in reading English originals. They had no desire to read no matter how interesting the book is. In addition, her students were juniors of English major. They were facing pressure from employment or postgraduate entrance examination. Thus, they poured less energy into her course. Furthermore, in spite of the awareness of autonomous learning, some students lacked autonomous learning skills. They didn't know how to learn by themselves. Teacher D emphasized that students' negative attitude towards learning was the most difficult problem to solve.

5. Conclusion

According to this study, teachers' understanding of learner

autonomy is focused on "ability" or "attitude", which corresponds to Dickinson [2]. Some of their perceptions are only based on their teaching experience rather than theoretical learning, which leads to incomplete understanding of that. Teachers are aware of the importance of learner autonomy in foreign language learning. Regarding teachers' roles, all participants agree that teachers play an very important role in promoting learners' autonomous learning. Teachers' roles as a facilitator, a counselor and a resource get general approbation. According to their practice, they are more inclined to the role of facilitator than to the role of counselor and resource. Their teaching practices show different degrees of intervention in promoting learner autonomy. Although they agree the importance of learner autonomy, they give students freedom of learning with different degrees. The freedom of learning is mainly reflected in the choice of topics and that of activities. As for the choice of teaching goals, materials and teaching methods, less freedom is given to students. However, due to some difficulties they have encountered there are some mismatches between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices in promoting learner autonomy. Even though their practice provides some support of learner autonomy, they adopt traditional teaching more frequently and seldom provide learners with opportunities for decision making.

The small-scale qualitative study could not be generalized and give a comprehensive picture of teachers' beliefs and practice concerning learner autonomy. It is hoped to be a reference for future related research which would be conducted with large samples through class observation or longitudinal research.

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