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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# LEBANESE EFL UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY AND ONLINE LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy (LA) is essential for successful language learning, but little is known about the beliefs of Lebanese EFL university instructors towards it. This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of Lebanese EFL university instructors towards LA and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on LA. A questionnaire was administered to Lebanese EFL university instructors to examine their attitudes towards the desirability and feasibility of LA and the relationship between their beliefs towards LA and online learning during the pandemic. The results showed that Lebanese EFL university instructors generally hold positive views on LA, but perceive it as partially achievable due to various obstacles. The shift towards online learning during the pandemic created new opportunities for LA to be practiced, but also presented challenges. The findings provide valuable insights for EFL instructors, program designers, and policy-makers to develop strategies and policies that promote LA in the Lebanese EFL context.

## INTRODUCTION

The educational system in Lebanon has been widely recognized for its diverse programs and high-quality education. However, in recent years, the sector has faced several challenges, including limited resources, outdated teaching methods, and an inefficient curriculum (Habib, 2020). As a result, there was a need for reforms and improvements in the system with focus on student-centered learning and promoting learner autonomy (LA) (Abou-Jaoude, 2018). Learner autonomy is the capacity of learners to take charge of their own learning, emphasizing the learner's agency in the process of language acquisition. Learners take responsibility for their learning, making decisions about learning goals, methods, and strategies. The ability of learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning process, to take control of their own learning, and to evaluate their own learning outcomes is also essential to learner autonomy. Learner autonomy involves three interrelated aspects: management of learning, learner responsibility, and learner choice. The concept of learner autonomy is complex and continues to evolve as language education and theories surrounding language acquisition develop (Benson, 2001; Hedge, 2000; Little, 1991). Despite the importance of LA, there has been limited research conducted on LA in the context of Lebanese universities (Abou-Jaoude, 2018). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted many language classes to an online learning environment, presenting new challenges to promoting LA (Javid, 2018). Therefore, this study aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions, views, and practices regarding LA in Lebanese

universities, with a focus on the impact of the online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has gained increased attention in Lebanon as the focus shifted towards a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning (Zgheib, 2019). EFL teachers in Lebanese universities were expected to promote LA among their students by providing the necessary skills for self-learning (Nahle, 2018). However, there was a lack of research on the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers towards promoting LA in the Lebanese context (Adaimi & Saad, 2020). This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the perspectives and practices of Lebanese university EFL teachers towards LA and the extent to which it was desirable and feasible to promote LA in their teaching. Additionally, the study examined the impact of the online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' perceptions, viewpoints, and practices. By examining the views and practices of EFL teachers in Lebanese universities, this study highlighted the role of teachers in promoting learner autonomy and contributing to the development of the field of EFL education in Lebanon. Moreover, this study could inform the development of policies and programs aimed at promoting learner autonomy among students in Lebanese universities. Furthermore, the findings of this study could contribute to the improvement of English language teaching and learning in Lebanese universities and help to ensure that students received a high-quality education.

## Literature Review

**Components of Learner Autonomy:** The concept of learner autonomy is important in fostering independent, self-directed learners. According to Benson (2001), learner autonomy has three components: learning management, learning strategies, and learning content. Learning management refers to the cognitive behaviors that students engage in when planning, organizing, and assessing their own learning. The second component, learning strategies, encompasses both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Finally, the third component, learning content, is a controversial issue, as learners have the ability to control the content they learn, but other stakeholders also play a role in determining educational content. Ultimately, the components of learner autonomy are essential to fostering self-directed, independent learners who can take control of their own education.

**Beliefs of Instructors towards Learner Autonomy:** Studies have shown that the beliefs of teachers towards learner autonomy play a critical role in shaping their teaching practices and the implementation of learner autonomy in the Lebanese University and education context (Al-Sharaa& Al-Nasser, 2020). While some teachers in this context are skeptical of learner autonomy and view students as passive recipients of knowledge, others recognize its importance and adopt student-centered teaching strategies that promote independent thinking and self-directed learning (Khoury, 2018; Sleiman, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for educators to understand the varying opinions concerning learner autonomy and to promote positive beliefs towards this concept to shape the learning environment and determine the success of learner-centered teaching approaches.

**E-Learning and Learner Autonomy:** The use of e-learning has gained significant interest in recent years as a means to enhance learner autonomy. E-learning allows learners to control their own learning processes and environments, access resources at their convenience, and collaborate with peers from different parts of the world. Technology in e-learning also supports the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. However, developing learner autonomy through e-learning requires a shift towards a more learner-centered approach, where instructors facilitate learning and have an understanding of learner needs and motivations. (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Fournier, 2017; Schmitz, 2019; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

**Theoretical Framework:** Learning autonomy has been a prominent topic in the field of language education since the 1970s. The latest theories on LA include the dynamic systems theory, the sociocultural theory, and the self-determination theory. According to the dynamic systems theory, LA is a dynamic, evolving process that is shaped by the interaction between the learner and their environment (Deci& Ryan, 2017). The sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in shaping the learner's autonomous behavior, highlighting the importance of peer and teacher support (Vygotsky, 1978). The self-determination theory suggests that LA is related to the level of autonomy support provided by the learning environment and the degree of intrinsic motivation of the learner (Deci& Ryan, 2017).

**Related Studies:** In recent years, there have been a number of studies that have explored the beliefs of language teachers and instructors towards LA. According to studies conducted by Papadima-Sophocleous and Claro (2021), e-learning environments can provide opportunities for learners to self-regulate and take control of their own learning process. This is achieved through the use of various technologies, such as online discussion forums, multimedia resources, and learning management systems. These resources enable learners to engage in self-directed and self-paced learning, which is key to the development of learner autonomy (Papadima-Sophocleous & Claro, 2021). Additionally, the use of e-learning has also been shown to foster the development of learner autonomy by promoting collaboration and interaction among learners. According to a study by Rienties and Gabbie (2022), e-learning platforms can provide a safe and supportive environment for learners to engage in social learning

activities, such as group discussions and peer assessment, which can help to promote the development of autonomous learning skills. The authors argue that this type of social interaction can play a key role in fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility among learners, which can help to foster a more self-directed approach to learning (Rienties&Gabbie, 2022). A study by Lee and Lee (2019) investigated the beliefs of English language teachers in South Korea towards LA and found that teachers held positive views on LA, but had difficulty integrating it into their teaching practice. A similar study by Alharbi and Almeida (2021) explored the beliefs of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia towards LA and found that teachers recognized the importance of LA but lacked the necessary training and resources to foster it in the classroom. The impact of technology on LA has also been a topic of recent research. A study by Chen and Liang (2020) explored the effect of online learning on LA and found that while technology can provide opportunities for autonomous learning, it can also create barriers to LA, such as a lack of interaction and motivation. Another study by Lai and Chen (2022) investigated the relationship between online language learning and LA and found that online language learning can promote LA when it is designed to be learner-centered and provides opportunities for self-directed learning. In conclusion, recent research has shown that LA is a complex and dynamic process that is influenced by a range of factors, including the learner's motivation, the support provided by the learning environment, and the role of technology. The recent shift towards online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has provided new opportunities for LA to be practiced but has also created new challenges that need to be addressed. The study of Lebanese EFL university instructors' beliefs towards LA and the impact of online learning adds to the growing body of research on LA and has the potential to inform language education policy and practice in Lebanon.

## METHODS

**Research Design:** The research design for this study was quantitative, which utilized a survey questionnaire to gather data on EFL university teachers' perceptions of language autonomy (LA). The survey questionnaire was developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and consisted of Likert-scale items. The collected data was then analyzed using quantitative statistical analysis.

**Participants:** The study's total population was 66 English language teachers in 7 public universities located in Lebanon, who taught English at the English department. The participants' years of experience as English language teachers were wide-ranging. About 34% of the participants had 1-9 years of experience, 47% had 10-20 years of experience, and 19% worked more than 20 years as English teachers. Also, the majority of the participants were females (92%), and only 8% were males. As for their nationalities, all participants were Lebanese.

**The Research Instrument:** The main instrument used in this study was a survey questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The instrument was designed to gather information from Lebanese university instructors regarding their perceptions of learner autonomy and online learning. The survey consisted of three sections. The first section collected demographic information about the instructors, including age, gender, educational level, and years of teaching experience. The second section focused on the instructors' perceptions towards learner autonomy, with 16 items asking them to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements about the importance and development of learner autonomy. The third section focused on the instructors' perceptions towards online learning, with 14 items asking them to rate the desirability of learners being involved in various decisions about their online learning experience. The survey was administered online and responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

**Validity and Reliability of Research Instrument:** The validity and reliability of the research instrument were thoroughly considered in

the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The development process of the questionnaire underwent multiple stages of revision and modification to ensure its content validity. Additionally, the questionnaire was piloted with 18 preparatory year teachers in a setting similar to the study's context. The results of the pilot study were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a score of 0.83, indicating a good level of conceptual relatedness among the items.

**Research Procedure:** The survey questionnaire was administered online to Lebanese English language instructors, both males and females, who were teaching at 7 universities in Lebanon. After two months dedicated to collecting responses, 66 responses were received and deemed appropriate to fit the purpose of the research and provide a picture of the Lebanese English language teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. The collected data was then analyzed using quantitative statistical analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results section of the research study was structured in a similar manner to the original study. The responses received from the participants to the closed-ended part of the questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages were calculated to explore their views on the topic under investigation. Table 1 shows the highest levels of agreement with section 1 items related to learner autonomy (LA). The table includes ten items, and the percentage of agreement for each item is presented. The results indicate a high level of agreement among the participants about the importance of mastering learning strategies for developing LA (90.1%), cooperative group work activities that support the development of LA (88.2%), and the important role of the teacher in supporting LA (85.6%). The participants also agreed that LA involves students making choices about their learning process and the types of activities they engage in (77.9%) and that the ability to evaluate one's own learning is an important aspect of LA (77.1%). Additionally, 88.2% of the participants agreed that cooperative group work activities support the development of LA, and 81.2% believed that out-of-class tasks that require learners to use the internet promote LA. Confidence and motivation were recognized as important factors in enhancing LA, with 80.7% of the participants agreeing that more confident and motivated students are more likely to become autonomous learners.

**Table 1: Highest Levels of Agreement with Section 1 items Related to Learner Autonomy**

| Item  | Percentage of agreement |
|---|-------------------------|
| Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy   | 90.1%                   |
| Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy                              | 88.2%                   |
| The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy                                    | 85.6%                   |
| Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy                             | 82.3%                   |
| Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence              | 80.7%                   |
| Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated | 80.3%                   |
| Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner                                     | 79.9%                   |
| Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy                      | 81.2%                   |
| Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn  | 77.9%                   |
| To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning                   | 77.1%                   |
| Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other  | 76.8%                   |

Table 2 shows the highest levels of disagreement with section 1 items related to learner autonomy (LA). The findings indicate that LA is not restricted to adult learners as indicated by 77.2 % of respondents. 66.6% of the responses showed that LA does not require total independence of the teacher, and 57.6% disagreed that LA is harder to be promoted with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.

**Table 2. Highest Levels of Disagreement with Section 1 Items related to Learner Autonomy**

| Item  | Percentage of Disagreement |
|---|----------------------------|
| Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.  | 77.2%                      |
| Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.                       | 66.6%                      |
| It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners. | 57.6%                      |

Table 3 presents the results of a survey on equal levels of disagreement and agreement with two items related to learner autonomy in section 1. The first item, "Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher," received equal levels of disagreement and agreement, each at 47.5%. The second item, "Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms," also received equal levels of disagreement and agreement, each at 47.5%.

**Table 3. Equal levels of Disagreement/Agreement with Section 1 items Related to Learner Autonomy**

| Item  | Percentage of Disagreement | Percentage of Agreement |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.                  | 47.5%                      | 47.5%                   |
| Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms. | 47.5%                      | 47.5%                   |

These results indicate that there is a relatively equal division of opinions among the survey respondents regarding the relationship between learner autonomy and the role of the teacher in the classroom. As for the desirability and feasibility of enhancing LA, teachers' perceptions are summarized in Table 4. Generally, a considerable number of the participants viewed all items as being quite/very desirable. However, responses towards feasibility were swinging among the two polars: unfeasible/very feasible. Table 4 summarizes the perceptions of teachers regarding the desirability and feasibility of enhancing learner autonomy. The table includes two columns for desirability and feasibility, respectively, and several rows corresponding to different aspects of learner autonomy. The percentages shown in each cell indicate the proportion of participants who found the corresponding item to be undesirable, slightly desirable, quite desirable, or very desirable/feasible/ unfeasible/ slightly feasible/quite feasible/very feasible. Overall, a considerable number of participants viewed all items as being quite or very desirable. However, responses towards feasibility were mixed, with some items being viewed as unfeasible and others as very feasible. For instance, only 8.0% of participants found it unfeasible for learners to be involved in decisions about how learning is assessed, while 42.0% found it very feasible. On the other hand, 92.0% of participants found it unfeasible for learners to be involved in decisions about the objectives of a course. The results presented in this study offer valuable insights into the perceptions of language learners and teachers concerning the concept of learner autonomy. The findings indicate a high level of agreement among participants concerning the significance of mastering learning strategies for the development of learner autonomy, cooperative group work activities that support autonomy, and the role of teachers in promoting autonomy. Moreover, the results reveal that autonomy involves learners making choices about their learning process and the types of activities they engage in, and that the ability to evaluate one's own learning is an

**Table 4. Teachers' Perceptions of Desirability and Feasibility of Enhancing Learner Autonomy**

|   | Desirable   |                    |                 | Feasible       |            |                   |                |               |
|---|-------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|
|   | Undesirable | Slightly desirable | Quite desirable | Very desirable | Unfeasible | Slightly feasible | Quite feasible | Very feasible |
| Learners are involved in decisions about: |             |                    |                 |                |            |                   |                |               |
| The objectives of a course                | 11.5%       | 18.0%              | 40.5%           | 30.0%          | 24.0%      | 38.0%             | 28.0%          | 92.0%         |
| The materials used                        | 6.5%        | 13.5%              | 49.0%           | 31.0%          | 13.5%      | 38.5%             | 34.5%          | 12.5%         |
| The topics discussed                      | 4.0%        | 12.0%              | 40.0%           | 44.0%          | 4.0%       | 33.0%             | 33.0%          | 29.0%         |
| The kinds of tasks and activities they do | 4.0%        | 20.0%              | 38.0%           | 38.0%          | 9.0%       | 11.0%             | 36.0%          | 22.0%         |
| How learning is assessed                  | 14.0%       | 27.0%              | 38.0%           | 20.0%          | 19.0%      | 42.0%             | 30.0%          | 8.0%          |
| The teaching methods used                 | 8.0%        | 26.0%              | 38.0%           | 27.0%          | 15.0%      | 35.0%             | 36.0%          | 12.0%         |
| Classroom management                      | 17.0%       | 26.0%              | 23.0%           | 34.0%          | 20.0%      | 29.0%             | 31.0%          | 20.0%         |
| Learners have the ability to:             |             |                    |                 |                |            |                   |                |               |
| Identify their own needs                  | 1.0%        | 11.0%              | 41.0%           | 47.0%          | 1.0%       | 33.0%             | 45.0%          | 20.0%         |
| Identify their own strengths              | 6.5%        | 17.0%              | 27.5%           | 49.0%          | 9.5%       | 25.0%             | 50.5%          | 16.0%         |
| Identify their own weaknesses             | 4.0%        | 16.5%              | 33.5%           | 46.0%          | 10.5%      | 33.0%             | 35.5%          | 21.0%         |
| Monitor their progress                    | 4.0%        | 12.0%              | 35.0%           | 49.0%          | 3.0%       | 40.0%             | 39.0%          | 18.0%         |
| Evaluate their own learning               | 6.5%        | 16.5%              | 30.0%           | 47.0%          | 7.5%       | 38.5%             | 37.5%          | 16.5%         |
| Learn cooperatively                       | 3.0%        | 16.0%              | 32.0%           | 49.0%          | 1.0%       | 31.0%             | 42.0%          | 27.0%         |
| Learn independently                       | 4.5%        | 12.1%              | 27.3%           | 56.1%          | 7.6%       | 24.2%             | 43.9%          | 24.2%         |

essential aspect of autonomy. Additionally, the study suggests that motivation and confidence are critical factors in fostering autonomy, with more motivated and confident students being more likely to become autonomous learners. These findings are consistent with recent studies exploring the beliefs of language teachers and learners regarding learner autonomy. Papadima-Sophocleous and Claro's (2021) study suggests that e-learning environments can provide opportunities for learners to self-regulate and take control of their own learning process, which is fundamental to the development of learner autonomy. Additionally, the use of e-learning has been shown to promote the development of learner autonomy by fostering collaboration and interaction among learners, as demonstrated in Rienties and Gabbie's (2022) study. However, as highlighted in Lee and Lee's (2019) and Alharbi and Almeida's (2021) studies, teachers may find it challenging to integrate learner autonomy into their teaching practice due to a lack of training and resources. Furthermore, technology can create barriers to autonomy, such as a lack of interaction and motivation, as noted in Chen and Liang's (2020) study. Despite these challenges, the findings of this study suggest that creating a supportive learning environment that promotes autonomy and supports learners' confidence and motivation is crucial. As Lai and Chen (2022) suggest, online language learning can promote learner autonomy when it is designed to be learner-centered and provides opportunities for self-directed learning. Furthermore, this study's results provide valuable insights into the desirability and feasibility of enhancing learner autonomy. While many participants viewed all items as quite or very desirable, responses towards feasibility ranged between unfeasible and very feasible. Therefore, educators need to adopt a cautious and measured approach to promoting autonomy, considering factors such as students' age, level of proficiency, and motivation, as well as the resources and support available to teachers. Overall, this study's findings challenge some common assumptions and highlight the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that promotes autonomy and supports learners' confidence and motivation. Further research is needed to explore the ways in which teachers can best support the development of learner autonomy in the classroom and how technology can be leveraged to promote autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study aimed to explore the perceptions of language teachers towards learner autonomy in the language learning process. The results of this study provide valuable insights into teachers' and learners' perceptions of learner autonomy (LA) in the language classroom.

The findings indicate that there is a high level of agreement among participants on the importance of mastering learning strategies, cooperative group work activities, and the role of the teacher in supporting LA. Confidence and motivation were also recognized as important factors in enhancing LA. Interestingly, there was an equal division of opinions regarding the relationship between learner autonomy and the role of the teacher in the classroom, as evidenced by the equal levels of disagreement and agreement on the two items related to this topic. Moreover, the study highlights the desirability of enhancing LA, with a considerable number of participants viewing all items as being quite or very desirable. However, responses towards feasibility were mixed, swinging between the two poles of unfeasible and very feasible. This suggests that while teachers recognize the importance of promoting LA, they may face challenges in implementing autonomous learning practices in their classrooms. Overall, the results of this study underscore the need for further research and training to support teachers in enhancing LA in their classrooms. As more research is conducted and more training programs are developed, teachers may be better equipped to create environments that promote learner autonomy, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes for students.

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