Saudi EFL Learners Self Perceptions and Readiness for Learner Autonomy

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Abstract: *Learner's readiness for independent learning plays an important role in establishing learner autonomy as a successful mode of learning in formal education. This is an important issue in the contexts of university level education in Saudi Arabia which is currently witnessing a shift from traditional classroom education to more learner centered approaches prevailing worldwide. This study explored students' opinions about their own abilities to act autonomously. Also, the learners' perceptions of teacher and learner responsibilities will be identified. The autonomous language learning activities employed by the language learners outside classrooms will be investigated. The respondents were 260 Third and Fourth year Saudi female ESL learners of Faculty of Arts, age ranging from 19-22 years. The learner's questionnaire measuring the roles of learners and teachers in language learning process was used. Results indicated that Saudi female learners were ready to take more responsibility in the learning process in language classroom. It was observed that for some items, students shared the responsibility with the teachers and scores of some items showed individual responsibility of teacher and learner. The results were statistically significant.*

Introduction:

Over the past few decades, like almost all faculties, English as a Second Language teaching has also been prone to a shift from teacher-centered learning towards more individualized, student centered learning and the core of class activities lays higher stress on learner's role in learning and focuses on their learning needs, strategies and styles.

As stated in Kocak (2003), student or learner centered education is a collaborative process between teachers and learners rather than a set of rules to be transferred to the learners from teachers. As cited in Kocak (2003), Tudor says, it is an approach which views students to have more active and participatory roles in the learning and teaching process than in traditional approaches.

What makes an autonomous learner?

As mentioned in Austin (2006), Thanasoulas describes an autonomous learner as the one who:

- are aware of their learning styles and strategies.
- Take an active approach to the learning task at hand.
- Be willing to take risks – i.e. to communicate in the target language at all costs.
- Complete homework whether or not it is assessed.
- Place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy – edit own work.

Self-directed learning, self-regulated learning and learner autonomy are some of the concepts that teach students thinking skills, critical problem solving and controlling their own learning. Therefore, these concepts about self-directed learning lead to develop approaches for autonomy in language learning.

Terms like 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning' are not sufficient to describe autonomous learning. Although these concepts represent various ways and degrees of self-learning, they cannot be considered as synonym for learner autonomy which refers to the learners abilities and attitudes that control one's own learning. (Naizhao & Yanling).

So, the question is that what is learners' autonomy?

As several researches on learner autonomy have been done over the decades to explore its possible role in formal education, many different definitions have been proposed to explain the concept of learner autonomy.

As mentioned in Yildirim (2008 a), Learner autonomy can be basically defined as the capacity to take control over, or responsibility for, one's own learning; that control or responsibility may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process (Benson, 2001).

As cited in Naizhao & Yanling, Holec defines autonomy as the ability to take care of one's own learning. Also, Littlewood explains it as learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently. But as Yildirim (2008 a) goes on to explain further, learning independently does not mean complete isolation from teachers and peers. It means interdependence with teachers and fellow learners and working together towards a shared goal.

If learners get more involved in their self-learning process, the outcome may be better as they learn what they are ready to learn using their suited learning strategies within or outside the classroom. This is also emphasized by Yildirim (2008 b).

As cited in Naizhao & Yanling, Wenden suggests that successful autonomous learners are expert or intelligent learners who have learned how to learn. They not only are aware of their own learning styles and strategies to acquire knowledge, but also develop skills that allow them to use this knowledge confidently and flexibly.

Wenden further says, "ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choice have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate." (Naizhao & Yanling).

The level of control on their learning that the autonomous learners need to have and the role of teachers in autonomous learning are issues that require attentionm. (Zhong, 2010).

Providing facilities and resources for self-study is not enough for promoting learner autonomy. Investigating the readiness of learners and their teachers in a particular educational environment is important before shifting to autonomous learning. That is, before bringing about any change in teaching methodology, we should emphasize initially on how ready students seem to take on the autonomous learning conditions and opportunities. (Chan, 2003)

Various researches in the field of learner autonomy suggest that the perceptions about learner autonomy vary among cultural and educational contexts and also among learners and teachers. (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001).

Learner's readiness for independent learning plays an important role in establishing learner autonomy as a successful mode of learning in formal education. Poor use of resources, wasting self-study time available, lack of proper support and training may cause students to prefer traditional classroom based education. As stated by Little, "autonomy may be the last thing learners want". (Breeze, 2002).

Researchers like Little (1995), Ho & Crookall (1995), Scharle & Szabo 2000) and Chan (2003) have mentioned that understanding learners readiness for learner autonomy is crucial in designing curriculum, material revision and adaptation, classroom practice and teacher training. (Yıldırım, 2008).

Rationale:

The purpose of conducting this study at university level Saudi language learners' autonomy is to understand the learners' readiness to adopt autonomous learning, and their capacity and actual practices of autonomous learning. The learning activities employed by Saudi learners were investigated to gain more knowledge on effective tasks more suited for autonomous learning.

This is an important issue in context to university level education in Saudi Arabia which is currently observing a shift from traditional classroom education to more learner centered approaches prevailing worldwide. Hence before adopting any new methodology, it is crucial that the people involved in designing the curriculum are aware of learner's perceptions and readiness for the change to foster better learning.

The study covered the following objectives:

- To investigate the perceptions of Saudi English Language learners for learner's autonomy.
- This study will also explore their opinions about their own abilities to act autonomously.
- Also, the learners' perceptions of teacher and learner responsibilities will be identified.
- The autonomous language learning activities employed by the language learners outside classrooms will be investigated.
- How different are the perceptions of Saudi language learners for learner autonomy as compared to those of Turkish and Malaysian language learners.

Methodology

In this study, the beliefs of Saudi university level language learners about leaners' autonomy and their level of autonomous learning are examined.

Subjects:

The respondents of the study were the Third and Fourth year English undergraduates of Faculty of Arts, age ranging from 19-22 years. A total of 260 questionnaires out of 300 were successfully completed by the sample who are currently taking English as a Second Language major. The entire Subject sample consisted of female ESL learners.

Questionnaire:

The questionnaire used for this study is called the learner questionnaire measuring the roles of learners and teachers in language learning process. It was adapted from Yildirim (2008 a) and Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002). The questionnaire consists of thirty eight items divided into three sections and scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

First section consists of 13 items focusing on students' evaluation of their own and their teachers' responsibilities in the language classroom. Second section evaluates students' confidence in their ability to operate autonomously by 11 items. Third section with 14 items goes on to measure students' actual practices of autonomous learning practices outside the classroom.

The questionnaire was evaluated for content validity, face validity and clarity of the items. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed that the questionnaire has reliability with a high level of internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed manually and statistically using descriptive statistics. The data was presented through percentages of responses for each item in each section and comparisons were run between 'teacher's responsibility' and 'student's responsibility' parts and students' responsibilities and their own abilities.

Results:

As the scores for each item in section one was calculated, it was observed that for some items, students shared the responsibility with the teachers and some items were shown individual responsibility of teacher and learner. The results were statistically significant.

The items that students felt were their own responsibility were item 2 (make sure you make progress outside class), item 8 (choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons?), item 10 (choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons?) and item 13 (decide what do you learn outside class?).
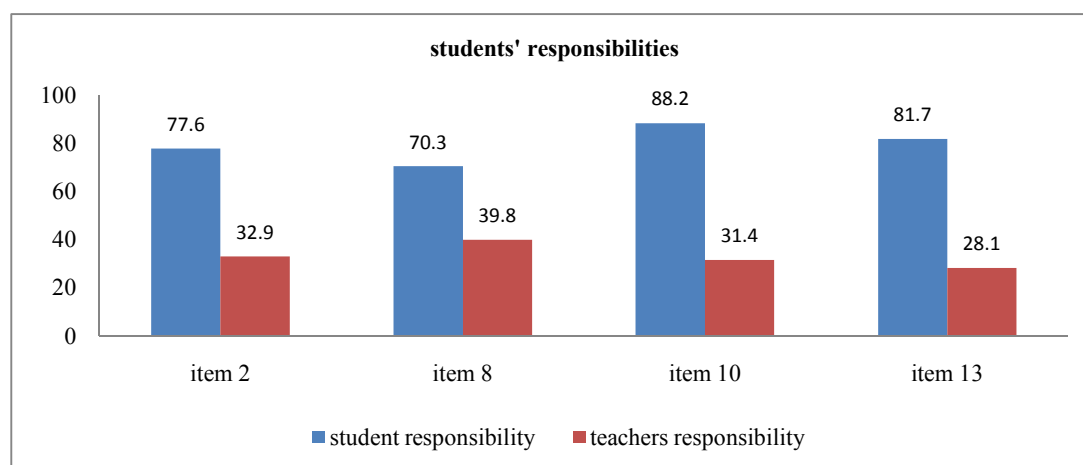

The items which students considered to be the responsibility of teachers are item 6 (decide the objectives of your English classes?), item 7 (decide what you should learn next in your English lessons?), item 9 (decide how long to spend on each activity?) and item 11 (evaluate your learning?). There was significant difference between perceptions of the responsibilities for students and teachers for these items.

Teacher's responsibilities
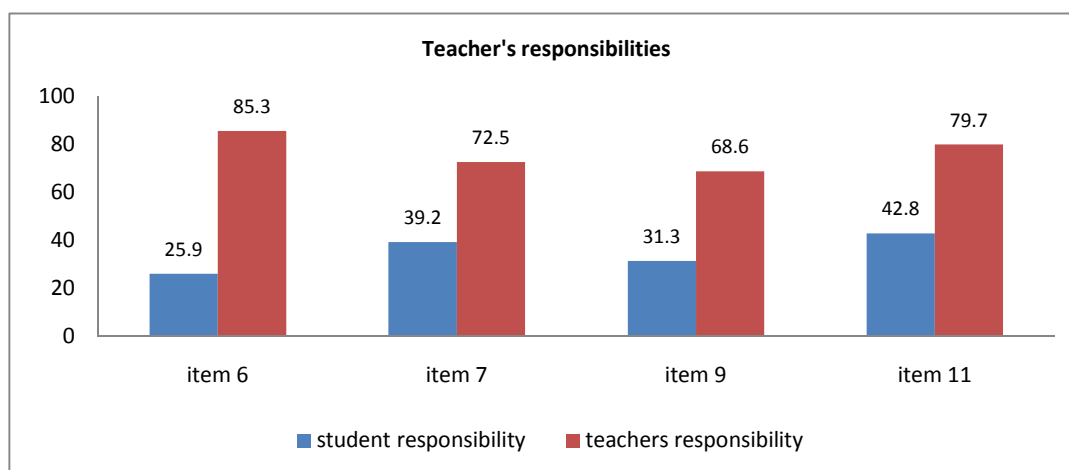
The items in which the students gave almost equal scores showed a sense of shared responsibility indicating a possibility of having capability of initiating self-learning. Such items were item 1 (make sure you make progress during lessons?), item 3 (stimulate your interest in learning English?), item 4 (identify your weaknesses in English?), item 5 (make you work harder?) and item 12 (evaluate your courses?). The p-values for these statements were under 0.05, hence they were significant.

shared Responsibilities
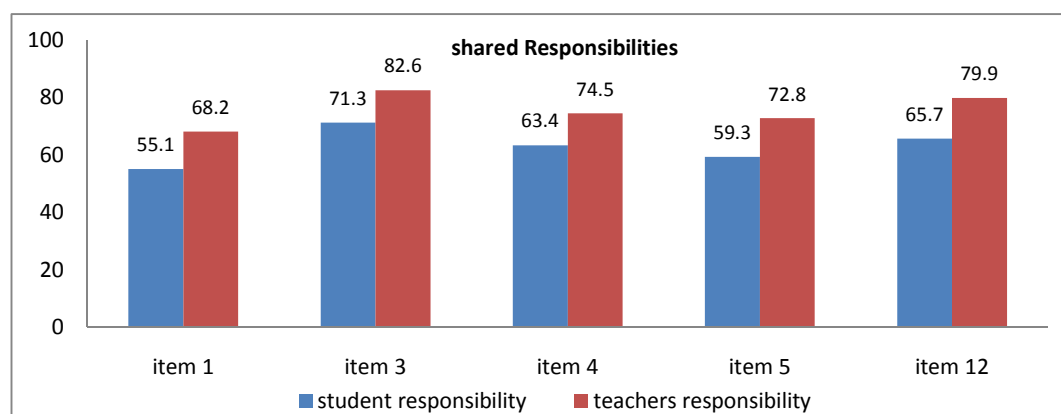
The students' perceptions about their ability showed a positive response for learning autonomously. 49.2% students felt that they are able to choose learning activities in class while 75.3% were more positive for choosing learning activities outside class. Similarly, 40.1% students felt that they are able to choose while 65.6% were more positive for choosing learning activities outside class. Ability to choose learning materials in and outside class was perceived almost equally by the students with 63.4% and 71.5% respectively.

Students' Abilities in and outside class
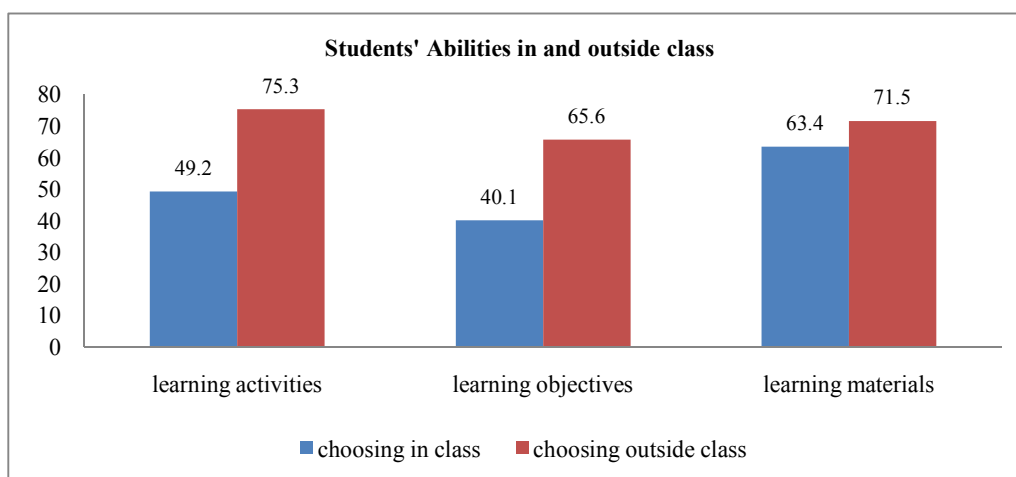
Among other abilities, 51.9% students thought they are able to evaluate their learning, while 74.7% for item no. 21 (ability to evaluate their course), 63.6% for item no. 22 (identifying your weaknesses in English?), 43.5% for item no. 23 (deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons?) and 51.3% for item no. 24 (deciding how long to spend on each activity?).

Students' Abilities
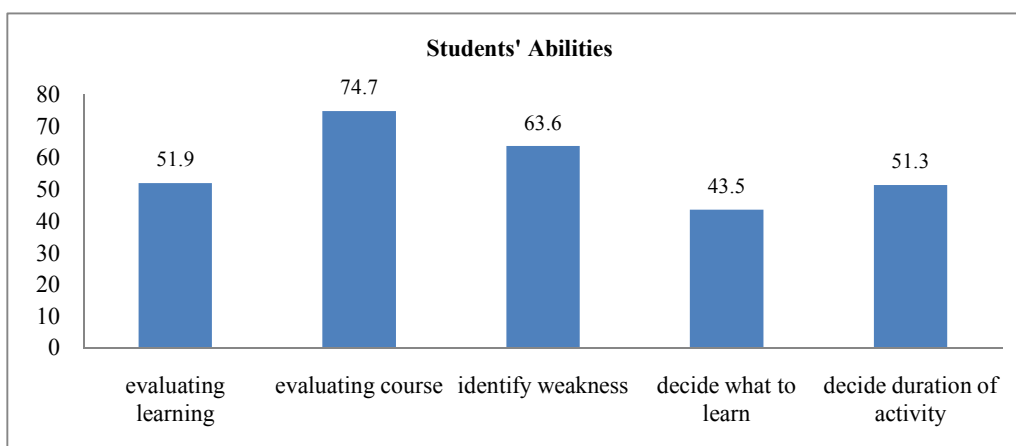
The third section, containing items stating actual autonomous learning activities showed that 39.7% students used listening activities like 'listening to English radio (Item 30)?' and 'listened to English songs (Item 31)?' while, 54.2% students used speaking activities like 'practicing using English with friends (Item 32)?' , and 'using English with a native speaker (Item 38)?'

65.9% students used reading activities as shown by their responses to item no. 25 (read grammar books on your own?), item 26 (read newspapers in English?) and item 28 (read books or magazines in English?). 80.5% of students used autonomous activities like item 33 (done English self-study in a group?), item 34 (done English self-study in a group?) and item 36 (written a dairy in English?) while, 89.9% used internet in English as stated in item 27 (sent e-mails in English?) and item 37 (used the Internet in English?). Also, the responses to item 29 (watched English TV programs?) and item 35 (watched English movies?) showed that 71.3% of students enjoyed watching TV in English.

Activities preferred by students
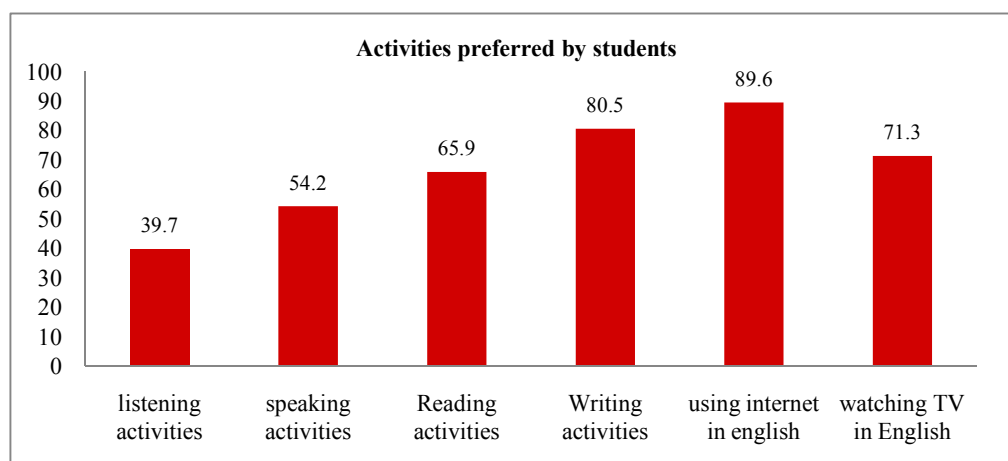
Discussion:

The total number of students who successfully completed the questionnaires was 260 out of which third year sample size was 164 and that from fourth year were 96. Third and fourth year undergraduate students were chosen because they have had sufficient experience of classroom learning and can give their perceptions about the learning methods most suited to them in an unbiased way.

Identifying student's views about their own and their teachers' responsibilities is crucial because in the process of establishing learner autonomy, there is a shift of learning responsibility from teacher to learner.

The first part of the questionnaire focuses on responsibilities of learners and teachers in language learning process. The more responsibility is given to self; the readier are the learners for autonomous learning, while more responsibility to teachers shows dependency on classroom teaching.

The results showed that there was a significant difference in responsibilities that Saudi female ESL students thought to be their own, their teachers' or shared both by them and their teachers.

Students felt themselves responsible for making progress in class, for their learning outside class and also for the activities and learning materials required outside class while they considered their teachers to be responsible for choosing the learning objectives, duration of learning activities used and to evaluate the level of learning achieved.

The main outcome of this research lies with the items that show shared responsibility of both the students and the teachers. These shared items show that the students are taking initiative in their own learning and are ready for autonomous learning. The results showed that students considered making progress in course and working harder is as much as their responsibility as their teachers'.

Also, in a study by Yildirim (2008 b) on pre-service Turkish English teachers about the learners and teachers responsibilities shows somewhat similar results. In this study, the subjects (future teachers) had a notion of shared responsibilities for some items but the items concerning learning outside class were sole responsibility of the learner.

In the second section, when the students' perceptions about their abilities to perform autonomously were checked, it showed that they reciprocated with their perceptions of responsibilities of their teachers and themselves. They thought to have the abilities for tasks which they thought were their own responsibilities including shared ones. It may be due to the fact that the students thought themselves to lack abilities that corresponded directly with teaching profession and role of teachers in a traditional curriculum.

While in the third section, some activities like those in listening and speaking categories were less preferred by Saudi students. It can be due to fewer opportunities to speak English in an Arabic dominant society. Also, it may be due to the ease of using native language. Reading and writing categories are preferred because most of the items in these categories are related to English course and group study which students may feel obliged to do. Internet and TV are an integral part of life and it might be suggested that owing to social constraints in Saudi Arabia, female students might find them an easier source of learning and practicing English at home.

The use of various autonomous learning activities by Saudi students suggests their readiness for autonomous learning and indicates that students can be relied upon for their learning and teachers can

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give them more responsibilities in class promoting self-learning. Also, if the activities preferred by students for self-learning are adapted by their teachers in classroom, the learning can be enhanced.

A similar study conducted by Yildirim (2008 a) on Turkish university level students showed somewhat similar results with some differences in the shared responsibilities and learning activities used but in essence the study showed readiness of Turkish students for learner autonomy. We can say that Saudi ESL learners are not very different than their Turkish counterparts in their readiness to adopt learner autonomy.

Conclusions:

Until now, learner autonomy has not yet been very successfully explored in case of ESL, but research shows that students find it more rewarding and interesting to learn autonomously. It is also observed that educational goals and learning objectives may be reached more easily by incorporating activities that promote learner autonomy in class.

This study aimed to explore the possibility of successfully using autonomous learning activities in Saudi ESL classrooms. The first step towards this goal was to identify the extent to which our learners are ready to cope with autonomous learning. The results showed that Saudi ESL learners are used to autonomous learning activities and are ready to share responsibility of learning with their teachers in and outside class.

It can be concluded that fostering learner autonomy in Saudi ESL classrooms can be obtained easily by encouraging and facilitating autonomous behavior in Saudi students' keeping in mind culture specific conditions and their readiness for autonomous learning.

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إدراك المتعلمين السعوديين واستعدادهم لتعلّم اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية للتعلم الذاتي

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إن استعداد المتعلم للتعلم المستقل يعدّ وسيله ناجحة في التعليم الرسمي، و نظرا لأهمية هذه المسألة في التعليم الجامعي، فإن جامعات المملكة العربية السعودية تحاول التحول من التعليم التقليدي إلى التعلم الذاتي. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى اكتشاف آراء الطالبات في مقدرتهن على التعلم الذاتي المستقل، وإدراكهن لدور الأساتذة في الصف الدراسي. وتتألف عينة الدراسة من 260 طالبة سعودية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية من المستويين الثالث و الرابع، وتتراوح أعمارهن بين 19– 22 سنة. وقد استخدمت الباحثة استبانة لقياس دور المتعلم و المعلم في العملية التعليمية. وقد أسفرت النتائج عن أن المتعلم قد أصبح جاهزا ليأخذ دورا أكبر، ومسؤولية أهم في العملية التعليمية.