

استقلالية المتعلم الجامعى فى فصول اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة : استكشاف تصورات المعلمين المصريين والأساليب والاستراتيجيات الحالية والآفاق المستقبلية

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يعد موضوع استقلالية المتعلم موضوعاً رئيسياً فى أبحاث تعلم اللغة الانجليزية طوال الثلاثين عاماً الماضية، كما تعد استقلالية المتعلم عنصراً أساسياً فى عملية تعلم اللغة بشكل عام وفى تعلم اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة على وجه الخصوص، حيث أنه من المتوقع أن يقوم الطلاب بالتفكير فى كيفية تعلمهم وكذلك تحليل استراتيجيات التعلم الخاصة بهم وأيضاً اتخاذ القرارات اللازمة لتحسين هذه الاستراتيجيات، ومن الجدير بالذكر أن معلم اللغة يؤدى دوراً مركزياً فى تعزيز استقلالية المتعلم حيث يستلزم هذا زيادة وعى الطلاب بمزايا الاستقلالية فى التعلم، حيث تساعد الأنشطة الاستراتيجية مثل النقاش الجماعى أو الاستبيانات المنظمة والمقابلات المتعلمين على أن يصبحوا أكثر استقلالية مما يزيد من حافزهم للتعلم.

وبالرغم من أهمية هذا الموضوع فإن الأبحاث التى تتناول استكشاف ما يعنيه مفهوم استقلالية المتعلم لمدرسى اللغة تعتبر قليلة نسبياً ولذلك فإن البحث الحالى يتناول هذا الموضوع لسد هذه الفجوة فى مجال البحث العلمى، حيث يركز البحث على تصورات معلمى اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة لمفهوم استقلالية المتعلم وكذلك أساليبهم واستراتيجياتهم الحالية كما يستكشف أيضاً آفاقهم المستقبلية فى هذا الشأن.

ولتحقيق هدف البحث فقد تم اجراء دراسة استقصائية فى كلية اللغة والاعلام بالأكاديمية العربية للعلوم والتكنولوجيا والنقل البحرى بالاسكندرية لجمع آراء معلمى اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة فيما يتعلق بتصوراتهم وطرائق واستراتيجيات التدريس والتحديات

التي تواجههم، حيث تكونت العينة من 40 معلماً يقومون بتدريس مقررات اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة في الكليات المختلفة بالأكاديمية العربية بالاسكندرية. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن معلمى اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة يعتقدون أن المتعلمين يجب أن يكونوا مستقلين فى تعلمهم وأنه من المهم توفير برامج تدريب المعلمين وجعلها جزءاً لا يتجزأ من عملية التدريس من أجل مساعدة متعلمى اللغة للأغراض المتخصصة على أن يصبحوا أكثر استقلالية.

الكلمات الأساسية: استقلالية المتعلم، اللغة الانجليزية للأغراض المتخصصة، استراتيجيات التعلم، تصورات المعلمين

Learner Autonomy in College ESP Classes: Exploring Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions, Current Practices and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Learner autonomy (LA) has been a key theme in ELT research for the past thirty years. It is an essential element in the process of language learning in general and in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in particular. During the process of language learning, learners are expected to reflect on how they learn, analyze their own learning strategies and make decisions on whether to improve them or not. The language teacher has a central role in fostering LA through creating a classroom learning environment which is conducive to promoting LA. This would entail raising the students' awareness of the benefits of independence in their own learning. Additionally, retrospective activities such as group discussion or structured questionnaires and interviews would help learners become more autonomous which would increase their motivation. However, only few studies in the extensive literature explored what LA means to language teachers and, therefore, this research addresses this gap. The research focuses on Egyptian college ESP teachers' notion of LA, their current practices and strategies; it also explores their future prospects regarding LA. A survey was conducted at the College of Language and Communication (CLC) at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (AASTMT), Alexandria, to collect the opinions of ESP teachers regarding the practices and future prospects of LA in their classrooms. The sample consisted of

40 teachers teaching undergraduate ESP courses at different colleges at the AASTMT. Findings have shown that ESP teachers believe that learners should be as autonomous as possible and that it is important to provide learner training and make it an integral part of the teaching process in order to help ESP learners become more autonomous.

Key words: *learner autonomy, ESP, learning strategies, teachers' beliefs*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

With regard to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which is a key parameter of the present research, it can be stated that ESP teaching and research started in Egypt around late 1970s. It has developed rapidly since the 1990s owing to the huge demand for individuals who are not only competent in their English language skills but also skilled in a specific field or profession. Business English is one key example for the gradual and progressive development of ESP in Egypt. Many other ESP courses are also offered by universities and higher institutions in Egypt. This creates a greater need for competent ESP teachers and related research in this area. However, most previous research concentrated on ESP course design, design of teaching materials and learners' roles in the learning process. In contrast, research exploring the role of ESP teachers and their beliefs has been relatively limited (Yang, 2015).

Regarding Learner Autonomy (LA) which is the main focus of this research, the concept of LA has been a major area of interest and a key topic of research in the field of foreign language learning and teaching for the last 30 years. Much has been written about the definition of LA, the rationale for its promotion and its implications for language learning and teaching. It has been claimed by many

scholars that LA improves the quality of language learning, makes students ready for learning during their life and helps learners make use of learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom in the best way; furthermore, it is a human right that ultimately promotes democratic societies (Al-Busaidi & Maamari, 2013; Salimi & Ansari, 2015).

Generally speaking, it can be claimed that we are now becoming more familiar with the nature of LA, the learner and the learning process. This is primarily due to the huge research done in different areas related to the learning process such as individual learning styles, strategies and cognition that has provided us with knowledge about the different factors that influence learners and their ways of learning. Furthermore, the development of learner-centred classrooms has provided learners with more opportunities to become active participants in the learning and evaluation processes and in making decisions about the learning objectives and materials; hence, starting to move towards becoming more autonomous learners (Salimi & Ansari, 2015).

In traditional language learning classrooms, the teacher is regarded as the sole source of knowledge. He is the one to decide what to learn and how to learn. His role also involves selecting teaching materials, designing classroom activities, motivating students and providing authoritative feedback on students' performance in the classroom. On the other hand, the teacher who seeks to promote LA performs a different role: the teacher acts as a facilitator who usually helps students take more responsibility in learning by setting their own goals, planning practice opportunities or assessing their progress. It follows that LA would largely depend on the teacher autonomy since both the teacher and the students are fully engaged in achieving the maximum benefit of language learning and teaching (AlAsmari, 2013).

Consequently, teachers should guide the students to become more autonomous by taking more responsibility for their learning and to be more involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating

their learning. Teachers should help learners develop the skills which are necessary to have control over their learning and to be able to make use of what they have learnt outside the classroom where the teacher is not available for help. In fact, there are many strategies that might help teachers provide learners with opportunities to become more autonomous. For example, the roles of both the teacher and the learners should be identified from the beginning. The students should, moreover, be provided with appropriate opportunities for practice in the language classroom. Barfield et al. (2001) assert that the teacher can willingly shift his role from teaching to supervising students as "the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted" (as cited in AlAsmari, 2013, p. 1). Borg (2006, p. 40) states that "teacher cognition research has affirmed the active role which teachers play in shaping classroom events and highlighted the complex nature of classroom decision-making".

In order to attain a better understanding of how language teachers can facilitate students' language learning process, it is essential to understand teachers' beliefs and practices regarding LA. However, generally speaking, the views of language teachers regarding LA have not been fully explored and little is known about what LA means to language teachers. Furthermore, no previous study attempted to probe into the perceptions of ESP teachers, in particular, of LA. This can be viewed as a significant gap in the extensive literature on LA, taking into consideration the influence that ESP teachers' beliefs have on how they teach and, in particular, on whether and how they seek to enhance LA in college ESP classrooms.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to investigate the perceptions, practices and future prospects of Egyptian teachers regarding LA in college ESP classes. Since autonomy and

motivation in foreign language learning is context-based and is perceived differently in different cultures, investigating Egyptian teachers' beliefs of autonomy is significant. The author claims that since no previous study was conducted to investigate Egyptian teachers' perceptions of LA in college ESP classes, research conducted would give some indications of ESP teachers' perceptions of LA.

Broadly speaking, this study merges three main areas of investigation: ESP teaching, LA and language teacher cognition. It aims to address such a gap in the literature on LA by examining Egyptian teachers' beliefs about LA in college ESP classes. The research focuses on investigating the current practices and future prospects of Egyptian teachers teaching ESP courses to undergraduate college students. It is hoped that this research could shed lights on how teachers' beliefs and practices relate to ESP students' LA and thus inform ESP teacher education.

The present study purports to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Egyptian teachers perceive LA in college ESP classes?
2. What practices do Egyptian teachers provide in order to create an autonomous learning environment in college ESP classes?
3. What strategies do Egyptian teachers think to be deployed in order to enhance LA in college ESP classes?
4. To what extent do Egyptian college ESP teachers think that their learners are autonomous?
5. To what extent do Egyptian teachers think that they actually promote LA in college ESP classes?

6. What challenges do Egyptian college ESP teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?
7. What are Egyptian teachers' future prospects regarding LA in college ESP classes?

1.3 Delimitation of the Study

The sample is delimited in the number of participants surveyed and is restricted to a number of Egyptian college ESP teachers. The study involves 40 ESP teachers at the College of Language and Communication in Alexandria (Miami headquarters) currently teaching undergraduate ESP courses at various colleges at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (AASTMT), Alexandria. These include College of Engineering and Technology, College of Maritime Transport and Technology, College of Management and Technology, College of Computing and Information Technology, and College of Logistics and International Transport.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Learner Autonomy

This section starts with presenting key definitions of LA, then it outlines its major components and general characteristics, and, finally, some strategies that can be deployed for the promotion of LA in ESP classes are presented.

2.1.1 Definitions of LA

The concept of autonomy is broadly related to laws and rules that are set by the autonomous subject or by others. This entails considering issues like one's responsibilities for one's actions; the

consequences of autonomy from others; and the ways in which an autonomous citizen can exist in relation to the state, both in terms of freedom and constraints. Therefore, the definition of autonomy should begin from a distinction between autonomy and liberty or freedom. Autonomy is a key widely-used concept in educational policy and practice. The etymology of the concept derives from the Greek *autonomous* 'having its own laws' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). Therefore, the debates around the concept revolve around "individuals' or groups' ability and capacity to self-rule, and the governance and/ or constraints, which limit such a capacity" (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015, p. 1).

The term autonomy has evoked much controversy since linguists and educationalists could not reach a consensus with regard to what autonomy actually means. It is quite problematic to define LA. This term may be confused with self-instruction and responsibility (Thanasoulas, 2000; Dobrota, 2009). According to Little (2015):

Learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is also a slippery concept because it is notoriously difficult to define precisely. The rapidly expanding literature has debated, for example, whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behavior; whether it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy. (p. 1)

LA which has its roots in the concepts of autonomy and freedom in philosophy has many definitions related to different aspects of language learning. However, Holec's (1981) early and still influential definition of LA was 'the ability to take charge of

one's learning ... to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning' and the specific decisions he listed were:

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition
- evaluating what has been acquired (p. 3)

Therefore, only those learners who can completely take control over their own learning or accomplish such a learning cycle can be considered autonomous learners. In such a way, LA focuses on how the learning is conducted. Some definitions also include the notion of 'willingness' to stress the point that learners will not develop autonomy unless they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning (Salimi & Ansari, 2015).

Ramirez (2014) views LA as a concept related to freedom and self-government; being autonomous also implies responsibility for the learner's performance. During the process of teaching and learning, responsibility involves both the learner's and teacher's engagement when enhancing independence (Ramirez, 2014, p. 57). Raya et al. (2007 as cited in Ramirez, 2007, p. 57) define autonomy as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible, and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation". In fact, this definition has a democratic dimension since it has holistic outcomes such as developing social skills and students would likely exercise their autonomy in various contexts. It also means that learners will take their own initiative, thus having control over the learning process. The aim of LA is to encourage the gradual development of self-government with greater responsibility taken on by learners not only for the purpose of improving their proficiency

level but also for upgrading their abilities, styles and participation in communities (Ramirez, 2014, p. 57).

Similarly, according to Illes (2012), LA entails learners taking responsibility for different aspects of the learning process including setting goals, determining content, selecting resources and techniques as well as assessing progress. In such a framework, an autonomous learner is a decision maker (Chan 2003) who exercises varying degrees of control at the levels of learning content, learning management and cognitive processes (Benson 2012). As Illes (2012) further argues, more recent definitions of LA include not only independence but interdependence as well:

Viewed as an educational goal, learner autonomy implies a particular kind of socialization involving the development of attributes and values that will permit individuals to play active, participatory roles in a democratic society (ibid., p. 31).

When we consider teacher autonomy, it becomes apparent that teacher autonomy can be conceptualized as a "dichotomous pairing of constraint vs. freedom". Therefore, it could be argued that teacher autonomy is usually about constraints. However, international comparisons concerning teacher autonomy should remain sensitive to the national and local contexts in which teachers operate and considers what autonomy actually means for teachers in such varying contexts (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015, p. 1).

2.1.2 Dimensions of LA

According to Littlewood (1999), *Responsibility* is one major dimension and one main feature of LA. In defining responsibility, one of Littlewood's main points is that students should take responsibility for their own learning since it is only the students who carry out all their learning in the end. In addition, they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education. Another point is that learners take either partial or total

ownership of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher. Among these are deciding on learner objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating the teaching process. *Ability*, as another dimension of LA, refers to students' capability of accomplishing these tasks. The development of this ability is a prerequisite for taking responsibility for their own learning. Motivation is another important block of responsibility which Deci and Ryan (1985) define as the performance of a task for its own sake and valuing rewards gained through the process of task completion irrespective of any external rewards.

It follows that LA is a complex construct entailing various dimensions and components. Essential components of LA are:

- a cognitive and metacognitive component (cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, awareness, learners' beliefs);
- an affective and a motivational component (feelings, emotions, willingness, motivation);
- an action-oriented component (skills, learning behaviors, decisions);
- a social component (learning and negotiating learning with partners, advisors, teachers)

An essential characteristic of LA is the capacity of the learner to create a balance among these dimensions in different learning situations (Tassinari, 2012, p. 28).

2.1.3 Characteristics of LA

One key characteristic of LA is that it is essentially 'a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning- a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991, p. 4). Therefore, it is far from being another teaching method. A learner can be characterized as autonomous when he independently chooses aims and purposes; chooses materials, methods and tasks, exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks;

and chooses criteria for evaluation. Autonomy is a process rather than a product. One does not become autonomous; one only works towards autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000).

Another characteristic of LA is that it is not an absolute concept. It has its own levels which vary with circumstances. Learners come to the learning situation with the knowledge, skills to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning or to make decisions to content or objectives. LA is an ideal that needs to be realized if we want learners who are capable of evaluating every situation they find themselves in and identifying any consistencies or shortcomings in institutions or society at large. The optimal form of LA results from students and teachers' negotiation process in planning and implementing activities and exercises. Wolter (2000) believes that "ownership is an important condition" in which learners think of the classroom and the curriculum as their own. The main reason that teachers need to promote LA is that students can continue their learning without their teachers after they finish their formal education (Zohrabi, 2011).

Furthermore, LA has been closely related to adult education in the sense that it helps learners to play an active role in participatory democracy and has been one of the Council of Europe's educational concerns. In the ESP classroom, students typically have basic language knowledge and the main objective for students and teachers is to accumulate as much specialized vocabulary and communicative language functions as possible in order to facilitate their professional communication in working environments (Dobrota, 2009).

Additionally, LA can be supported by teachers maximizing students' perceptions of having a voice and choice in the academic activities on the one hand and minimizing the evaluative pressure on the other hand. Previous research reveals that autonomy- supportive teaching practices are associated with positive outcomes in the classroom. Another important aspect of autonomy support is that teachers provide learners with a meaningful rationale of why certain

learning activities are beneficial. Furthermore, recent developments in the field of technology have significantly affected language learning. Many language teachers integrate computers into language teaching and learning in order to provide students with opportunities to continue learning outside the classroom because web-based learning allows learners to work at their own pace and to have the freedom to choose their own materials; thus helping them to achieve LA and offering them opportunities to learn, practice and communicate with others in the target language outside the classroom (AlAsmari, 2013, pp. 2-3).

Finally, it has often been argued that LA is a concept which is associated with Western educational tradition and, consequently, it will only fit in western educational contexts. Harmer (2005, as cited in Benassi 2015, p. 411), explains that "attitudes to self-directed learning are frequently conditioned by the educational culture in which students have studied or are studying...autonomy of action is not always considered a desirable characteristic in such contexts." A major finding of a study by Xaferi (2011) on the implementation of autonomy in higher education in Macedonia is that 85% of the participants believe that LA is important but they mostly do as being instructed by their teachers. It can be claimed that learners' conceptions of their roles as well as their teachers' have been shaped by previous conventional practice. It follows that Egyptian learners would likely show similar reactions.

2.1.4 LA in Language Learning

LA in language learning can be described as the degree to which learners are free to select their own learning materials, practice language as far as they need and produce spoken or written forms of language appropriately. In an educational context, autonomy basically relies on the following characteristics:

- a. autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;

- b. they take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- c. they are willing to take risks, i.e. to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- d. they are good guessers;
- e. they attend to form as well as to content, i.e. place importance on accuracy as well as on appropriateness;
- f. they develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply;
- g. they have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language (Dobrota, 2009, pp. 507-508).

Autonomy in FL teaching pedagogy does not suggest "teacherless learning". Sinclair (1997, as cited in Benaissi, 2015, p. 410) outlines a number of aspects of autonomy in language learning as follows:

- a. Autonomy involves a learner's capacity and willingness to take responsibility for making decisions about their learning;
- b. These capacities are not innate;
- c. There are degrees of autonomy;
- d. Different teaching and learning contexts require different approaches to the promotion of learner autonomy.

As Benaissi (2015) argues, if autonomy is adopted in the EFL classroom, students are undoubtedly:

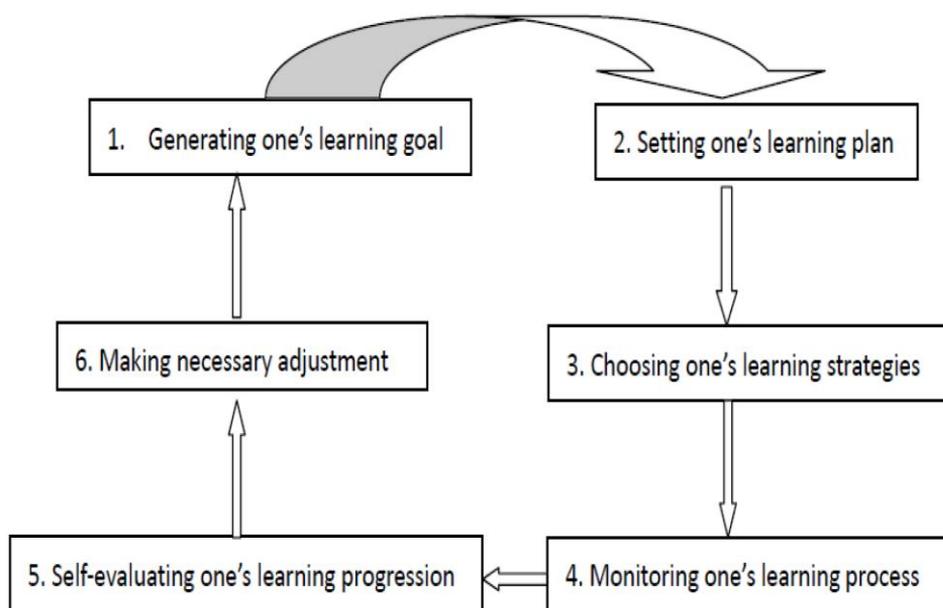
- 1. discouraged to rely heavily on the teacher;
- 2. expected to develop their own learning strategies;
- 3. required to make decisions about what they learn, how and with whom they learn it;
- 4. expected to evaluate their own progress and weaknesses. (p. 411)

According to Little (1991), the main pedagogical principles in developing autonomy in language learning are as follows:

- a. learner involvement (engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process);
- b. learner reflection (helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning);
- c. appropriate target language use (using the target language as the principal medium of language learning) (as cited in Dobrota, 2009, p. 508).

In fact, helping students to become "motivated and self-regulated learners can be achieved by promoting an autonomy-supportive learning climate" (Ng, Lui & Wang, 2014, p.192). Autonomy support is characterized by enhancing students' intrinsic motivation by offering options; creating interest with regard to learning; providing informational feedback as well as fostering self-regulated learning. Such a learning climate with autonomy support promotes the students' need for satisfaction and productive outcomes. Furthermore, an autonomy-supportive environment would lead to more self-determined forms of motivation in learners as contrary to controlling behaviors (Ng, Lui & Wang, 2014, p. 194).

Gai (2015) argues that if we apply the abovementioned theory of LA, developed by Holec, to our college English learning, most of the following steps should be considered: 1) generating one's own learning goal, 2) setting one's learning plan, 3) choosing one's own learning strategies, 4) monitoring one's own learning process, 5) self-evaluating one's own learning progression and 6) making necessary adjustment to the existing goal, plan or learning strategies according to the evaluation. This can be illustrated in the following diagram:



(Gai, 2015, p. 614)

Figure 1: Application of LA to College English Learning

It can be claimed that improving one's autonomous learning ability is an effective way for college students to improve their English competence.

The Common European Framework (Council of Europe 2001, CEF) defines the concept of language learning autonomy as consisting of both those items which need to be learned in order for adequate communication, and the knowledge and skills which need to be developed by an effective autonomous learner (as cited in Ustunluogul, 2009, p. 194).

Illes (2012) asserts that there is a variety of methods that can be used for promoting LA in language learning. Such methods include self-access facilities and involving learners in decision making with regard to pedagogic matters such as choosing topics, materials and activities, etc. Other methods that can contribute to developing LA are encouraging self-assessment and peer evaluation as well as pair and group work. Another tool for supporting LA on a large scale is the European Language Portfolio which provides a framework for developing and assessing various aspects of autonomy. It contains checklists and inventories which can be used by learners to monitor their own progress. By completing the 'I can' list at various stages of their learning career, students realize what they have achieved and how much they have progressed. One of the outcomes of autonomy training is, therefore, the expert learner who can understand and manage their own learning and who has particular characteristics such as motivation and self-efficacy. Autonomous learning would lead to successful future in language use, as learners who have appropriately been trained in autonomy would be able to transfer the ability to manage the learning process to performing successfully in real-life communication outside the classroom.

Owing to recent developments including the growing role of English as a lingua franca and computer-mediated communication (CMC), it is assumed that the current definition of LA that focuses mainly on learning processes would be extended to include learners' ability to perform successfully in the new changing circumstances of the use of English and to cope with the requirements of real-life communication. It is assumed that autonomous language learners would have the capacity to become competent speakers of the target language who are able to effectively make use of the linguistic resources that they have (Illes op. cit.).

In recent years, many studies have been conducted to promote LA in different levels of foreign language education at different schools and at different universities. Many new approaches and innovations have been used to develop LA in foreign language education. Helping foreign language learners to become more autonomous has been one of the fundamental duties of foreign language educators (Yagcioglu, 2015). It is also noted that an analysis of the large literature on autonomy in language learning that now exists highlights a number of key and often interrelated themes:

- The nature of LA - how to define it and what it involves
- The rationale for promoting LA in FL learning
- The role of the teacher in LA
- Institutional and individual constraints on LA
- The meanings of LA in diverse cultural contexts
- Individualistic vs. social perspectives on LA
- The kinds of learning opportunities that foster LA (Borg & Al-Bussaidi, 2014, p. 4)

Benaissi (2015) argues that what is lacking in various theoretical and empirical studies on LA is the cultural dimension that is bound to the concept of LA. She further asserts that LA is neither an innate concept nor is it valued and expected in all cultures; culture commonly refers to "the way human beings codify, classify and symbolize their experience" (p. 411). Culture is manifested through all the behaviours and the general way of life of a community and is transmitted from one generation to the other. Culture simply refers to what particular people do and how they do it in various circumstances and contexts.

2.1.5 Strategies for the Promotion of LA in ESP Classes

The ESP teacher may resort to various strategies that may facilitate the transfer of control from the teacher to the learners. Learning strategies, seen as "mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so" (Wenden, 1998), may be classified as cognitive and metacognitive. Examples of cognitive strategies are repetition; resourcing (resorting to specialized dictionaries and other materials); translation (using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language, especially at the level of thematic vocabulary); note-taking; deduction (conscious application of the foreign language rules); contextualization (embedding a word or a phrase in a meaningful sequence); transfer (using knowledge acquired in the native language to remember and understand facts and sequences in the second language); inferencing (matching an unfamiliar word against available information) or asking for clarification. Adult learners are likely to use this entire variety of strategies. It can be argued that in autonomous learning, the teacher has to rely more on metacognitive strategies which can be seen as skills used for planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning activity:

- a. directed attention (deciding in advance to focus on general aspects of a task);
- b. selective attention (paying attention to specific aspects of a task);
- c. self-monitoring (checking one's own performance while doing a task);
- d. self-evaluation (appraising one's performance in relation to one's standards);
- e. self-reinforcement (rewarding oneself for success) (Dobrota, 2009, p. 509).

In the ESP classroom, directed and selective attention can be implemented as strategies from the very beginning as learners typically enjoy receiving explicit instruction and grasping the inner mechanism of the learning process. The teacher clearly states the objectives at the beginning of each task/ lesson so that the students know what they are expected to do. Self-evaluation and self-reinforcement are related to motivation as adult students are generally able to assess their own and their peers' performance following a set of criteria of their own choice. Among the techniques that are directed towards promoting LA, teachers may require their students to focus on self-reports, terminological crosswords, reflective journals and internet communication of various types. It can be concluded that adult ESP learners need to be given the necessary guidance to become autonomous learners who are able to cope independently with the various challenges in their working environment (Dobrota op. cit.).

2.2 Teachers' Beliefs about LA

Sigel (1985 as cited in Yang, 2015, p. 14) defines beliefs as "mental construction of experience – often condensed and integrated into schemata or concepts." In the field of English language teaching, Borg (2010) defines a belief as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; furthermore, it serves as a guide to thought and behavior" (p. 186). Among the various factors that have a powerful impact on teachers' beliefs are their own experience as language learners, teachers' own teaching experience (during their teaching over a number of years, teachers develop their favoured styles, techniques and strategies which form a powerful source of their beliefs), teacher education, culture and other factors such as teachers' personality factors and research-based principles.

Teachers' beliefs normally form the background for the practices and strategies that the teacher deploys in the contexts of teaching and learning. In addition to beliefs, teachers might have certain expectations regarding what should or should not be observed regarding their students' behaviors and performance. In fact, teachers' instructional behaviours may enhance or undermine students' performance. Educational research has revealed that teachers' supportive behaviors and establishing a positive teacher-student relationship would lead to positive student performance (Ng, Lui & Wang, 2014, p. 195).

Yang (2015) argues that though there is a wide range of studies in which researchers attempt to examine the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, there is now clear evidence that teachers' beliefs provide the basis for their actions and guide classroom practices. However, few studies have reported close matches between beliefs and classroom practices. Such mismatches may be due to contextual factors such as heavy workloads, large classes, student discipline, lack of motivation for learning, students' varying levels of proficiency, low language proficiency of students, students' resistance to new ways of learning, examination pressure or a shortage of resources.

In relating teachers' beliefs to LA, Al-Busaidi & Maamari (2013) outline two key points. First, teachers' beliefs can shape both what teachers do and, consequently, the learning opportunities learners receive. Therefore, the extent to and the manner in which LA is promoted in language learning will be influenced by teachers' beliefs about what autonomy is, its desirability and feasibility. Second, teacher education is more likely to have an impact on teachers' practices when it is based on an understanding of the beliefs that teachers have. Thus understanding teachers' beliefs about autonomy is essential for the design of professional development activities that aim at promoting LA.

3. Review of Related Previous Studies on LA

In spite of the fact that there have been many attempts towards conducting more research on the perceptions and practices of both learners and teachers with regard to the concept of LA, there is still little research addressing the concept of LA from the perspective of English language teachers. A current review of the literature on teachers' perspectives on LA has yielded few studies: Balcikanli, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; AlAsmari, 2013; Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014. I will comment on each of these in turn.

Balcikanli (2010) conducts a study that aims at investigating student teachers' beliefs about LA in a Turkish institute. A questionnaire was administered to 112 student teachers. That was followed by interviews with 20 student teachers in order to identify further attitudes towards LA. Findings of the study suggest that the student teachers are positively disposed towards LA, i.e., they have positive attitudes towards adopting LA principles in decisions regarding a wide range of classroom activities though they are less positive about involving students in decisions regarding when and where lessons should be held. The study concludes by asking about the extent to which participants' positive theoretical beliefs about promoting LA would actually be transformed into classroom practices. Therefore, the author claims that we should take into consideration that there exists a potential gap between teachers' theoretical beliefs and classroom practices. Teacher educators are recommended to encourage their student teachers to engage in out-of-class tasks, to involve them in decision-making on the teaching/learning processes and to employ portfolios and teacher logs for the development of critical thinking and practical knowledge.

Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) conduct a study that aims at exploring the beliefs and practices of 61 teachers of English at a large university language centre in Oman regarding LA via

questionnaires and interviews. The findings highlight a range of ways in which teachers conceptualize LA, though it was commonly seen in terms of strategies for independent and individual learning. The study also examines both teachers' positive theoretical dispositions to LA as well as their less optimistic views on the factors that might hinder the development of LA and the most salient among these are adverse learner attributes such as lack of motivation and limited experience of independent learning in addition to institutional factors such as a fixed curriculum. In addition, this project involves professional development workshops on LA for the participating teachers. The authors believe that this model of linking research to in-service teacher education can be effective in supporting institutional development in relation to a wide range of issues in foreign language learning.

AlAsmari (2013) conducts a research study that investigates teachers' perceptions of the practices and prospects of LA. A survey was conducted at Taif University English Language Centre in Saudi Arabia to collect the opinions of teachers regarding the practices and prospects of LA in their classrooms. The sample consisted of 60 teachers from different countries teaching Arab students at university level. The study focuses on the teachers' notion of LA, its practices and prospects in Saudi Arabian context. Findings reveal that it is important to provide language learners with teacher training and make it an integral part of the teaching process in order to help learners become more autonomous.

Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari (2014) conduct a study that aims to explore LA in theory and practice from the teachers' points of view. It is an attempt towards investigating the teachers' views regarding

their definition of LA and the sources of their ideas. Findings of the study reveal that teachers define LA from different perspectives which reflect their diverse experiences and perceptions about the concept. Some of these definitions are based on the literature and others are influenced by the teachers' classroom experience. The teachers also vary in the sources of their definitions ranging from pre- or in-service teacher training to classroom practices. Therefore, the authors believe that their study brings new insights to the literature on LA since it sheds light on teachers' perceptions of LA and the sources of these definitions, an area that has not been explored much in the literature.

Benaissi (2015) writes a paper examining the relatedness between autonomy and culture on theoretical grounds. The paper attempts to discuss LA with regard to learners' specificities which are highly shaped by certain socio-cultural educational contexts. The author's arguments are directed towards Algerian students of English at university level. The author concludes that "the present piece of work is far from being comprehensive, as we have already referred to autonomy and culture on theoretical grounds" (p. 413). It is recommended that empirical studies need to address questions like teachers' resistance to LA, the lack of material facilities that pave the path towards autonomy and the difficulty of measuring autonomy.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

A total number of 40 ESP teachers participated in this study. They are either part-time or full-time lecturers at the College of Language and Communication who are teaching ESP courses to

undergraduate students in various colleges at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport in Alexandria. These include College of Engineering and Technology, College of Computing and Information Technology, College of Maritime Transport and Technology, College of Management and Technology, and College of Logistics and International Transport. The participants in this study included two male teachers and 38 female teachers with ages ranging from 23 to 55. Their teaching experiences vary from 1 year to 30 years. The following graph shows the percentages of their highest qualifications:

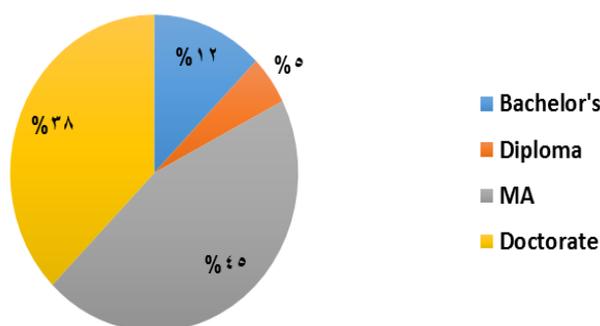


Figure 2: The Percentages of the Participants' Highest Qualification

The sample included 5 participants with a bachelor degree in Arts or Education (12%), 2 participants with a Diploma in Applied Linguistics or Education (5%), 15 participants who are MA holders in TEFL, Education, Applied Linguistics or Literature (38%), and 18 participants who are PhD holders in Education, Linguistics or Applied Linguistics (45%).

4.2 Instrumentation

The instrument used for gathering information was a questionnaire which was originally designed by Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) and later modified by Salimi & Ansari (2015) in order to investigate the perceptions of English language teachers regarding

LA. The questionnaire was adapted for the purpose of the present study by selecting some of the items from the original and the modified versions of the questionnaire and then adapting the selected items to an ESP teaching context.

The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) contains two parts. Part one contains a total of 37 statements and two questions. It is divided into five sections. Section 1 consists of 10 statements which are in the form of Likert-scale items on a five-point scale of agreement (Strongly agree, Agree, Unsure, Disagree, Strongly disagree) which corresponded with these themes:

- LA as an innate vs. learner capacity
- Proficiency and LA
- The role of the ESP teacher in promoting LA
- The implications of LA to ESP teaching methodology
- The contribution of LA to effective learning

Section 2 consists of 9 statements in the form of Likert-scale items on a five-point scale of agreement and focuses on college ESP teachers' current practices. Section 3 consists of 12 statements in the form of Likert-scale items on a five-point scale of agreement and addresses the strategies that can be deployed for enhancing LA in ESP classes. Section 4 consists of 6 statements and relates to ESP teachers' future prospects regarding LA in College ESP classes. Section 5 contains two questions which relate to ESP teachers' beliefs about how autonomous their learners are and the extent to which they promote autonomy in their teaching in addition to the challenges they face in promoting LA. Part two of the questionnaire asks teachers for demographic information (gender, educational background, and years of teaching experience).

4.3 Procedure

To ensure the clarity of the questionnaire items, the questionnaire was first administered to a very small group of ESP

teachers and, based on their feedback, slight modifications were made to some of the items. Next, the final version of the questionnaire was uploaded on Google Forms. The online link to the questionnaire was sent via mail to 45 participants in the study who were asked to fill in the questionnaire and submit it. Out of the total number of 45 participants, 40 ones responded to the questionnaire. It took the researcher about three weeks to collect the responses of the participants.

4.4 Analysis

In order to analyze the data, the Responses part of the Google form was thoroughly reviewed. The responses for each of the items in the first four sections of Part One including Likert scale questions were collectively shown either in a bar graph or a pie chart showing responses both in number or percentage form for each of the items in the questionnaire. Responses for the qualitative questions in section five and section six were carefully analyzed and grouped together. Next, the results were analyzed by answering each of the research questions of the present study in an attempt to investigate Egyptian ESP teachers' perceptions, practices and future prospects regarding LA in college ESP classes.

5. Results

The data collected from the ESP teachers via the google-form-questionnaire were tabulated and analyzed through percentages (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire consisted of two parts and the responses were analyzed accordingly. The purpose of the analysis was to investigate Egyptian ESP teachers' perceptions of the present status of LA, teaching practices and strategies for

developing LA in college ESP classes as well as their future prospects regarding LA. Additionally, the analysis was an attempt to highlight some of the challenges that Egyptian teachers encounter in fostering LA in college ESP classes.

5.1 College ESP Teachers' Perceptions

The first section of the questionnaire focused on teachers' perceptions of LA in college ESP classes. The most favored statement that all participants (100%) unanimously agreed upon is: *'Motivated ESP learners are more likely to develop LA than learners who are not motivated'*. Two other statements which were very highly favored by the participants were: *'The ESP teacher has an important role to play in supporting LA.'* (91%) and *'In order for ESP learners to become autonomous, they need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning'* (87%). The least favored statement was *'LA means learning without a teacher.'* since only 19% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed to that statement.

5.2 College ESP Teachers' Current Practices

The second section of the questionnaire concentrated on teachers' current practices in college ESP classes. The analysis of the data shows that the two practices perceived to be most frequently conducted by ESP teachers are *'ESP learners compare their results with the results of other students.'* (76%) and *'ESP learners can comment on the selection of the study material.'* (75%). The practices perceived to be least conducted by ESP teachers are *'Learners discover language concepts on their own rather than waiting for the teachers.'* (34%) and *'ESP learners are keen to perform excellent in the classroom.'* (37%).

5.3 College ESP Teachers' Strategies

The third section of the questionnaire focused on the strategies that are believed to be deployed by teachers in fostering LA in college ESP classes. The analysis of the data in this section reveals that the best strategy is *'I prefer learner-centred plus teacher's facilitation pattern in my teaching.'* which is being favored by 99% of the total number of participants. Next, the two other strategies that are highly favored by the majority of the participants are: *'Group discussion creates interest in ESP learners.'* (97%) and *'LA is promoted by activities that encourage ESP learners to work together.'* (93%). The statement that was least favored by the participants was *'The best strategy to encourage creativity in language use among ESP learners is to assign home-based language tasks and projects to the learners.'* (37%).

5.4 College ESP Teachers' Future Prospects

The fourth section of the questionnaire focused on the future prospects of Egyptian university ESP teachers. Generally speaking, the analysis of the responses in this section reveals a high percentage of agreement on the part of the participants to all the statements included in this section. The total percentages of both 'agree' and 'strongly agree' ranged from 78% to 99%. Two of the futuristic techniques most favored by the participants were *'Reflecting with ESP learners on the teaching/ learning process helps me identify some of their problems and find ways of solving them.'* and *'I think continuous professional development is important to improve the teaching learning process.'*, each represented by 99% of agreement.

5.5 College ESP Teachers' Beliefs regarding the Degree of LA in their Learners

The fifth section of the questionnaire contained two questions. The first of these was: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

In general, my ESP students have a fair degree of learner autonomy.

Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree
Strongly agree

As shown in Figure 2 below, less than half the participants (46%) either agreed (43%) or strongly agreed (3%) that their ESP college learners have a fair degree of LA whereas 46% disagreed or strongly disagreed to this statement, and 8% of the participants were unsure in this regard.

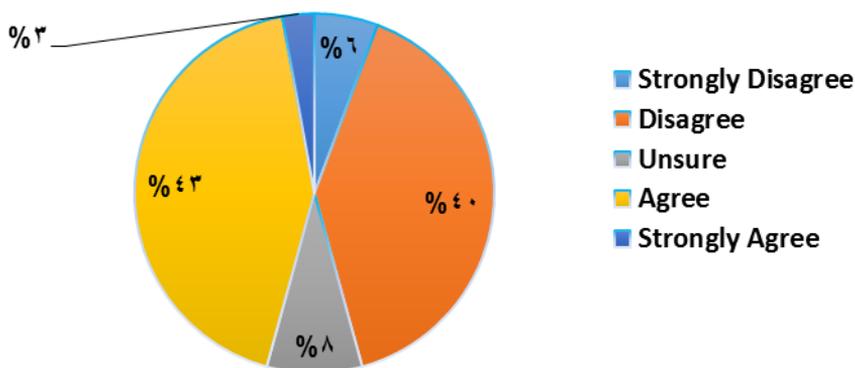


Figure 3: Participants' Responses Regarding the Degree to which ESP Students Have LA

In commenting on the extent to which their ESP learners have a fair degree of LA, the participants varied in their responses. Some of them believe that their students have a fair degree of LA.

This belief is reflected in the following sample of the participants' comments:

- *Throughout the term, they are given the freedom of choice about achieving several aspects of the course objectives. An example would be their choices of topics and manner of achieving creativity for the advanced presentation skills component of the course.*
- *As far as students participate in groupwork activities, they fairly develop their LA.*
- *They are given projects to work on and they have a free hand on deciding what to do within general guidelines set by the teacher.*
- *Ss get the chance to use language on their own after the heavy practice they undergo in class.*
- *They make many of the decisions needed in the selection of the topics they cover in their projects.*
- *They achieve a high level of learner autonomy in making presentations and writing research papers.*
- *They have the freedom to choose a topic for their presentations and develop an argument based on their beliefs and stances.*
- *My students decide on their points of strengths and weaknesses early on. They play a vital role in deciding on assignments. Besides, they evaluate their learning progress.*

However, the majority of the responses reflected disagreement with the fact that their ESP learners have a fair degree of LA. This was attributed by the participants to a number of factors. Some of these are the whole educational system in Egypt, lack of motivation on the part of the learners and restrictions on ESP teachers such as the huge number of students and the limited amount of time available for teaching the course. The following comment by one of the participants in the study is a good explanation of the status of LA in college ESP classes:

- *As a teacher you promote class discussions, ask students to set their goals and identify their weaknesses. You also identify their expectations for the course and ask them for their recommendations. Yet, we face three main problems. 1. The learners' both inability and indifference to make any research. Students have always been "spoon-fed" and their first expectation for the course is "I expect you to teach well!"; a phrase I hear at the beginning of each term. 2. The curriculum restricts us as we have to finish the course and assess students on its basis. 3. The time limit which doesn't give us the chance for free discussions or even allow us to train our students on LA, especially that many colleges require that the main focus of ESP courses is "ESP vocabulary" (despite the fact that we manage to focus on other skills)*

a) Educational system

The following sample of the participants' comments clearly illustrates aspects related to the negative effect of the educational system on the development of LA:

- *The whole educational system does not train students to depend on themselves. They are accustomed to spoon feeding and they need a great deal of effort to convince them to learn otherwise. In fact, by time, when they get used to learner autonomy, they perform greatly and achieve very satisfactory results.*
- *They don't exert any effort to learn anything on their own. They are Exam-oriented.*
- *Most students do not want to exert any effort when it comes to ESP; thus, they do not want to do anything except study a few pages in order to pass the course.*
- *It is the nature of Egyptian students.*
- *They are used to being spoofed, especially if they're weak students.*

b) Lack of motivation

The following sample of the participants' comments relates to the relationship between lack of motivation on the part of the students and the development of LA in college ESP classes:

- *I believe my students can develop learner autonomy if they realize that ESP is a demand of the job Market. The problem with ESP practices in Egypt is that learners don't really understand how beneficial it is to acquire the basic jargon of their future profession. In real classrooms, most students find ESP teaching practices dull, mechanical and dry. Besides, students*

regard ESP less important than other core subjects; as a result, they become reluctant to learn.

- *My ESP students are not very much engaged in their learning process in terms of materials taught and methods of assessment. In addition, they lack motivation towards the subject.*
- *Most Students are unmotivated and rely on their teachers for information rather than on their own.*
- *Many students deal with ESP classes as not being a field related subject which doesn't require much effort for them. However, a few students exert a lot of effort and show creativity in projects.*
- *They are not motivated to begin with, and strong motivation, I believe is at the core of Learner Autonomy*

c) Institutional Factors

The following sample of the participants' comments relates to other factors that might restrict the development of LA in college ESP classes. Among these are syllabus restrictions, the huge number of students in ESP classes and teachers' lack of motivation or lack of teacher training in this regard:

- *To abide by the quality assurance rules, certain content need to be covered and specific methods of assessment have to be followed in the course; therefore, learners cannot decide what to learn or*

how they will be assessed. However, they can decide how to study at home which reduces the degree of LA.

- *With the huge number of ESP learners, teachers feel the need to unify the input received by students and this hinders the learners' autonomy.*
- *Learners rarely have a say in selecting their material and communicative strategies are barely practised in class due to syllabus restrictions and teachers' lack of training.*

5.6 Why and How LA is Promoted by College ESP Teachers

The second question in section five of the questionnaire was:
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

In general, I give my ESP students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree
Strongly agree

As shown in Figure 3 below, the majority of the participants (80%) believe that they give their ESP students opportunities to promote LA whereas 6% of the participants believe that they do not give opportunities to their students to this effect and the remaining part (14%) are unsure about that statement.

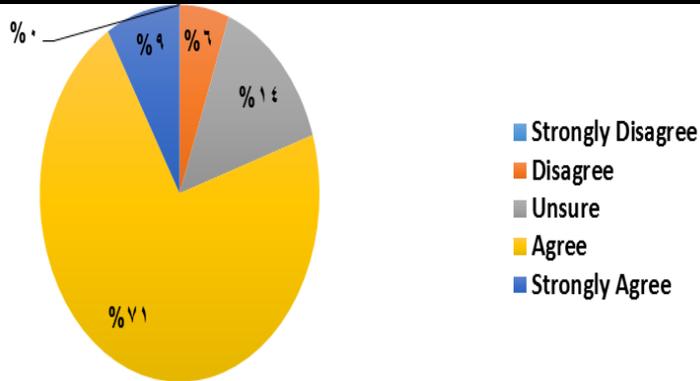


Figure 4: Participants' Responses Regarding the Degree to which Students are Given Opportunities to Promote LA

5.6.1 Why is LA Promoted in College ESP Classes

In responding to this part of the questionnaire, the participants commented that the main reasons for promoting LA are enhancing levels of motivation and self-confidence; upgrading creativity and critical thinking skills; developing their language skills in addition to transferring this attribute to other courses and to real life contexts including work place environments. The following comments reflect their opinions:

- *ESP is unique in the sense that it varies according to the environment even within the one field. If students are not autonomous, they will fail to gain the authentic language required at their own workplace. Guiding students to be autonomous ensure their success not only in English classes but in all classes as well as work environments. In other words, autonomy is a transferable life skill.*
- *I believe learner autonomy is essential to developing students' motivation and drive to learn. I try as hard*

as i can to give them the freedom to decide how to learn.

- *There is no end to learning. Therefore, students should be able to learn independently from their teachers, identify their points of weaknesses and problems, and address them in the appropriate manner, especially in the light of abundance of material available online. LA also encourages and depends on critical thinking which, in my opinion, is a skill that is necessary for their future lives both professionally and otherwise.*
- *I promote autonomy because I believe it is the only way they can be held responsible for the learning process.*
- *Because fluency will never be achieved through spoon feeding.*
- *Why? Because I believe that a student's profound desire to learn is one of the essential factors in the learning process, and autonomy operates within the learning desire.*
- *. . . These tasks are important because they help students to reshape their information and reformulate their language skills and use them. In addition, these activities promote self confidence and creativity which enrich students' personalities.*

- *Because this is how I know they can learn best.*

5.6.2 How is LA Promoted in College ESP Classes

In responding to this part of the questionnaire, very few participants commented that they either do not develop LA in college ESP classes or unsure about developing it. However, the vast majority of the participants outlined and explained a number of techniques and strategies they deploy in their attempts to promote LA in college ESP classes. Among these are:

- probing into their strengths and weakness at the beginning of the semester
- involving them in group discussions
- incorporating tasks requiring higher-order thinking skills
- asking them to research about certain topics
- encouraging them to resort to and make use of online resources
- giving them the freedom to choose topics for writing and oral presentations
- providing them with support and continuous feedback

Their following comments illustrate these techniques and strategies:

- . . . *Personally, I guide my students to improve their language skills as well as their knowledge through online resources.*
- *To a limited extent, mainly in academic writing, my students choose topics to write about; in addition, I allow them the chance to comment on course materials.*
- *I try as much as possible to assign tasks that depend fully on researching and*

present problems in the form of group discussions to help them develop

reasonable solutions on their own, based on their prior knowledge.

- *I promote their LA by making learning relevant to real life contexts*
- *I try as hard as i can to give them the freedom to decide how to learn.*
- *By asking students at the beginning of the term to set their goals and making the course objectives quite clear. - By asking students for their expectations and allowing them to give their feedback and recommendations for the course. - Asking them to give presentations on ESP topics of their choice, and write on topics of their choice (especially ungraded writing). - In my feedback, in many cases I highlight students' mistakes and ask them to identify them. - We allow for classroom discussion. - Students have to identify the meaning of new vocab through guessing the meaning from context or making research (The answers are never given directly).The same applies to grammar. Examples are given and students are required to deduce the rules. - Peer evaluation of each other's presentations and writing is always recommended. By the end of the term students are asked for their feedback on the course, and how it could be promoted.*
- *. . . A few examples only: *Initially through tasks that require critical thinking and open discussion questions, *also through teacher/student analysis of their language production, oral or written, to identify*

*their weaknesses, in case the student is unaware or incapable of doing this on his/her own, *also through providing instances of autonomy in choosing certain elements regarding the achievement of the course objectives, *and also through providing feedback.*

- *I sometimes give my students some challenging tasks so they can do their own research and try to explore independently. This is so applicable when I ask them to give a presentation and they to select the material and the topic and I just give them general guidelines.*
- *I always give them a project that challenges their higher order thinking skills and that requires them to do research.*
- *I mainly provide it by allowing them tasks which they can choose and perform on their own.*
- *group and individual work to demonstrate their practical understanding of the skill and concept delivered*
- *How? I never object any idea or addition suggested by a student. I always praise and integrate any input from students. I even let my students put their own assessment criteria (but not for final grades of course). I give the students authority over their progress and I facilitate and guide instead of control.*
- *I encourage them to do Internet research about relevant topics*

- *By sending links for online learning sites, encouraging them to visit the library and assigning project and group work*
- *Mainly through encouraging students to do research when it comes to their practical projects*
- *By asking Ss to do further practice at home and to engage in Group discussion*
- *This is achieved through assigning research projects, presentations and individual and team work tasks.*
- *Students are performing the following tasks in my classes: Reading references and paraphrasing their content for writing the review of literature in their research papers, selecting and reading references about certain topics and developing powerpoint presentations, developing films about a certain topic and uploading them on YouTube.*
- *encourage students to identify their aims and objectives, direct them towards setting a road of map to their learning process in order to organize their ideas and to be sure they tackled all needed aspects for reaching the course aims and objectives, provide them with clear guidelines and continuous support throughout their learning process, highlight the benefits from implementing a LA system.*

- *I do it by involving them in a lot of peer/group work and also by letting them take part in making decisions concerning what assignments they prefer best. During the first week of study, I usually ask my students about their interests and what they wish to study in the course and why. Then I try to adapt the syllabus accordingly. Plus, I try to incorporate communicative activities and group work as much as I can.*

5.7 Challenges in Promoting LA in College ESP Classes

In analyzing this part of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that, according to the participants in this study, the main challenges that college ESP teachers encounter in promoting LA in college ESP classes are related to three main aspects:

- ❖ ESP students (indifference, lack of motivation and self-confidence)
- ❖ Cultural factors (the nature of the Egyptian educational system)
- ❖ Institutional factors (teaching materials, assessment methods, class size, time factor, etc.)

One of the participants clearly enlisted these three aspects in their comment:

- *As mentioned earlier: 1) The students themselves. a) the students' inability or indifference to make research (Egyptian spoonfeeding educational system); b) students' indifference to the course itself, feeling that it is not a main subject and that they can easily pass it. 2) Sticking to the curriculum and the colleges'*

recommendations. 3) Time limit which does not foster LA learner training.

The majority of the participants believe that the real challenge in promoting LA in college ESP classes is due to the attitudes of the students themselves; more specifically, their negative attitudes towards the language itself; their lack of motivation and self-confidence; their underestimation of their abilities to become autonomous, etc. This is clearly reflected in the following comments:

- *The real challenge is that some learners have negative attitudes towards the language itself. Additionally, they are a product of an educational system that neglects such variables.*
- *Irresponsible, unaware and de-motivated students*
- *The main challenge is that ESP students consider English a non major subject and, accordingly, they do not give adequate attention to the subject.*
- *Most students are not interested in activities that they are supposed to do on their own. Especially, older students.*
- *When students are reluctant to work. They sometimes undermine their skills and believe that they can't do it.*
- *Poor language skills*
- *Low proficiency level of students*
- *Many students plagiarize and are not motivated to do any kind of research work*

- *Some students are still reluctant to develop their LA.*
- *Students' motivation and understanding of the added value for ESP courses*
- *Students' laziness and desire to always depend on teacher*
- *lack of motivation & looking down upon ESP*
- *Complete lack of motivation*

Other challenges are mainly related to some institutional policies; more specifically, abiding by a certain curriculum; class size; difficulty of finding suitable teaching materials, etc.:

- *Students aren't always motivated to participate or engage in group discussions. The materials used for the courses sometimes are outdated, and methods of assessment do not depend, or encourage self learning or researching*
- *I feel constrained by the fixed session plans and lecture schedules. Moreover, the lack of interest on the side of the students sometimes puts me off, but I try to find various ways to keep them motivated.*
- *Class size, material, background of students*
- *To find suitable material and to make students act against what they have been brought up to do*

- *There are certain aims and objectives for the course which have to be met and these are mainly assessed through written exams.*
- *The urgency of unifying the teaching material*
- *Number of students in class, institutional policies*

Finally, some other challenges are cultural since they are attributed to the nature of the whole educational system which mostly depends on spoon-feeding and is mostly characterized by being exam-oriented:

- *Students are sometimes either not keen on developing the skill or are too intimidated to use it due to previous learning experiences in schools and other college courses that are teacher centered.*
- *The fact that we are held to a system of grades and exams makes very difficult to apply*
- *Culture problems. Some students don't take it seriously or resist doing it because they are used to be spoon fed.*

6. Discussion

6.1 Research question 1. How do Egyptian teachers perceive LA in college ESP classes?

Concerning Egyptian teachers' perceptions of LA in college ESP classes, the analysis of the quantitative data in Section One of the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) reveals that for Egyptian ESP teachers, LA means that learners can make choices about how they learn and that the ability to monitor one's learning is central to LA.

They also strongly believe that motivated and confident ESP learners are more likely to develop LA than those who lack motivation or self-confidence. They think that it is easier to promote LA with proficient ESP learners than it is with beginners and that the proficiency of an ESP learner, to some extent, affects learners' ability to develop autonomy. Additionally, they believe that the teacher has a key role in supporting LA in ESP classes; therefore, they disagree with the fact that LA means learning without a teacher. Furthermore, they think that LA allows ESP learners to learn more effectively than they would otherwise be.

6.2 Research question 2. What practices do Egyptian teachers provide in order to create an autonomous learning environment in college ESP classes?

With regard to the practices that Egyptian teachers provide for the purpose of creating an autonomous learning environment in college ESP classes, the analysis of the quantitative data in Section Two of the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) reveals a number of these practices. Among these are allowing ESP learners to comment on the selection of the study material and to compare their results with the results of other students. More than half of the participants also provide ESP learners with opportunities to share their learning goals with the teacher, to identify their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of the semester and to evaluate their own learning. However, the responses of the participants clearly show that learners lack motivation and wait for their teacher rather than discover language concepts on their own. Moreover, less than half of the participants believe that ESP learners set up their own learning goals.

Other practices revealed through the analysis of the qualitative part of the questionnaire (Section Five) are probing into their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of the semester, involving them in group discussions, incorporating tasks that require higher-order thinking skills, asking them to do research about

certain topics, encouraging them to resort to and make use of online resources, giving them the freedom to choose topics for writing and oral presentations as well as providing them with support and continuous feedback.

6.3 Research question 3. What strategies do Egyptian teachers think to be deployed in order to enhance LA in college ESP classes?

Regarding the strategies that Egyptian teachers think to be deployed in order to enhance LA in college ESP classes, the analysis of the quantitative data in Section Three of the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) reveals that the vast majority of the participants believe that among the best strategies for enhancing LA in college ESP classes are adopting learner-centred plus teacher's facilitation pattern in their teaching, involving learners in group discussions and activities that encourage them to work together. Other strategies agreed upon by the majority of the participants in the study are communicative skills and independent study at the library. Some of the participants also believe that all decisions should be made based on teacher-learner agreement and negotiation and that LA is to be partially promoted and the teacher should choose what to be taught. However, assigning home-based assignments and projects to learners is not favored by most of the participants as a strategy for promoting LA in ESP classes.

6.4 Research question 4. To what extent do Egyptian teachers think that their college ESP learners are autonomous?

The findings of the study in relation to Section Five of the questionnaire have revealed that while some Egyptian ESP teachers (46%) think that their college ESP learners are autonomous, other teachers (46%) do not believe that their learners are autonomous and the remaining part of the participants represented by 8% are unsure about such a belief. On the one hand, those who believe that their learners have a fair degree of LA explain that their learners are

given opportunities to practice language, to choose topics for writing and for oral presentations and to do group work activities. On the other hand, those who do not believe that their learners are autonomous explain that their learners lack motivation for learning ESP courses and that they are the end-product of an educational system characterized by being teacher-centred and exam-oriented.

6.5 Research question 5. To what extent do Egyptian teachers think that they actually promote LA in college ESP classes?

The findings of the study in relation to Section Five of the questionnaire have shown that the majority of the study participants (80%) think that they actually provide their college ESP learners with opportunities for fostering LA. They believe that fluency is never achieved through spoon feeding. They also believe that autonomy is a transferrable skill- developing LA will ensure learners' success not only in English classes but also in all other classes as well as in their future work environments. They also believe that LA is essential for developing motivation and drive to learn as well as critical thinking skills which are essential for future lives both professionally and otherwise. In addition, LA will promote creativity and self-confidence which enrich learners' personalities.

In commenting on how LA is promoted in college ESP classes, the study participants outlined a number of techniques employed for achieving this goal. Among these are encouraging learners to make use of online resources and do research about certain topics, allowing them to choose topics for writing and oral presentations, incorporating tasks that necessitate employing higher-order thinking skills and involving them in group discussions. Other techniques are helping learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of the semester and providing them with support and continuous feedback.

6.6 Research question 6. What challenges do Egyptian teachers face in helping their college ESP learners become more autonomous?

The findings of the study in relation to Section Five of the questionnaire have revealed that the key challenge that Egyptian teachers face in promoting LA in college ESP classes is students' lack of motivation: they are reluctant to work independently and, sometimes, they believe that they are incapable of doing research or project work on their own. In addition, they might not recognize the added value of ESP courses. It is believed that such attitudes are the product of an educational system which is characterized by spoon-feeding and by being teacher-centred. Other challenges are related to institutional factors: class size, time constraints and, sometimes, the difficulty of selecting teaching materials that would encourage learners to promote LA.

6.7 Research question 7. What are Egyptian teachers' future prospects regarding LA in college ESP classes?

The analysis of the quantitative data in Section Four of the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) have revealed that Egyptian teachers believe that their ESP learners should be as autonomous as possible and that teachers should ensure this autonomy. They recognize the necessity of improving their theoretical knowledge in this field. Furthermore, they strongly believe that reflecting with ESP learners on the teaching/ learning process helps them to identify their problems and find ways of solving them. They also believe that learner training component should be included in the teacher development programmes and that providing learner training contributes to the development of autonomy as a teacher. Finally, one of the main future prospects agreed upon is continuous professional development which largely contributes to improving the teaching learning process.

6.8 Link of Results to Previous Related Studies

It can be claimed that the results of the present study lend support to the results of previous related studies; e.g. Balcikanli (2010), Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012), AlAsmari (2013) and Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari (2014). One area of similarity between the results of this research and those of previous research is related to the way ESP teachers conceptualize LA. It is normally seen in terms of strategies for independent and individual learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). However, similar to previous studies (e.g.; Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014), ESP teachers define LA from different perspectives which reflect their diverse experiences and perceptions about the concept. Some of these definitions are based on the literature and others are influenced by the teachers' classroom experience. ESP teachers also vary in the sources of their definitions ranging from pre- or in-service teacher training to classroom practices. A second area of similarity relates to the positive attitudes by ESP teachers towards adopting LA principles in decisions regarding a wide range of classroom activities, encouraging learners to engage in out-of-class tasks and involve them in decision-making on the teaching/ learning processes and employ portfolios for the development of critical thinking and practical knowledge (Balcikanli, 2010). A third area of similarity is related to the factors that might hinder the development of LA in ESP classes such as lack of motivation and limited experience of independent learning in addition to institutional factors such as a fixed curriculum (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Furthermore, similar to the results of previous studies (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; AlAsmari, 2013), providing professional development workshops on LA for ESP teachers can be effective in supporting institutional development in relation to a wide range of issues in ESP learning. It is also important to provide ESP learners with teacher training and make it an integral part of the teaching process in order to help them become more autonomous.

Finally, in the same veins, though this study brings new insights to the literature on LA since it sheds light on the

perceptions of ESP teachers in particular of LA, an area that has not been explored much in the literature, this piece of research is not by any means comprehensive. It is recommended that future empirical studies need to address questions like teachers' resistance to LA, the lack of material facilities that pave the path towards autonomy and the difficulty of measuring autonomy (Benaissi, 2015).

7. Conclusion

The present research attempted to build on the work of other researchers in several countries (for example, Turkey, Oman and Saudi Arabia) to identify language teachers' perceptions, current practices and future prospects of LA. This research focuses on the Egyptian university context and explains ESP teachers' perceptions of the dimensions, current practices and future prospects of LA. In this way, it merges three fields: ESP, LA and teacher cognition. Therefore, it can be claimed that this research incorporates two new dimensions that were not previously explored in related research on LA: the Egyptian context and ESP teaching. A total number of 40 Egyptian ESP teachers participated in this study. The tool for data collection was a questionnaire that participants were asked to fill in and submit online via a google-form. The key findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

- ESP teachers strongly believe that motivated learners are more likely to develop LA than learners who are not motivated and that, in order to be autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their learning. In addition, they believe that the ESP teacher has an important role in promoting LA.
- Among the most commonly adopted strategies for promoting LA in college ESP classes are using learner-centred plus

teacher's facilitation pattern in teaching, group discussion and activities that encourage learners to work together.

- Though less than half the participants in the study (46%) believe that their ESP learners are not autonomous, 80% of the participants believe that they actually give their learners opportunities to become more autonomous.
- The key challenge in promoting LA in college classes in Egypt is learners' lack of motivation. They do not realize the added value of ESP courses and they are sometimes reluctant or think that they are incapable of doing research on their own. This may partially be attributed to an educational system which is exam-oriented and characterized by spoon feeding.
- Egyptian teachers strongly believe that LA should be promoted in ESP classes and that incorporating learner training in teacher development programmes is essential for teachers in fostering LA.

Achieving a good degree of LA in university ESP classes is considered a long and continuous process that requires changing the traditional roles of both ESP teachers and learners. In reality, ESP teachers cannot expect their learners to move from a spoon-fed attitude to a completely decision taking one for better ESP learning. In addition, autonomy should be developed during the early stages of education so that by the time they are at university level, they would have gained a reasonable degree of autonomy. ESP teachers require their expertise and professionalism to gradually lead learners to change their attitudes and learning styles instead of adopting

sudden and abrupt methodologies taking into consideration that there are different degrees of LA.

In fact, due to their age and expectations, ESP learners can be regarded as the best candidates for promoting autonomous learning. Its aim is to raise their awareness to the process of learning in terms of objectives, strategies, techniques and actual results. Under the supportive supervision of the teachers, learners gradually act independently in ESP classes. LA may be realized as a collaborative process where tasks and activities are organized together with the teacher so that ESP learners would feel free to express personal views as well as being provided with opportunities to criticize the views of their peers or teachers. This means that class work should be characterized by freedom and communication. Moreover, ESP learners can be invited to evaluate their progress, strengths and weaknesses. They should also be encouraged to make use of various types of online resources.

It can be concluded that the results of this study would hopefully add insights into university ESP teachers' perceptions of current teaching practices that reflect the dimensions of LA and would pave the way to further research on ESP teachers' perceptions and prospects of LA. The results show that more research needs to be conducted to add more details and information to this study to confirm the results, add more qualitative data and further experimentation. This study has produced a good amount of quantitative data which needs to be interpreted with the addition of qualitative data through interviews to more clearly ascertain university teachers' perceptions of LA. Furthermore, the underlying reason for this study is to ultimately find ways to foster LA. As a consequence, it is recommended that classroom action research based on the findings of this research is done in order to realize how ESP teachers can actively influence the learning environment in a positive way.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Learner Autonomy in College ESP Classes: Exploring Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions, Current Practices and Future Prospects

This questionnaire is part of a study about learner autonomy (LA) which aims at exploring Egyptian university ESP teachers' beliefs about LA. It consists of two parts: Part One includes questions about teachers' perceptions of LA, current practices and strategies that are deployed to promote LA and Part Two includes questions about the teacher's personal information.

Part One

Section One:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. In ESP classes, LA means that learners can make choices about how they learn.					
2. LA means learning without a teacher.					
3. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to LA in ESP classes.					
4. To become autonomous, ESP learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.					
5. It is harder to promote LA with proficient ESP learners than it is with beginners.					

Learner Autonomy in College ESP Classes: Exploring Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions, Current Practices and Future Prospects

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. The proficiency of an ESP learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.					
7. Confident ESP learners are more likely to develop LA than those who lack confidence.					
8. Motivated ESP learners are more likely to develop LA than learners who are not motivated.					
9. LA allows ESP learners to learn more effectively than they would otherwise be.					
10. The ESP teacher has an important role to play in supporting LA.					

Section Two:
LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Current Practices

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. At the beginning of the semester, ESP learners identify their strengths and weaknesses.					
2. ESP learners set up their own learning goals.					
3. ESP learners share their learning goals with the teacher.					
4. ESP learners can comment on the selection of the study material.					
5. ESP learners discover language concepts on their own rather than waiting for the teacher.					
6. ESP learners are keen to perform excellent in the classroom.					
7. Learners motivate themselves in learning ESP.					
8. ESP learners compare their results with the results of other students.					
9. Learners evaluate their progress in learning ESP during the session.					

Section Three:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Strategies

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Group discussion creates interest in ESP learners.					
2. Communicative skills are taught from the very beginning.					
3. I prefer learner-centered plus teacher's facilitation pattern in my teaching.					
4. The best strategy to encourage creativity in language use among ESP learners is to assign home-based language tasks and projects to the learners.					
5. Only partial LA is possible in ESP classes and the teacher should decide what the learners do independently.					
6. All decisions are made on the basis of teacher-learner agreement and negotiations.					
7. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops LA.					
8. LA is promoted by activities that encourage ESP learners to work together.					
9. LA is promoted when ESP learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.					
10. LA is promoted when ESP learners are free to choose their own learning materials.					
11. Learners' poor responsibility is the main problem in teaching ESP.					
12. Poor facilities is the main problem in ESP teaching.					

Section Four:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Future Prospects

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. ESP learners should be as autonomous as possible and teachers should ensure this autonomy.					
2. To able to implement a learner-centered pedagogy and develop my students' learning competences, I need to improve my theoretical knowledge in this field.					
3. Reflecting with the ESP students on the teaching/ learning process helps me identify some of their problems and find ways of solving them.					
4. Providing learner training contributes to the development of autonomy as a teacher.					
5. Learner training component should be included in the teacher development programs.					
6. I think continuous professional development is important to improve the teaching learning process.					

Section Five: Your Learners and Your Teaching

This section contains two open-ended questions. These give you the opportunity to comment more specifically on your work as an ESP teacher.

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Choose ONE answer.

In general, my ESP students have a fair degree of learner autonomy.

Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree
Strongly agree

Please comment on your previous choice.

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2. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Choose ONE answer:

In general, I give my ESP students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

Strongly disagree Disagree Unsure Agree
Strongly agree

Please comment. You may want to explain:

Appendix 2: Descriptive Statistics for Sections One – Four of the Questionnaire

Section One:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. In ESP classes, LA means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	2.7%	13.5%	21.6%	40.6%	21.6%
2. LA means learning without a teacher.	21.6%	54.1%	5.4%	16.2%	2.7%
3. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to LA in ESP classes.	2.7%	0%	8.1%	59.5%	29.7%
4. In order for ESP learners to become autonomous, they need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	2.7%	0%	5.4%	40.6%	51.4%
5. It is harder to promote LA with proficient ESP learners than it is with beginners	18.9%	43.3%	13.5%	21.6%	2.7%
6. The proficiency of an ESP learner does not affect their	5.4%	43.3%	16.2%	27.0%	8.1%

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	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
ability to develop autonomy.					
7. Confident ESP learners are more likely to develop LA than those who lack confidence.	0%	8.1%	5.4%	54.1%	32.4%
8. Motivated ESP learners are more likely to develop LA than learners who are not motivated.	0%	0%	0%	48.7%	51.4%
9. LA allows ESP learners to learn more effectively than they would otherwise be.	0%	2.7%	27.0%	48.7%	21.6%
10. The ESP teacher has an important role to play in supporting LA.	0%	2.7%	2.7%	46%	48.7%

Section Two:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Current Practices

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. At the beginning of the semester, ESP learners identify their strengths and weaknesses.	2.7%	16.2%	18.9%	59.5%	2.7%
2. ESP learners set up their own learning goals.	8.1%	21.6%	27.0%	37.8%	5.4%
3. ESP learners share their learning goals with the teacher.	5.4%	27%	8.1%	46%	13.5%
4. ESP learners can comment on the selection of the study material.	0%	5.4%	18.9%	59.5%	16.2%
5. ESP learners discover language concepts on their own rather than waiting for the teachers.	8.1%	37.8%	16.2%	32.4%	5.4%
6. ESP learner are keen to perform excellent in the classroom.	5.4%	29.7%	24.3%	32.4%	8.1%
7. Learners motivate themselves in learning ESP.	8.1%	43.3%	21.6%	27%	0%
8. ESP learners compare their results with the results of other students.	0%	8.1%	13.5%	48.7%	29.7%
9. Learners evaluate their progress in learning ESP during the session.	2.7%	16.2%	27%	54.1%	0%

Section Three:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Strategies

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Group discussion creates interest in ESP learners.	0%	0%	2.7%	46%	51.4%
2. Communicative skills are taught from the very beginning.	0%	5.4%	8.1%	64.9%	21.6%
3. I prefer learner-centred plus teacher's facilitation pattern in my teaching.	0%	0%	2.7%	48.7%	48.7%
4. The best strategy to encourage creativity in language use among ESP learners is to assign home-based language tasks and projects to the learners.	0%	40.6%	24.3%	24.3%	10.8%
5. Only partial LA is possible in ESP classes and the teacher should decide what the learners do independently.	0%	29.7%	18.9%	46%	5.4%
6. All decisions are made on the basis of teacher-learner agreement and negotiations.	0%	24.3%	13.5%	51.4%	10.8%
7. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops LA.	0%	10.8%	8.1%	59.5%	21.6%
8. LA is promoted by activities that encourage ESP learners to work together.	0%	0%	5.4%	62.2%	32.4%
9. LA is promoted when	5.4%	27%	21.6%	29.7%	16.2%

Learner Autonomy in College ESP Classes: Exploring Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions, Current Practices and Future Prospects

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
ESP learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.					
10. LA is promoted when ESP learners are free to choose their own learning materials.	0%	24.3%	21.6%	35.1%	18.9%
11. Learners' poor responsibility is the main problem in teaching ESP.	5.4%	13.5%	8.1%	46%	27%
12. Poor facilities is the main problem in ESP teaching.	5.4%	32.4%	16.2%	32.4%	13.5%

Section Four:

LA in College ESP Classes: Egyptian Teachers' Future Prospects

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. ESP learners should be as autonomous as possible and teachers should ensure this autonomy.	0%	13.5%	5.4%	54.1%	27%
2. To be able to implement a learner-centered pedagogy and develop my students' learning competences, I need to improve my theoretical knowledge in this field.	0%	8.1%	5.4%	43.3%	43.3%
3. Reflecting with ESP learners on the teaching/ learning process helps me identify some of their problems and find ways of solving them.	0%	0%	0%	43.3%	56.8%
4. Providing learner training contributes to the development of autonomy as a teacher.	0%	2.7%	10.8%	48.7%	37.8%
5. Learner training component should be included in the teacher development programs.	0%	2.7%	8.1%	40.6%	48.7%
6. I think continuous professional development is important to improve the teaching learning process.	0%	0%	0%	32.4%	67.6%

Learner Autonomy in College ESP Classes: Exploring Egyptian Teachers' Perceptions, Current Practices and Future Prospects
