Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Development for Female Learners of English as a Foreign Language: Teachers’ Perspectives

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Abstract
The research reported here represents a qualitative case study that engaged teachers as participants over a prolonged period of time, examining their teaching practices and agentive roles in the language development of their students. This study draws on a social constructivist framework and transformative learning theory, both of which approach the learner as an agentive self and in the sociocultural context of language learning. Data collection took place at an all-female university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). It includes face-to-face semistructured interviews of six teachers from two different classrooms, classroom observations (of two of the six teachers), and audio recordings of instructional practices. The findings reveal that the implementation of autonomous learning is a significant factor in students’ intrinsic engagement and motivation to develop vocabulary knowledge. This study aims to offer guidance to language teachers and researchers who advocate for learner autonomy and innovative classroom practices. It recommends new strategies for cultivating learner autonomy in English education, both in the KSA classroom and elsewhere.

Keywords: Learning autonomy, Vocabulary development, Independent learning, Foreign language learning, Language learning perceptions, EFL teachers, Classroom practices
1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is defined as a learner’s readiness and competence in taking accountability for suggesting, implementing, monitoring, and assessing his/her learning in cooperation with, and with support from, the teacher (Benson, 2007). The ways in which we organize the practice of teaching and learning have an important influence on the development of autonomy among our learners. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to realize the importance of learner autonomy development as an aid to vocabulary enhancement. However, research on learner autonomy and vocabulary acquisition have not received the same attention within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as in other countries. As such, this research was conducted to address the paucity of literature dealing specifically with learner autonomy and vocabulary development within English language learning at the university level in the KSA. More specifically, it examined the extent of the application of learner autonomy in two contexts—a teacher-centered approach to language education, in which the teacher is not supporting learner autonomy, and a student-centered classroom, where the teacher is using some autonomous learning strategies. This study also explored the roles and insights of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary development in the KSA.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Origins and Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Many theoretical frameworks have shaped the idea of learner autonomy. John Dewey (1916) established the foundation for the development of learner autonomy in his book, Democracy and Education. He highlighted the importance of generating a supportive teaching environment that promoted students’ persistence in learning rather than the pure acquisition of knowledge and subject matter. Holec (1981) coined the term “learner autonomy,” defining it as “taking control over one’s learning” (p. 3), which encourages learners to find their own way of learning and, ultimately, to ease the learning process. In the learning context, Little (1991) defined autonomy as “a capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning” (p. 4). It should be noted that the concept of learner autonomy has Western origins.

2.2 The Teacher’s Role in Fostering Learner Autonomy

In traditional language teaching, teachers usually play a larger role in the learning environment when compared to students. Yan (2012) emphasized that the teacher is evaluated based on the amount of knowledge that s/he is able to transfer to the students. In this sense, teachers are the knowledge-givers who dominate the class from start to finish. However, in order for learner autonomy to develop, the teacher’s role must be shifted from teacher-focused to student-focused instruction. The teacher must still be engaged, but her or his role changes when choosing appropriate methods to promote learner autonomy. Yan stressed that “the teacher must believe in the students, respect them and create suitable education, making the class a one of discussion equally and cooperate friendly” (p. 562). Yan
concluded that there are different teacher roles that can enhance learner autonomy, which include (a) the facilitator—someone who can be the psychosocial provider, technical worker, motivator, and guide to assist the learners in overcoming their difficulties; (b) manager and organizer—someone who can organize different activities and games that meet the learners’ desires and expectations; and (c) counselor—one who can reduce anxiety by giving advice to the individual learners on how to achieve more effective learning outcomes.

2.2.1 Teachers’ Awareness

Swaine (2012) conducted an argumentative study aimed at clarifying the core conception of learner autonomy. Swaine asserted that the critical approach to promoting learner autonomy might damage students’ own perspectives and that their ethical identities as learners might be at risk of falling into false decisions in regard to their own learning. Therefore, it is debatable whether encouraging learners to be autonomous in their learning process will lead to success. As Little (2007) pointed out, “few learners will arrive at their first class ready to take complete charge of their own learning; for most, self-management in learning will be something they have to learn, to begin with by taking very small steps” (p. 23). Therefore, the teacher’s mission is to detect students’ areas of strength and weakness from the beginning so s/he can allow the students to guide their own learning development. This calls for careful consideration: when teachers promote learner autonomy without paying attention to students’ various learning abilities or social, cultural, and emotional status, learner autonomy may hinder their learning process instead of developing it.

Despite some concerns in relation to the accurate preparedness of promoting learner autonomy inside the classroom, the data yielded by Kristmanson, Lafargue, and Culligan (2013); Li (2015); Munzur (2012); and Schuster (2012) provide evidence of the need for autonomous learning in schools as it can be implemented using multimodal educational tools. These studies were designed to explore how assessment tools, such as building an English language portfolio and portfolio assessment, diaries, and private learning sessions, could support learner autonomy in vocabulary development. These researchers exemplified some characteristics of learner autonomy, theoretical structures, concepts, and authentic learning practice. The findings from their studies suggested that there are significant differences in the implementation of learner autonomy within different schools in Austria, China, and the United States. Their findings also show that teachers should have intercultural awareness and reveal an understanding of how EFL students develop their learning process, through the creation of portfolios and the encouragement of class participation, in which these two ideas (portfolios and class participation) can help in fostering learning autonomy. These studies help expand the understanding of the role of teachers in developing learner autonomy as they act as facilitators, assistants, or counselors.

2.2.2 Reconnoitering Process

EFL teachers work with a variety of learners who have cultural, linguistic, intellectual, or other differences. Therefore, it is important for English teachers to be involved in a reconnoitering process in order to be familiar with learners’ backgrounds and plan for both specific and general learning objectives (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). A general idea of the
students’ English level and understanding of basic subject matter will give teachers opportunities to plan specific learning goals instead of only general learning objectives. In the KSA school context, there are students who learn English as their second language, while for others it is their third or fourth language. Teachers find that they should adjust their language teaching approaches for different students in different learning circumstances. Some teachers believe that the native language, Arabic, should be used to assist the understanding of the foreign language and to help students discover the best way of learning English vocabulary (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Therefore, teachers cannot depend on the students’ ability to comprehend lexical terms without guiding them into various practical methods for learning vocabulary. Benson (2007) suggested that students should be asked to govern their own vocabulary development by selecting their appropriate learning methods and by continually practicing in authentic situations.

A study by Lengkanawati (2017) stressed the significance of training teachers on how to use autonomous learning strategies in the EFL context. This training is important because the lack of autonomous learning experience results in inadequate proficiency in English language learning. Within the Lengkanawati study, data were collected from Indonesian EFL teachers who stated that learner autonomy might be improved by activities such as studying independently in the library, practicing English outside the classroom, assessing their own work, and using the technology to develop their language skills autonomously. The findings from the Lengkanawati study suggests instructive implications that place the teacher’s preparation for facilitating learner autonomy in an EFL setting as the first step. Then, teachers should motivate the students to direct their own learning process to learn English.

2.2.3 Multiple Modalities

To foster autonomous learning, teachers may use different teaching practices including assessment, computer-assisted language learning, distance learning, the process syllabus, and strategic training. Benson (2001) recommended six approaches for fostering autonomous learning. First, resource-based approaches emphasize autonomous communication in learning materials, such as students’ assessment of their own learning. The application of such a strategy requires teachers to ask the students to continuously assess their own learning development and be responsible for their own learning growth. Second, technology-based approaches focus on the use of technology in self-directed learning, such as distance learning and other types of e-learning. Third, learner-based approaches are concerned with the direct production of behavioral and psychological changes in the learner so that s/he can become autonomous. In this approach, teachers should try to facilitate a friendly learning environment where students can lead their learning process without fear of failure. Fourth, classroom-based approaches emphasize learner control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning. Fifth, curriculum-based approaches concentrate on the role of teacher-learner cooperation in making decisions related to all areas of the curriculum, such as the syllabus process. Finally, teacher-based approaches focus on the role of the teacher in fostering autonomy among learners as well as taking responsibility for one’s own professional growth.
In the same line of thought, Loon, Ros, and Martens (2012) examined how digital learning tasks with problem-based learning could be a featured addition in motivation and learning, as students usually perform better when they are motivated to learn. Their study examined many hypotheses in relation to the facilitation of learner autonomy in the digital learning environment. The participants in the study totaled 320 students across the Netherlands at the fifth- and sixth-grade levels. The gender of participants was chosen equally—160 males and 160 females who came from 12 different classrooms. The findings revealed that when the support and structure of autonomy are tied to any digital learning task, the learning result has a positive influence on intrinsic motivation and learning outcomes.

2.2.4 Assessment Varieties

Various approaches have been proposed to promote student autonomy in vocabulary learning, and learners’ assessment of their own work has been shown to be most effective (e.g., Hargreaves, 2014; Kristmanson et al., 2013; Li, 2015; Yeung, 2016). Hargreaves’ (2014) empirical study, which investigated how teachers develop their students’ autonomous learning capacity by using classroom feedback, showed a positive effect on students’ learning. The findings suggested that when teachers allow students to assess their own work, students’ learning outcomes improve. The feedback is designed in five types: independence (e.g., learner having an opinion that differed from the general view), proactivity in learning (e.g., learners’ engagement with a topic), metasocial critical inquiry (e.g., connecting what the students were learning to real life, or connecting their school work to real-life situations by inquiring or requesting explanation), and critical inquiry into learning (e.g., discussing what might support the students’ learning). The findings of Hargreaves’ study agree with the above studies that teachers’ promotion of student autonomy using feedback strategies seems to be effective in encouraging independent and constructive learners. These studies also indicate that learners appreciate teachers’ attempts to facilitate the learning curriculum to meet their individual needs and learning preferences.

2.3 Purpose of the Study

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

What are female EFL teachers’ perceptions regarding the most effective methods for English vocabulary learning?

To what extent, if any, do female EFL teachers in the two different university English language classrooms promote learner autonomy, with special attention to the domain of vocabulary development?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted at one female public university in the Department of English Language and Literature in the KSA. This university offers undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate degrees in specific majors.
Six female EFL teachers (pseudonyms)—Dr. Alaa, Dr. Faten, Dr. Kholod, Dr. Lama, Dr. Tala, and Dr. Nujood—were recruited from the university’s English department. Two of the six teachers were purposefully selected based on the research purpose of observing one teacher-centered classroom and one student-centered classroom. Four other teachers were selected randomly. All English teachers’ contact information was obtained from the publicly available university department (College of English Language) website. The researcher contacted the teachers by e-mail and invited them to participate in this study.

The assigned curriculum was a selection of English literature novels from the 19th century. It included the social, cultural, and political background of Old English Literature, Middle English Literature, and Elizabethan novel and prose. Specifically, this observed course examined the study of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.

### 3.2 Procedures

The six teachers were interviewed about their beliefs on their English teaching approaches inside 3rd-year EFL classrooms. The researcher had one audio session (30-45 minutes) at her office, in the same university where she was currently working, asking the teachers for their perceptions of learner autonomy and its relation to vocabulary development and the application of current teaching methods. The interviews were transcribed and added to the qualitative data of the project.

Additionally, observations were made within only two of the six participants’ classrooms in order to record students’ learning progress and teachers’ methods of teaching. Drs. Faten’s and Kholod’s classrooms were selected purposefully based on their philosophical beliefs in teaching, which appeared as two different and opposing teaching approaches: a teacher-centered classroom and a student-centered classroom, respectively. Each of these English classes was observed twice a week for 8 weeks and the whole class session (80 minutes) was recorded for transcription and analysis. The observation of the two classes lasted 160 minutes in total (320 minutes/week) and the researcher recorded students’ participation in class, teachers’ involvement with students, and the instructional methods implemented. Classroom observational guidelines and protocols were filled out using guideline analysis by Wajnryb (1992) and the classroom observation protocol for undergraduate STEM (COPUS) observation by Smith, Jones, Gilbert, and Wieman (2013) to dependably illustrate how the teacher and students interacted inside the classroom. These guidelines of classroom observation were used as a tool to allow more exploration of the developments of teaching and learning, especially while recording information, such as students’ contributions and seating arrangements, to understand the role of learner autonomy inside the classroom environment. The researcher’s thoughts and comments were also documented in each session.

During the observation sessions, the researcher focused on understanding the teachers’ differences and similarities in delivering the lesson, which was the same topic for each of the two classrooms. The researcher also investigated the culture of these classrooms regarding the length of the lectures, waiting time, one-to-one guidance, classroom atmosphere, classroom management, student level of interactions, students’ responsibilities, rewards,
students’ performances in the classes, hands-on activities, individual work and assignments, group discussion, student questions, students’ prediction of answers, critical thinking, students’ motivation, and level of engagement.

All interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, and all observation records were coded manually. During the coding process, attributes from constructivism and transformative learning theories (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Mezirow, 2000) were used as guides. During data analysis, techniques were used to compare and contrast explanations, improve unexpected results and analyses and discover justifications of the unusual results. Such methods included organizing the regularity of events, key terms, central ideas, concepts, information collection, and stream plans (Freebody, 2003).

4. Results

The results of this study detail how the participants perceived teaching English in the context of EFL learners’ development via purposeful vocabulary acquisition and how the participants promoted, if at all, learner autonomy in vocabulary development. These results are written in chronological order following two dimensions: EFL teachers’ perceptions of the most effective methods in English vocabulary learning and the two of the six participating EFL teachers’ instructional strategies inside their classroom.

4.1 EFL Perceptions of the Most Effective Methods in English Vocabulary Learning

4.1.1 Perceiving School as a Place of Creativity: Use of Self-Regulated Learning Strategies for Vocabulary Development

Drs. Khlood and Alaa can be seen as strong advocates for the use of autonomous learning strategies in EFL classrooms. They believed that students should find their own distinctive way to learn English vocabulary and should be motivated to learn. Their primary approach was promoting students’ self-exploration in their classroom, for instance, when they asked their students some questions to engage them in critical thinking. For that reason, they aimed to use various autonomous learning approaches to reach out to their students and allowed room for creativity. Such advocacy for the use of autonomous learning strategies is exemplified through the following statement offered by Dr. Alaa during an interview session:

I believe in independent learning. Mainly I prefer to involve students in their own learning as much as I can (e.g., inquiry-based learning, task-based learning, etc.). My rationale is that students learn best when they have contributed to their own learning and that my job is to teach them not only “how to learn” but “how to enjoy their learning.

In the same vein, Dr. Khlood stated that

At a college level, it’s no longer spoon-feeding the students. It has to be from them first. I’m just here to guide, facilitate, and enhance, but not really do the teaching so that they are just absorbing like a sponge.

In the interview sessions, Dr. Khlood explained that in her EFL classroom she always kept in mind that she had to be patient with her students and help them develop English vocabulary
gradually. She stated that she believes that the best teaching strategy is giving students different tasks that focus on their areas of weakness. Mirroring the same beliefs about a “student first” learner approach, Dr. Alaa stated:

I try as much as possible to promote learner autonomy in my class but I always consider the level of students, personalities, and learning styles. I try to do so by first introducing the concept of autonomy and attracting their attention to its benefits to raise my students’ self-confidence and support them in developing their own English knowledge.

Drs. Khlood and Alaa also indicated that they incorporate technology into their EFL classes to develop their students’ academic vocabulary. They allowed students to use their phones during class to research and explore related information. Students were encouraged to use their phones, for example, to reach clearer definitions or examples of some vocabulary they struggled with. Students also used the iPad’s visual and audio components to support vocabulary knowledge.

4.1.2 Perceiving School as a Place of Heritage: Use of Repetitive Drill Strategies for Vocabulary Development

Drs. Faten and Nujood indicated, during their interviews, that they believe that a traditional teacher-centered approach is the right approach to English language and learning. Dr. Nujood stated that, “I don’t fully accept autonomous learning because I believe that students always need the help of the teacher as a leader of learning.” According to Dr. Nujood, “Lecturing—I think that traditional learning is the best method because it doesn’t confuse students.” She justified her approach by saying that when the teacher has all the power inside the classroom, students will listen and learn rapidly. Similarly, Dr. Faten, argued, as follows, for the teacher to have total control in the classroom:

Now, the problem with the novel that I am teaching this semester is that it is the earliest of the novels and there the language is very different. So the girls find it a bit difficult. I can’t tell them to go on looking for each word. We lose the purpose of learning and they will be just focused on finding the meanings of the words. As such, I tell them directly to listen carefully and write every word I say!

Dr. Faten further explained that EFL learners come to every class exhausted and not ready to learn. She stated that sometimes students do not even want to tell the teacher why they are not paying attention. Dr. Faten emphasized that her EFL learners are passive learners; that, in her view, they just want to listen and do not want to contribute to the learning environment, because their primary purpose is to pass the course.

4.1.3 Perceiving School as a Place of Constraints: Use of Structured Lesson Plans for Vocabulary Development

As Dr. Lama stated, “I think lecturing is the most effective strategy because it is the traditional way of learning and most of the students can understand the information when I use it.” She indicated that she follows a lecture-based approach because the given curriculum is dense and because there is no time to ask each student about her preferred way of learning.
She further explained that leading the students in the classroom is her core learning objective, which she does through a preplanned lecture, and that she limits students’ interactions to asking questions.

Similarly, Dr. Tala stated, “In my opinion, the most important students’ role is listening to their teacher. After I explain everything, they can participate.” Dr. Tala believed that she should follow a timeline in her lecture and be organized, adding that, “The reason why I don’t open-up for my students some self-learning approaches is that I like to have a set of lesson objectives and I like to achieve them every lecture.” She claimed that, with autonomous learning strategies, students’ learning outcomes are not always predictable.

Dr. Tala explained, as follows, that she is “traditional” in starting her lessons:

I always start by writing some very brief points on the board and explain to my students that they are the focus of the lesson. Then, I start asking each student about different parts of the previous lesson because I strongly believe that the new lesson should be built on the previous one. Then, I start discussing the new lesson based on the focus of the lesson that I have written on the board, and I ask the students to write every word written on the board.

Based on the above excerpt, Dr. Tala seems to have a predetermined idea of how much time it will take her students to complete learning tasks, down to the minute. She does not make room for students who may work at a quicker or slower pace than what she had assigned for each writing task. Consequently, the flow of the lesson is entirely up to the teacher and is prearranged. According to Dr. Tala, it is more important to be seen as satisfying the course objectives than it is to be developing her students’ English skills.

4.2 Instructional Pacing: A Closer Look at Two EFL Teachers’ Practice Inside Their Classrooms

The results presented in this section are based on observation data collected during time spent in Drs. Khlood’s and Faten’s classrooms. These two participants were chosen for the collection of observation data because one represents a teacher who espouses a teacher-centered, lecture-based approach to instruction (Dr. Faten), while the other represents a teacher dedicated to developing learner autonomy in her students (Dr. Khlood).

4.2.1 Dr. Faten’s Classroom

4.2.1.1 Classroom Setting

Dr. Faten’s classroom was very wide and had a very long whiteboard. The board was not cleaned, and there was permanent writing on it. The desks were organized arbitrarily, in front-facing rows, and students were seated everywhere in the large classroom. Students could not see the faces of their classmates, but Dr. Faten could see all of their faces. There were over 50 seats in the classroom, but only 23 students were registered for the course. The class started at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 9:50 a.m. Some students were 40 minutes late for class. Attendance was taken at the end of the lecture. Most students used their phones or chatted with each other during the lecture.
4.2.1.2 Teaching Style

Dr. Faten lectured for most of the class period. She discussed an introduction to the assigned novel, Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations. Dr. Faten did not ask the students their names, and they did not introduce themselves. She seemed concerned with the lesson’s delivery more than getting to know her students. For example, Dr. Faten spent the majority of the class talking, while the students listened. She also presented a large amount of literature-based vocabulary without explaining the terms that are commonly used. As she taught the novel, she asked questions, but rarely received any answers from the students; she usually gave the answers herself and continued lecturing. She kept repeating the phrase “Do you understand?” without trying to engage, challenge, or include the students in the learning process to ensure their understanding. She was also strict; while she was asking the students for some information, she said, “No response, fine by me,” “Wake up,” and “Focus please” as a way to trigger the students’ attention.

For her first lecture, Dr. Faten posted a summary of the novel’s introduction via email and asked the students to print it out. Some of the students followed Dr. Faten line by line while she read. She used the verbs (underline, omit, share) for most of the class. At no point in the lecture did she ask the students whether they had prior knowledge of the material. Dr. Faten was also unconcerned with connecting the novel’s events with real-life examples. While she read the printed text, students were lost and looked at each other’s notes. Besides reading all the time, she asked the students to follow the text’s lines without paying attention to whether the students were understanding the narrative events or the written terms.

It was noted that the students seemed reluctant to express their opinions during Dr. Faten’s lecture time. For example, they were extremely anxious when Dr. Faten asked them to read a response aloud in front of their peers or to answer questions in class. When the students were asked whether they understood something, they generally responded “Yes” or sat silently and then asked their friends for clarification.

As a daily pattern, Dr. Faten stood in front of the class, near the board to lecture, and wrote little word explanations on the board. Most of the time, Dr. Faten looked towards the center of the classroom, and the students who were seated next to the windows were disregarded. While she talked, she instructed the students to take note of every word.

4.2.2 Dr. Khlood’s Classroom

4.2.2.1 Classroom Setting

Dr. Khlood’s classroom was extensive and had a very long whiteboard. Dr. Khlood had arranged a class leader for each week to clean the board and made sure that the desks were organized by the students’ seating preferences. The students were given the opportunity to arrange their classroom themselves, and the major recurring arrangements were as follows: four round tables, group pods, and semicircle arrangements. There were 24 students registered for the course. The class started at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 9:50 a.m. Attendance was taken at the beginning of the lecture, and students were responsible for checking in using the Dr. Khlood’s iPad.
4.2.2.2 Teaching Style

Dr. Khlood used several instructional strategies to teach the same assigned novel, Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations. She used the flip classroom approach by giving the students topics and subtopics to explore themselves, before discussing them in class. For example, she stated at the beginning of the class that, “You are supposed to give me the information and ask me some novel-related inquiries.” At the end of each class, Dr. Khlood gave the students topics and subtopics via email to investigate, question, relate to, and prepare to discuss in the next class. Dr. Khlood also used a literature circles activity to develop students’ English oral communication. During the activity, students were divided into groups, and each member of a group took a role, such as a summarizer, discussion director, connector, vocabulary enricher, or investigator. Students were also asked to read and construct meaning from what they read. She guided and monitored all groups inside the classroom, and encouraged them to be self-evaluators of their learning progress.

While students were trying to figure out the significance of a passage from the text, Dr. Khlood took on a role of facilitator of oral communication to increase in participation. She compared real examples of Saudi life with the Victorian age depicted in the assigned novel. She also encouraged the students to contribute their own personal examples. One of the students asked her an unrelated question, and she answered her in detail, connecting it with the novel’s events. Moreover, while she was teaching, she stopped and said, “If I am not mistaken” to clarify that she was not the knowledge-giver and she was learning from her students as well. To make sure that her students understood the text, Dr. Khlood asked the students to choose their own way to write their notes, as evidenced by the following statement she made: “Please use your notebook or notepad to write on the important points.” She also used phrases such as “Are you sleepy?” or “Are you bored?” to get the students to express their emotional or conditional status.

Additionally, when Dr. Khlood taught new English terms, she made sure that she used them in a different context, and acted them out, when possible, to assure the students’ understanding of the meaning of the words. For instance, she asked, “What does empirical conquest mean?” Then she said, “From my gesture, who can tell me in different words the meaning of it?” One of the students answered, “Gazo,” which is the meaning of conquest in Arabic. Dr. Khlood allowed the use of the students’ first language for second language linguistic support.

Based on the 16 classroom observations, it appeared that Dr. Khlood’s teaching style was student-centered; she tried to listen and let the students not only participate in the class discussion, but also share their personal thoughts on each assignment in the syllabus. Dr. Khlood spent class time getting to know the students by asking them personal questions and identifying their strengths and weaknesses in English language skills. She encouraged students to express their personal opinions of related events pertaining to the given novel. The class environment was kept casual, as the students were allowed to move freely inside the class and feel comfortable in her presence. Dr. Khlood challenged herself to remember all the students’ first names and facts about them that they shared in the first class. Dr. Khlood
presented a humorous attitude to encourage her students to participate. She usually started
and ended the class with a joke. For example, when some students were late, she asked them
to bring coffee and cookies if they were going to be late next time. She said to one of her
students, “I am glad you decided to join us, please be punctual my dear.” Dr. Khlood
commonly used funny phrases to get the students’ attention. For instance, when she was
talking about one of the novel’s events, she said, “This occurs during World III” to trigger the
students’ attention. Dr. Khlood also used some acting techniques while she taught in order
to direct the students’ attention to some essential elements in her course (e.g., she changed her
voice while she was talking about the English during the Victorian age). Dr. Khlood was
friendly and flexible as evidenced by the fact that as she took the students’ personal opinions
on the workload and timeline given into consideration. She also appeared to individually
observe and appreciate each of her students. For example, Dr. Khlood was concerned about
one of her student’s well-being, asking her, “Did you get enough sleep? Are you okay?”
Within the classroom interaction, Dr. Khlood encouraged her students to participate even if
they were not likely to give the correct answer.

As one of her assessment tools, Dr. Khlood used pop quizzes to measure the students’
understanding in each class. She mentioned that the pop quizzes were based on the
information given in the class, and there was no need for a previous review or preparation. At
some point during each class, she tested the students for 2 minutes about some of the
information that was covered in her previous class. Thus, it was clear that Dr. Khlood was
assessing students’ prior knowledge of every new topic or required information in order to
build on their English vocabulary knowledge.

Dr. Khlood discussed the grading system and course requirements with her students to ensure
that they are valid and meaningful information. When a student asked, “Do you give extra
marks?” she said, “I do, just ask.” She explained the grade distribution to the students, and
told them that grades should be their last concerns, because she wanted them to focus on
contributing to the learning process without being anxious about making mistakes.
Additionally, constant encouragement was given by Dr. Khlood, as exemplified by her
regular use of the phrase, “Well done.”

Dr. Khlood was well-organized in her approach; while still maintaining an environment
conducive to getting to know the students, delivering her instructions, and answering student
queries. She creates in-class activities that helped all types of learning styles, including visual,
auditory, and kinesthetic.

4.2.3 COPUS Data Regarding Classroom Dynamics

Because it is the intention to describe the full range of classroom activities undertaken by
students and instructors, only one class for each instructor is presented in detail.

4.2.3.1 Dr. Faten’s Classroom

Dr. Faten was the dominant mediator of classroom discussion, as the leading percentage was
62%, which meant that the students listened and Dr. Faten lectured. Within this 80-minute
class period, 16% of the students’ interactions were simply answering questions that were
raised by Dr. Faten, which included her calling of students’ names to answer specific questions. Consequently, more than half of the students’ class time was spent in silence. This was because students’ performance in the classroom mainly consisted of listening to the teacher (79%), taking notes, predicting (3%), asking questions (2%), or answering questions (16%).

As stated previously, a large part of the lesson was reserved for students’ passive listening, which took about 79% of the 80-minutes class. As for Dr. Faten’s attempt to promote a more interactive class, only about 14% of the class time dealt with proposing questions that were hard to answer. Not surprisingly, there was a limitation in the class interaction regarding students’ questioning. The students were not allowed to interrupt Dr. Faten’s thoughts or offer their opinions on the text and teaching methodology and they were not given the opportunity to link the events with their personal experience. In addition, students’ predictions of the answers to Dr. Faten’s questions were limited to one contribution from one student seated at the front of the classroom.

Considering Dr. Faten’s teaching performance, it appears that the majority of the 80-minutes classroom period was devoted to lecturing, which consumed roughly 62% of classroom interactions. Specifically, around 23% of Dr. Faten’s time in the class was filled with writing notes on the board. In addition, 14% of the class time was spent on questions proposed by Dr. Faten. These questions were not designed to raise students’ critical thinking and understanding, but were routine questions such as “Do you understand?” and “Are you following.” In addition, Dr. Faten only devoted 1% of the class time to answering students’ lesson-related questions. It appeared that Dr. Faten was not concerned with actively engaging the students inside her classroom by using various active learning methods; even the teacher lesson plan was not constructed to include opportunities for students’ interaction with the new material.

It appeared that the teaching and learning style in Dr. Faten’s class was based on the traditional manner in which the teacher is lecturing and the students are listening. These percentages demonstrate that more than half of the classroom time was directed by Dr. Faten, which is a clear indicator of a teacher-centered method. For instance, the interactions between Dr. Faten and the students were mainly about asking and answering related and unrelated questions. While the primary aim of the lesson was to teach the students how to analyze a novel’s characters and how to identify the author’s writing style and habits, there was no real-life experience or self-guidance offered to promote that significant skill: a critical analysis. Based on the classroom observation protocol, the student engagement was considered low. The low engagement level in the class time was identified as 82%. In addition, only 18% of the time saw a moderate level of students’ engagement.

What is also apparent, in the observed lessons of Dr. Faten is that she never asked students to explore other learning resources, engage in class-activities, set learning goals, or make other selection of learning preferences that support autonomous learning. The students were followers of Dr. Faten’s instructions, and there was not much of a conversation in the class. The data from the classroom observation and other resources confirm that Dr. Faten’s class
was traditional in its nature. This teacher-centered class focused on the delivery of a lesson’s content and the sequence course requirements without respect to students’ different levels of knowledge, learning methods, learning abilities, and motivation.

4.2.3.2 Dr. Khlood’s Classroom

From the COPUS results, Dr. Khlood’s class presented a student-centered classroom. It is evident that Dr. Khlood’s method of instruction allowed for the development of students’ learning autonomy. The students’ time inside the class was filled with group work (26%) and answering the teacher’s questions (26%). In addition, 48% of the students’ time in the class was consumed in asking questions (18%), listening (15%), predicting (8%), and individual thinking and problem-solving (7%).

Only 9% of the class time was filled with lecturing. Dr. Khlood employed (30%) of the class time in proposing questions that require a high level of student interaction. In addition, she guided students approximately 23% of class time to increase the students’ level of engagement in class activities. The rest of the class time was filled with answering students’ questions (15%), following up with the class activities, (18%) and participating in the one-to-one discussion (5%). These percentages reveal Dr. Khlood’s adaptation to various autonomous learning approaches. Consequently, Dr. Khlood’s style of teaching allowed the students’ engagement level to be measured as high as 82% of the class time. The moments during which the engagement went slightly down were just 18% of the whole class time, and this is considered to be a moderate level as there were still student-teacher interactions.

5. Discussion

5.1 Teachers’ Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

The findings from the interview sessions demonstrate how the six EFL instructors’ beliefs were diverse in their instructional teaching strategies in English vocabulary development. Their viewpoints on the most effective method of teaching English vocabulary can be divided as follows: two EFL teachers perceived autonomous learning strategies for English vocabulary learning as a valuable strategy and four EFL teachers were certain that traditional teaching is a convenient method.

As for the advocates of autonomous learning strategies, Drs. Alaa and Khlood believed that students should be actively involved in their learning and they should grasp the English content knowledge. Both of these instructors explained the students’ varied use of autonomous learning strategies. They promoted such approach through self-exploration in their classroom, use of technology to develop their academic vocabulary, inquiry-based learning, task-based learning, training of self-review, guidance in the literature analysis process, and engagement of students in critical thinking and exploring. Drs. Alaa and Khlood also engaged their students in practicing new words in a real-life setting, translating and using words in context, ongoing monitoring, self-evaluation, self-reflection, peer assessment, self-assessment, and portfolio assessment. These active practices are aligned with some of the theoretical constructs of constructivism theory in which students construct their knowledge by unconsciously and indirectly communicating with students and sharing their views and
experiences. These active practices also agree with transformative learning theory’s tenets. Dirkx (1998) explained that transformational learning in adult education is about “a meaning-making process,” which aids in raising an individual character who is responsible for his or her learning development (p. 3). When EFL instructors encourage students to practice multiple exposures to English words in a meaningful context, they will gradually nurture their students’ English lexical knowledge.

The four EFL instructors who claimed that the teacher-led classroom was helpful in English vocabulary learning argued that students are neither prepared nor trained to guide their own English learning. They believed that when students write every word they say, they would eventually develop their English lexical knowledge. They stressed the importance of providing the students with basic knowledge through a series of long lectures. Their assumptions are not inconsistent with Du’s (2013) Shams’s (2013), and Stockwell’s (2011) arguments that a significant motive of inadequate vocabulary learning is related to a teacher-dominant classroom, in which student-as-passive listener and an absence of students’ self-exportation and self-decision making exist regarding vocabulary learning. It appears that, while Drs. Faten, Tala, Nujood, and Lama understood the general concept of autonomous learning, they had little awareness of its effectiveness and applicability in EFL settings. Without adequate training for EFL teachers, their students may struggle to learn vocabulary autonomously. As such, a significant result worth mentioning is that the teacher’s professional expertise inside the classroom plays a critical role in promoting learner autonomy in learning vocabulary. In this study, it seems that the teachers’ educational background, learning-teaching experience, and the range of teacher professional development strategies might have some effect on their rationale and views about this learning approach. As Al-Hazmi (2003) suggested, “EFL teacher preparation programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be described as nonsystematic and inadequate” (p. 341), as the workshops provided are not planned to have tools for each content or model authentic teaching and learning.

5.2 Teachers’ Perceived Barriers to Promoting Autonomous Strategies

Traditionally, as stated by Alrashidi and Phan (2015), the educational system in Saudi Arabia is controlled by the MOE, and the syllabus of the content subjects of the English teaching college is required to be evaluated and examined by the dean and the committee of the department. Therefore, as Al-Seghayer (2014) stated, “EFL teachers at state schools are tied by the MOE to a relatively fixed syllabus that provides guidelines in the form of learning objectives” (p. 23). From this study, one barrier, according to Drs. Faten and Tala, to promoting learner autonomy in the classroom was the extent of teachers’ autonomy regarding curriculum development. These EFL instructors explained that the school requires a dense curriculum to be taught within a short period of time during the summer term. Therefore, they claimed that the best teaching method is the lecture-based approach. Due to their concerns about the lecture time-limit, it appears that these teachers lacked expertise in promoting learner autonomy. Alrabai (2016) stated the “teachers are not required to have teaching certification to join the teaching profession; they only need an undergraduate degree” (p. 26).
As such, Saudi instructors’ inadequate training for the needs of their EFL students and active learning methods may be barriers to students’ autonomy in language developments.

Another barrier, according to some of the EFL instructors within this study (e.g., Drs. Faten and Nujood), was the lack of students’ motivation in class, which made it necessary to use the direct method—the teacher-centered approach. They stated that students are reluctant learners who want the teacher to feed them information and give them good grades at the end of the term. Alrabai (2016) claimed that the teacher-centered learning is an environment in which “students are merely listeners and receivers of knowledge, [which] tends to prevent [them] from developing acceptable language competence” (p. 25). However, with the KSA’s education policy constraints in syllabus review using the same period of class time and subject, some EFL instructors (e.g., Drs. Alaa and Khlood) demonstrated their ability to turn the classroom environment into active learning opportunities. These active learning strategies included games, role-playing, and engagement in authentic interactive activities.

5.3 The Extent of Learner Autonomy in the EFL Classroom

The findings from Dr. Khlood’s autonomous learning classroom indicate that learner autonomy opens up great opportunities for student engagement in learning, because it is a developmental process that requires effort from both the students and the teacher. It is also evident from Dr. Khlood’s classroom observation that she had created a student-centered atmosphere, where she encouraged students’ inventiveness, contribution, and self-evaluation, which increases student engagement in learning (e.g., Hargreaves, 2014; Kristmanson et al., 2013; Li, 2015; Yeung, 2016). Dr. Khlood fostered autonomy approaches that prepared her students to do a critical reflection of given texts and independent learning choices, which assisted them in “transferring what they have learnt to other contexts of learning” (Pichugova, Stepura, & Pravosudov, 2016, p. 2). These active practices concur with the transformative learning theory’s tenets in which learners are challenged to monitor their language learning, reflect on their own intellectual process, elaborate on meaning structures, modify personal understanding, and transform knowledge, then assess their performance and make significant choices regarding their English learning development.

Al-Seghayer (2011) argued that Saudi EFL teachers should use their given autonomy to modify textbooks to meet students’ culture and needs. In this study, it is also worth mentioning that teachers who were not familiar with the local context, created a challenge in learning. In both observed novel classrooms, the instructors discussed Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations. In Dr. Khlood’s classes, she connected some aspects and events in the novel with the students’ real-life examples. Dr. Khlood clearly allowed the use of the first language for second language linguistic support to encourage students to be self-reflective and comparative while they learned about a different era and culture. The use of these teaching practices is consistent with Dirkx’s (1998) beliefs, when he described transformative learning theory as “consciousness raising,” (p. 2), which refers to “a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives” (p. 3).

6. Conclusion
This study raises some implications for language teachers and researchers who advocate for learner autonomy theory and practice. Teachers should gradually implement the development of learner autonomy. Autonomous learning is the outcome of a long process and training. As such, teachers should be aware of the benefits of promoting learner autonomy and should know how to deal with any challenges. In addition, the teacher’s role should be situated as a facilitator who can assist learners in overcoming their difficulties, a manager who can organize different activities and games that meet learners’ requirements and anticipations, and a counselor who can guide the individual learner down a successful path of learning (Yan, 2012). Thus, educators should allow the students to participate, investigate, and generate while they are in the stages of learning development.

References


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