

Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

The present study sought to explore the perceptions of Iraqi EFL learners regarding autonomous learning within the context of higher education. Employing a qualitative research design, the study involves the participation of 80 Iraqi university students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language programs across various higher education institutions in the Erbil region of Iraq. Convenient sampling was employed to select participants, who ranged in age from 20 to 30 years old and had Kurdish and Arabic as their first languages. Data collection was facilitated through the utilization of a "Learner Autonomy Questionnaire." The collected responses were analyzed using SPSS version 25, employing frequency analysis to uncover patterns and trends within the dataset. The findings reveal that the majority of participants hold positive attitudes toward autonomous learning in higher education. However, it is noteworthy that some participants expressed reservations and highlighted challenges associated with autonomous learning. The study provides valuable insights into the nuanced perceptions of Iraqi EFL learners, shedding light on their attitudes and perspectives toward autonomous learning within the dynamic landscape of higher education. The outcomes of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between learners' perceptions and the promotion of autonomous learning in the Iraqi EFL context. This study has implications for curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and the enhancement of language learning experiences in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning, Higher Education, Iraqi EFL Learners, Perceptions

Introduction

The significance of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iraq has increased significantly as it plays a crucial role in global communication, economic growth, and academic progress. The English language is widely recognized as an essential instrument for global communication, enabling the exchange of ideas and fostering connections between diverse cultures. Moreover, it serves as a gateway to various educational and professional prospects (Al-

Tamimi, 2018). In the realm of higher education, it is of utmost importance for Iraqi students to acquire English language proficiency in order to excel in their academic endeavors and augment their prospects for future employment.

In Iraq, language learning has traditionally been characterized by the predominant use of teacher-centered approaches. These approaches involve the instructor assuming a central role in the dissemination of information and the facilitation of the learning process. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that these approaches may have certain limitations when it comes to catering to the varied needs and preferences of EFL learners. The aforementioned constraints encompass a scarcity of chances for learners to actively participate in the process of acquiring knowledge, a scarcity of focus on learner independence, and an absence of customization to address learners' distinct objectives and preferences (Al-Tamimi, 2018). As a result, there is an increasing fascination with investigating alternative pedagogical methods that foster learner autonomy, empowering learners to actively engage in their language acquisition journey.

In recent decades, there has been a growing trend towards the adoption of autonomous learning as a cutting-edge methodology in the realm of language acquisition (Kashef, Alavinia, & Khabazian, 2023). This particular approach has garnered significant attention and interest from esteemed researchers and scholars within the field. According to Holec (1981, p. 3), the concept of learning autonomy can be defined as "the capacity to assume responsibility for one's own self-directed learning". Learner autonomy, in essence, bestows upon the students a heightened level of responsibility, fostering the development of their individual abilities, and granting them the power to autonomously monitor their own learning journey.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on Autonomous Learning

Self-determination Theory

The significance of motivation in self-directed learning is underscored by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as highlighted by Deci and Ryan (2000). SDT posits that learners experience intrinsic motivation when they participate in activities that are congruent with their desires for autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Autonomous learning environments are designed to enhance learners' autonomy through the cultivation of intrinsic motivation and the encouragement of their sense of volition and freedom to choose. Based on the principles of SDT, it is believed that learners' motivation can be heightened through the provision of meaningful learning experiences that promote self-direction, choice, and the development of their competence. Learning environments that support autonomy, which means giving students the freedom to make choices and acknowledging their perspectives, have been found to promote autonomous learning behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory (ST) places great emphasis on the social and cultural dimensions of the learning process, as highlighted by Vygotsky (1978). ST posits that the process of learning occurs through social interactions and within the framework of cultural contexts. The concept of autonomous learning is widely regarded within the field as a process that is both socially situated and collaborative in nature. Autonomy is fostered in learners as they actively engage in genuine language usage, actively negotiate the meaning of communication, and actively participate in socially-mediated tasks and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). The significance of scaffolding, social interaction, and cultural tools in promoting autonomous learning is emphasized by the ST.

Benefits and Challenges of Promoting Autonomy in Higher Education

The promotion of learner autonomy within the realm of higher education presents a plethora of advantages for both students and educational establishments. According to Dam and Little (2018), learners who exhibit autonomy tend to display higher levels of motivation, engagement, and responsibility towards their own learning. As a result, these learners are more likely to achieve better learning outcomes. Through the facilitation of student autonomy, a more profound comprehension of the subject matter is fostered, alongside the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Little, 1991). Autonomy is a crucial aspect (Zarfsaz, & Hosseini, 2023) that equips students with the essential skills and attitudes required to navigate the realm of lifelong learning. By fostering autonomy, individuals are empowered to effectively adapt to novel challenges and consistently enhance their knowledge and skills (Knowles, 1975).

Related Studies

In a study conducted by Alrabai (2017), the focus was on investigating the autonomous learning activities carried out by Master level students at Tribhuvan University in Nepal. The collection of data was conducted by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that learners exhibit commendable engagement in autonomous activities. Furthermore, it was observed that teachers have expressed their recommendation for learners to cultivate autonomy in their learning journey. Both educators and students were discovered to exhibit a favorable attitude towards autonomous learning.

In addition, the study conducted by Saywonpia and Kongthai (2018) aimed to investigate the various factors that impact the inclination of Vietnamese EFL learners to either support or resist the promotion of learner autonomy in a 15-week writing course that utilized portfolios as a means of assessment. The data was gathered through the utilization of semi-structured interviews and writing logs, and subsequently subjected to content analysis for the purpose of analysis. The results indicated that there were three significant factors, namely personal, academic, and external, that both facilitated and hindered the progress of learner autonomy in the writing course that utilized portfolios.

The study conducted by Papamitsiou and Economides (2019) aimed to explore the perspectives and behaviors of learners in comprehending the teaching goals and expectations set by instructors in the context of autonomous language learning. The findings indicated favorable

dispositions towards the teaching objectives and requirements set by the instructors, as well as the establishment of personal objectives and study plans. Additionally, the participants demonstrated a willingness to engage in autonomous English language learning.

It is worth noting that although there have been various studies conducted to investigate the efficacy and results of autonomous learning methodologies, there is a noticeable lack of research dedicated to exploring learners' perspectives on autonomous learning. Gaining insight into the viewpoints, dispositions, and convictions of learners is crucial in order to cultivate pedagogical methods that prioritize the learner and are in harmony with their individual requirements and inclinations. Through conducting an investigation on the perceptions of autonomous learning among EFL learners in Iraq, this study addresses a significant gap in the existing literature. This study was guided by the following research question:

RQ. What are the Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions of autonomous learning in higher education?

Method

Design of the Study

The study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of Iraqi EFL learners regarding autonomous learning in higher education. Qualitative research is highly appropriate for investigating subjective experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, as it enables a profound comprehension of the participants' viewpoints and facilitates extensive and meticulous data gathering and analysis. This study aimed to explore the intricate aspects of autonomous learning as perceived by university students from Iraq, employing a qualitative research design.

Participants

The research comprised of a meticulously chosen and examined cohort of 80 Iraqi undergraduates who were registered in EFL courses at higher educational establishments. The participants for this study were selected utilizing a convenient sampling technique from a range of universities situated in the Erbil region of Iraq.

Instruments

The data collection instrument employed in this study was a questionnaire, more precisely referred to as the "Learner Autonomy Questionnaire." The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data regarding the perceptions of autonomous learning in higher education among EFL learners from Iraq. The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire is comprised of a total of 20 statements.

The participants were obligated to express their personal experiences and perceptions by choosing the suitable number on the given scale. The purpose of the questionnaire was to evaluate different facets of self-directed learning, such as setting objectives, utilizing resources, honing listening abilities, engaging in speaking exercises, deriving pleasure from independent learning tasks, expressing preferences regarding teacher participation, building self-assurance.

Data Collection Procedures

The process of data collection was carried out in a methodical and well-structured manner, with the aim of guaranteeing the dependability and accuracy of the results. The survey was conducted among a group of 80 Iraqi university students who willingly offered to take part in the research. The participants were given explicit instructions regarding the completion of the questionnaire and were allocated a suitable duration to provide their responses. The process of collecting data was carried out in a classroom or other appropriate settings to create a comfortable and conducive environment for participants to share their responses.

Data Analysis

The researcher of the present study analyzed the responses through SPSS25 and made use of frequency analysis. For each statement, the participants' responses were taken into consideration and the level of agreement and/or disagreement were pointed out and manifested through tables and figures.

Results

Answering the Research Question

The research question was analyzed using Frequency Analyses. Therefore, it was needed to take into account frequency data as well as other descriptive statistics. To this end, the researcher of the present study provided tables and bar charts for each item of the questionnaire so that he could meticulously analyze the participants' answers to the questionnaire items. There were 6 items in the questionnaire and each item was taken into account separately. However, the items have been taken into consideration in groups of five.

Table 1

Frequencies related to Items 1-5

Statistics					
			When I hear someone talking		I enjoy learning
I usually set my own goal for each semester.	I use other English books and resources of my own will.		in English, I listen very carefully.	I want to talk in English with my family or friends.	a grammatical point on my own.

N	Valid	80	80	80	80	80
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	4.2500	4.0625	4.3625	4.5125	4.0250
	Std. Deviation	.87872	.94593	.84560	.61611	.98051
	Minimum	2.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	1.00
	Maximum	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

The results manifested in Table 1 show that the mean scores for items one to five are 4.25, 4.06, 4.36, 4.51, and 4.02, respectively. The 5-point Likert scale range is interpreted as 1.0-2.4 (Negative attitude), 2.5-3.4 (Neutral attitude), and 3.5-5.0 (Positive attitude). Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants of the present study mostly agreed with items one to five. In the following, each item has been analyzed separately.

Table 2

Item 2

I use other English books and resources of my own will.					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	1	1.3	1.3	1.3
	<u>Disagree</u>	5	6.3	6.3	7.5
	<u>Undecided</u>	12	15.0	15.0	22.5
	<u>Agree</u>	32	40.0	40.0	62.5
	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	30	37.5	37.5	100.0
Total		80	100.0	100.0	

The participants were requested to express their degree of agreement with the assertion "I use other English books and resources of my own will." A significant proportion of participants, specifically 62.5%, express agreement or strong agreement regarding their voluntary utilization of additional English materials and resources. This implies that a considerable proportion of the participants proactively pursue supplementary English resources autonomously.

Table 3

Item 3

When I hear someone talking in English, I listen very carefully.					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	1	1.3	1.3	1.3
	<u>Disagree</u>	2	2.5	2.5	3.8

Undecided	7	8.8	8.8	12.5
Agree	27	33.8	33.8	46.3
Strongly Agree	43	53.8	53.8	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	

A considerable percentage of respondents (15.0%) demonstrate uncertainty when it comes to independently utilizing supplementary English materials and resources, indicating a lack of clear preference or hesitancy in their decision-making process. A smaller percentage of participants demonstrated dissent (6.3%) or strong dissent (1.3%) towards the statement, suggesting that they do not actively partake in supplementary English literature and materials at their own volition.

Table 4

Item 4

I want to talk in English with my family or friends.					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Undecided	5	6.3	6.3	6.3
	Agree	29	36.3	36.3	42.5
	Strongly Agree	46	57.5	57.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

The participants were requested to express their degree of concurrence with the assertion " I want to talk in English with my family or friends". A significant proportion of participants (57.5%) express a strong inclination towards engaging in English conversations with their family or friends. This finding suggests that a considerable proportion of the participants have a strong inclination to engage in English communication with their loved ones.

A significant proportion of participants (36.3%) express their agreement with the statement, thereby highlighting the generally favorable attitude towards participating in English dialogues with relatives or acquaintances. Additionally, it is worth noting that a lesser proportion of participants (6.3%) fall under the category of "Undecided," suggesting that they may lack a definitive inclination or are experiencing uncertainty when it comes to engaging in English conversations with their family or friends.

Table 5

Item 5

I enjoy learning a grammatical point on my own.					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	1.3	1.3	1.3

Disagree	6	7.5	7.5	8.8
Undecided	13	16.3	16.3	25.0
Agree	30	37.5	37.5	62.5
Strongly Agree	30	37.5	37.5	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	

A proportion of participants (16.3%) express uncertainty regarding their inclination towards autonomous acquisition of grammatical concepts. This particular cohort may experience a range of emotions or a lack of clarity when it comes to their personal preferences. However, a smaller proportion of participants express disagreement (7.5%) or strong disagreement (1.3%) with the statement, suggesting that they do not derive pleasure from autonomous grammar learning.

Table 6

Item 6

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	3	3.8	3.8	3.8
	Undecided	11	13.8	13.8	17.5
	Agree	22	27.5	27.5	45.0
	Strongly Agree	44	55.0	55.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

The participants were requested to express their degree of concurrence with the assertion "While learning English, I like activities in which I can learn on my own". A significant proportion of participants (55.0%) express a strong inclination towards favoring activities that afford them the opportunity to independently acquire English language skills. This finding suggests that a considerable proportion of the participants exhibit a strong inclination towards and derive satisfaction from engaging in self-directed learning tasks. Additionally, a significant proportion of participants (27.5%) express their agreement with the statement, thereby highlighting the generally favorable attitude towards self-directed learning.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the perspectives of Iraqi EFL learners with regards to autonomous learning in the context of higher education. By means of scrutinizing the data collected from questionnaires and conducting in-depth interviews, significant revelations were acquired regarding the viewpoints of the participants in relation to autonomous learning. The results provide valuable insights into the advantages, difficulties, and situational elements that impact self-directed learning within this particular environment.

The analysis indicated that a significant proportion of participants exhibited favorable attitudes towards autonomous learning. The potential benefits of recognizing it include an increase in motivation, self-efficacy, and learner autonomy. This is in line with prior research conducted by Papamitsiou and Economides (2019), as well as Hussein and Al Bajalani (2019), which highlighted the beneficial effects of self-directed learning on learner engagement and language proficiency. The aforementioned findings indicate that EFL learners from Iraq recognize the significance of assuming responsibility for their own learning journey and possess a strong inclination towards developing greater autonomy in their learning endeavors.

Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge that the participants have also articulated reservations and encountered challenges in relation to autonomous learning. The participants expressed concerns regarding time management, a lack of guidance, and a lack of familiarity with autonomous learning strategies. The findings presented align with the research conducted by Sadaghian, Marandi, and Iravani (2020), as well as Khaidir, Wulan Tersta, and Afria (2020), who highlighted the possible challenges that learners might encounter when trying to incorporate autonomous learning strategies. This highlights the significance of offering focused assistance and guidance to learners, along with integrating clear instruction on self-directed learning strategies into the curriculum.

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