Aligning Beliefs with Action: A Study of ESL Teachers' Beliefs on Fostering Learner Autonomy

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Learner autonomy, where students take charge of their learning, is a growing focus in language education. However, research suggests a gap exists between teachers' belief in learner autonomy and their actual classroom practices. This study, conducted at a public Malaysian university, investigates this disconnect by exploring how ESL teachers perceive learner autonomy and how those beliefs translate into action. Using a mixed methods approach, the research first employed surveys to examine the correlation between teachers' beliefs and their reported use of autonomy-fostering practices. In-depth interviews then provided richer insights into the experiences and challenges teachers face in implementing such practices. The findings revealed a positive correlation - teachers with stronger beliefs were more likely to report using autonomy-fostering methods. However, interviews highlighted the complexities of implementing learner autonomy, revealing both potential benefits and practical challenges. This study underscores the need for targeted professional development programs that bridge the gap between teachers' beliefs and effective classroom strategies. By equipping teachers with practical tools and addressing implementation challenges, such programs can empower them to cultivate truly autonomous learners.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is regarded as an important capacity for effective language learning [9,10]. It aligns with the development and demands of the 21st century, fulfilling the need for sustainable living. The advent of technology and rapid development encourages educators to provide better quality service and equip learners with autonomous learning skills. Learners who have achieved higher levels of autonomy are better equipped to meet their learning needs and are recognized as

better citizens by taking control of their own decisions [1]. In English language learning, learner autonomy has become a widely discussed topic in educational pedagogy over the decades. The concept of learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's learning was first introduced by Holec in a seminal report Luckring and Hummel [2]. It is now understood, exercised, and promoted in various contextual settings [3]. In language learning, learner autonomy is vital, requiring active learner participation [4]. Littlewood highlighted that this ability is not inborn and must be attained through natural means, including formal learning. Holec's popular definition emphasizes learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" and a potential capacity to act in a learning situation [5].

In language teaching and learning, learner autonomy is considered one of the desirable characteristics of language learners [6]. More recently, it has begun to attract attention in the school sector and is considered essential in meeting the challenges of globalization in the 21st century. The changes in educational systems emphasize learner-centred approaches, making learner autonomy crucial in English language teaching by encouraging critical decision-making [7]. The 21st century has seen the impact of globalization characterized by worldwide competition and constant changes Chu and Luckring [8]. Thus, human resource development is strategically positioned at the center of achieving developmental goals Chang [9]. The success of a nation in developing its human capital is evidenced by the quality of skills and knowledge, creativity, resilience, and responsiveness, highlighting the importance of education and training [10].

An earlier interest in learner autonomy was individualistic tone in the form of self-learning in mid-seventies was replaced by a focus on fostering autonomy in the classroom by equipping learners with all required skills, particularly needed in language learning. In language learning, learner autonomy is defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning which he notes that the ability is not inborn but must be achieved by formal learning [11]. In addition, the concept of Learner Autonomy which was first introduced in Europe [11-13] has been further researched and developed by researchers in many countries around the world including the Asian region.

A few research have been conducted in investigating learner autonomy in a non-western cultural region. For example, a study which reported explanation of autonomous learning theory to its practice Kareva, [14], ways to promote autonomy in material development and the use of technology Sprivoska and Osmani [15], teachers and learners' belief of autonomy [16], learner autonomy in Indonesian high school [17-19] and learners' level of autonomy [20] and Abdelrazaq [21]. It is believed that an autonomous teacher will be able to produce autonomous learners and able to be independent implementers of government policies which is related to education policies. In Malaysia, a study conducted by Varatharaj, *et al.*, [22] revealed that teachers in cluster schools perceive teacher autonomy at a moderately high level. This indicates that the teachers view autonomy as an important aspect of their professional needs and feel that they have autonomy over the planning and implementing of the lesson. However, teachers have little say over the use of the curriculum because of the centralized nature of the curriculum.

In a Malaysian context, learner autonomy was first introduced as 'Self Access Learning' in 1990 in primary schools, and later in 1995 in secondary schools for English subjects [23]. A growing body of literature recognizes the importance of the classroom environment in building learners' responsibility. In Malaysia, fostering learner autonomy in language teaching aligns with producing human capital with such qualities. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB 2013-2025) emphasizes using Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) to improve language proficiency among students. However, autonomous learning remains crucial yet missing from English language classrooms due to Malaysia's exam-oriented system and traditional teacher-centred approaches. [11] This results in students becoming passive learners, waiting for teachers to provide information and examination

tips, leading to rote learning rather than long-term knowledge or skills gain. Therefore, educational institutions must develop teaching and learning practices which focus on improving learners' responsibilities and decision-making, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes.

This research seeks to understand the issues relevant to the English language learning process at public universities in the Northern region by investigating teachers' beliefs and practices about autonomy in ESL classrooms. While learner autonomy has gained interest in many Asian countries, including Malaysia, many studies have focused on learners' and teachers' perceptions of autonomy. In the Malaysian tertiary education context, few studies have covered learners' readiness among university students, but limited studies emphasize learners' and teachers' real ESL classroom practices at tertiary and secondary levels. Therefore, exploring the beliefs and practices of local ESL teachers is timely. In most studies, teachers' voices have not been explored, and little is known about the extent of learner autonomy as perceived by ESL teachers [12]. This gap in research could benefit future studies. Although extensive literature is available on learner autonomy, studies on teachers' beliefs and practices are limited.

Investigating teachers' beliefs about autonomy is significant as teachers provide a clear picture of classroom occurrences [13]. Exploring teachers' beliefs and practices about current issues in teaching and learning could provide ESL planners and educators with a clear view of the real classroom situation and assist in developing appropriate methodologies, pedagogies, and educational materials.

1.1 Research Questions

This study will examine the following research questions:
1) What are Malaysian ESL teachers' beliefs towards learner autonomy?
2) How do English teachers foster learner autonomy in their teaching practices?
3) What is the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices in developing learner autonomy in ESL classrooms?

Null Hypothesis (H01): There is no significant relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in developing learner autonomy in ESL classrooms.

1.2 Definitions of Learner Autonomy

The term learner autonomy has been created since the 1960's. It pays much attention to an attribute of learners rather than learning situation. In the context of foreign language learning, Holec [11] is considered the first scholar in Europe to suggest that there is a need for a word or group of words that is used to indicate a person's ability to take charge of his/her own learning. He wrote a report on the theory and practice of adult education and defined learner autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3). An autonomous learner is therefore a person who is capable of taking charge of his or her own learning. The definitions of LA have been changing with times, among which Holec's [11] has remained the most widely cited definition in the world.

In addition to Holec's [24] famous definition of learner autonomy, other definitions of learner autonomy have also emerged. Dam [25] encapsulates learner autonomy as "a creating capability on the part of the learners to accept responsibility for their learning" (p. 135). In applied linguistics learner autonomy is considered as "a capacity for active, independent learning" [26], or, according to Little [13], the capacity for "detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (p. 4). From those definitions, learner autonomy can be summarized as learners' capacity to

take control of and responsibility for their learning and to use this skill to conduct independent learning.

1.2 Autonomy and Teaching Practices

Evidently, there is a connection between Learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. According to Thavenius [27] cited in Lamb [28], "Teacher autonomy can be defined as the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning". Consequently, Asmari [29] described that Learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy as both are fully involved in achieving the greatest effectiveness of language teaching and learning. The most vital thing in language learning is that "both teachers and learners need to be ready to enjoy and see the value of learners' autonomy as a means of learning success" Breen and Mann [30], cited in Wan [31].

In that sense, clearly there is a strong interrelationship between learners' autonomy and teachers [32] since teachers are supposed to facilitate autonomous learning in students [33]. Little [34] clearly asserts that "the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers" (p. 175). Teachers need to have the awareness and understanding of the limits of their control in the learning environment as overusing it could undermine student's autonomy. Even though numerous language teachers have positive attitude towards autonomous language learning and how important it is for learning and learners; however, they fail to put it into practice [35,36]. In China foreign language learning context, Li and Kim [37] have found positive impact of learner autonomy on competence level of English language. Their study establishes the increase of learner autonomy results in the development of communicative competence of English. In a similar vein, Hermagustiana and Anggriyani [38] have found that in Indonesia that learner autonomy supports the learners with higher confidence level where students learn English independently and less guided by teachers. Thus, learner autonomy and teachers are interdependent.

2. Methodology

The present study aimed to identify the ESL lecturers' beliefs and report their practices regarding the potential for learner autonomy among the ESL students they teach. Thus, a mixed-method qualitative and quantitative methodological approach was used in the present study for collecting data, involving a questionnaire and interviews. The whole population of ESL lecturers from the three campuses is 42 ESL lecturers from the Northern division.

The main research instrument used for data collection in phase one of the study is a questionnaire adapted from Borg and Al Busaidi's study [39] pertaining teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Borg and Al Busaidi's questionnaire was grounded in a thorough review of the academic literature on autonomy, which means that it is well suited for international use. The questionnaire was piloted, and the reliability of the questionnaire was checked by using Cronbach Alpha and it was more than 0.7 and is suitable to be used in the study.

Phase two of the research was a semi-structured interview conducted virtually. The interview questions are to explore teacher's beliefs about learner autonomy in depth. The semi-structured interview was conducted with six ESL university instructors. The researcher also adapted the interview guide from Borg and Al Busaidi's study [39] interview schedule, which the main themes investigated in the interview were:
   (a) the teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy
   (b) teacher beliefs about their practices

Data obtained from the survey was analyzed using SPSS version 21. Descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) was calculated for all questions. Inferential statistics were also used to examine relationships between the variables and the differences among them. The qualitative data (the open questionnaire responses and the interview data) were categorized through a process of qualitative thematic analysis. Braun &Clarke [40] with the support of Thematic Analysis. Teachers' belief in learner autonomy was analyzed and categorized based on Oxford's [41] model of learner autonomy.

2.1 The Four Aspects of Learner Autonomy

Oxford [41] expanded Benson's model and proposed a model that contains four perspectives on autonomy, each with a different focus: a technical perspective, which focuses on the physical situation; a psychological perspective, which focuses on the characteristics of learners; a sociocultural perspective, which focuses on mediated learning; and a political–critical perspective that deals with competing ideologies, access, and power structures.

3. Results

RQ 1 - What are the Malaysian ESL teachers' beliefs towards learner autonomy?

3.1 Psychological view

Table 1 shows the result of the psychological perspective. Psychological perspective refers to the attitudes and cognitive abilities that allow learners to be responsible for their learning. Concerning the psychological perspective, as such Item 30 (learn how to learn) and Item 38 (self-evaluate) represented the psychological view.

The descriptive statistics of two items of psychological view are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Psychological view

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (9.5%)	27 (64.3%)	11 (26.2%)	4.167	0.58
To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	0 (0%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	28 (66.7%)	11 (26.2%)	4.167	0.621
Overall						4.167	0.477

Based on the findings, Item 1 "learning how to learn is key to developing learner" showed the majority of the respondents chose to agree with 27 respondents (64.3%) followed by strongly agree with 11 respondents (26.2%). The mean and standard deviation for the item are 4.167 and 0.58 respectively.

Next, Item 2 "To become autonomous learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning" showed the mean and the standard deviation for the item are 4.167 and 0.621 respectively indicating respondents agreed with the statement of the importance of developing the capacities of learners to evaluate their own learning. Based on the findings of all the items psychological view showed the overall mean is 4.167 and the standard deviation is 0.477. In conclusion, respondents agree with the psychological view.

3.2 Social View

Social view focuses on situations in which learners might learn through social interactions with their teacher and other learners. As such Item 20 (activities to work together) and Item 17 (opportunities to learn from each other). The descriptive statistics of two items of social view are listed in Table below 2.

Table 2
Social view

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.	0 (0%)	2 (4.8%)	4 (9.5%)	24 (57.1%)	12 (28.6%)	4.095	0.759
Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	0 (0%)	2 (4.8%)	2 (4.8%)	31 (73.8%)	7 (16.7%)	4.023	0.643
Overall						4.059	0.606

Considering this analysis, it is clear that most of the teachers believe in the social orientation of learner autonomy. Meanwhile, a minority of the respondents partially agree and disagree with 2 respondents (4.8%). The mean and the standard deviation for the items were 4.023 and 0.643 respectively indicating that respondents agreed with the statement. Based on the findings of all the items in social view showed the overall mean was 4.059 and the standard deviation was 0.606. In conclusion, respondents agreed with the social view.

3.3 Technical View

The technical perspective emphasizes skills and strategies used by learners for unsupervised learning Oxford [41]. There were three items such as;

Item 5 (learning outside the classroom)
Item 22 (self access learning resources)
Item 6 (independent study at a library)

The descriptive statistics of three items of technical view are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Technical view

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	1 (2.4%)	4 (9.5%)	10 (23.8%)	24 (57.1%)	3 (7.1%)	3.571	0.859
Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy	0 (0%)	4 (9.5%)	15 (35.7%)	19 (45.2%)	4 (9.5%)	3.547	0.802
Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.8%)	13 (31%)	22 (52.4%)	4 (9.5%)	3.619	0.824
Overall							

Based on the findings of all the items from a technical view, the overall mean was 3.579 and the standard deviation was 0.646. In conclusion, respondents partially agree with the beliefs in the technical view which recognized that learner autonomy is promoted by working independently in self-access centers.

3.4 Political view

Political views on autonomy refer to the freedom and choices a teacher gives to his/ her students to determine aspects of students' own learning Benson [42]. The items in the questionnaire are listed below;
    Item 3 (learner make choices how they learn)
    Item 15 (idea of choices of learning activities)
    Item 28 (choices of learning materials)
    Item 20 (what they learn encourage learner autonomy)
    The descriptive statistics of four items of political view are listed in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Political view

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (16.7%)	23 (54.8%)	12 (28.6%)	4.119	0.67
Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kind of activities they do.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.4%)	30 (71.4%)	11 (26.2%)	4.238	0.484

Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.	0 (0%)	2 (4.8%)	2 (4.8%)	31 (73.8%)	7 (16.7%)	4.023	0.643
Learning autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (19%)	26 (61.9%)	8 (19%)	4	0.624
Overall							

Based on the findings of all the items from a political view the overall mean is 4.095 and the standard deviation is 0.427. Thus, respondents agree about the political view of learner autonomy which is intended to give learners some choice in the kinds of activities they do to promote learner autonomy. Generally, from the survey results, it could be concluded that teachers have their own interpretations of beliefs about learner autonomy the majority proposed that learner autonomy sees learners as being able to decide, monitor and evaluate their own learning with or without the help of their teachers. Based on the overall findings, it could be concluded that psychological orientation, social orientation, and political orientation are the most supported, with higher average levels of total support, and strong support, than for the technical perspective. The strong support for psychological perspectives is an indication of the importance.

3.5 Next is RQ2 - How do ESL teachers foster learner autonomy in their Teaching Practices?

Table 5 below represents the teachers' practices.

Table 5
Teachers' practices

ITEMS	STATEMENTS
28.	Learning autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.
5.	Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.
2.	Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete the task alone
3.	Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn
6.	Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy
7	Involving leaners in decision about what to learn promotes leaner autonomy
15.	Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kind of activities they do.
17.	Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other.
20.	Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.
23.	Learner autonomy is promoted while learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed
26.	Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy

There are 11 items to be discussed. As shown in table below, majority of the respondents agree about "learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together" (73.8%) followed by "Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choices in the kind of

activities they do" (71.4%). Then it is followed with "Involving learners in decision about what to learn promotes learner autonomy" and "Learning autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials" (61.9%). Based on the mean score, the highest mean showed respondents agree about "Learner autonomy is promoted when teachers provided learners with some choices in the kind of activities they do" (M= 4.238, SD=0.484). Meanwhile the lowest mean showed the respondents partially agree about "Learner autonomy is promoted while learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed" (M= 3.523, SD=0.943). Next, the overall mean of the teachers' practices is 3.917 and standard deviation is 0.389. Thus, the respondents partially agree about teacher's practices.

3.6 Next is RQ 3 – What is the relationship between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices in developing students' learner autonomy amongst ESL teachers?

i. Null hypothesis (H01): There is no significant relationship between teachers' beliefs and the frequency of use of instructional practices to develop learner autonomy.
ii. Null hypothesis (H02): Teachers' beliefs do not significantly predict the frequency of use of instructional practices to develop students' learner autonomy.
Table 6 shows the beliefs and instructional practices in developing students' learner autonomy among ESL teachers.

Table 6
Teachers' beliefs and instructional practices in developing students' learner autonomy among ESL teachers

		Beliefs	Practices
Beliefs	Pearson Correlation	1	.890[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	42	42
Practices	Pearson Correlation	.890[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	42	42

The findings of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices in developing students' learner autonomy amongst ESL teachers in Table 6 displayed (r=0.890, p<0.05) indicates that there is a significant relationship between them. Hence the increase of the teachers' beliefs then the effect of teaching practice also increases. Therefore, the Null hypothesis (H01): There is no significant relationship between teachers' beliefs and the frequency of use of instructional practices to develop learner autonomy was rejected.

3.7 Findings of Phase 2 (Qualitative) of the Studies

RQ1 – What are the Malaysian ESL teachers' beliefs towards learner autonomy?

To summarize ELS teacher's definition of Learner Autonomy, based on the responses given, the themes independence and taking responsibility confirms with the definition by Holec [11] ; Little [43]; Benson [36] in the field of learner autonomy. The themes independence and responsibility align with Dickinson [43] interpretation of the term 'taking responsibility for one's own learning' in a sense that

the leaner is involved in decision making process, setting objectives and finding the means i.e. materials, sources of input and activities in achieving the objectives. The answers are also aligned with a psychological attribute of individual learners, implying a capacity and willingness to take responsibility for one's own learning and actively manage it, both inside and outside the classroom Holec [11]; Dickinson [43]; Leathwood, [44]. So, a fully autonomous learner is required to undertake learning independently as mentioned by the interviewees. This finding also corroborates with a study done by Hasim and Zakaria [45] where most Malaysian ESL teachers were found to be aware of what learner autonomy entails.

RQ 2 – How do ESL teachers foster learner autonomy in their teaching practices?

The teaching practices that teachers believe can promote autonomy and the activities that they do to encourage their learners to be more autonomous. Table 7 shows the summary of Teachers' Beliefs on Practices of autonomy-promotional activities.

Table 7
Summary of teachers' beliefs on teachers' practices of autonomy-promoting activities

Interviewees	Practices	Excerpts
T1	give clear instructions, giving deadline and give sufficient guidance	*the instructions I made sure that they are clear.* *tell them to not be afraid to explore, not be afraid to make mistakes, always try to be independent, always refer to friends*
T2	ask questions	*instead of giving them direct answers, I would ask them questions*
T4	give positive reinforcement	*If it's physical class, my reward is just nasi lemak*
T5	read the sources to be able to respond to questions	*. I want you to read on the topic. So that on the day that I am going to go through regarding this topic, you are able to actually give me some information regarding the topic*
T6	self-learning, class participation	*I give them sample questions and I want them to do their own research.* *…give them questions and ask them to participate.*

Based on the responses, it could be concluded that ESL teachers utilize various teaching practices in their classrooms to foster learner autonomy.

4. Discussion

4.1 Teacher's Beliefs Regarding Learner Autonomy

The result of the questionnaire was conducted to get information about teacher's beliefs regarding learner autonomy. Concerning the first research question, 'How is learner autonomy defined by teachers?' The most interesting finding was that the psychological and technical orientations of learner autonomy were more strongly supported than the social and political perspectives. Teachers accept the social perspective of learner autonomy. They endorse the political, psychological and technical orientations of learner autonomy, in that order. They associate learner autonomy with concepts common in literature, such as learners' independence and responsibility for their own learning and involving students in their learning process and means of evaluation.

However, by exploring how autonomy is employed in practical teaching, it seems that teachers retain control over learners in some aspects of the learning process, such as determining the objectives, the materials, and the evaluation and assessment activities. This notion of autonomy is similar to that indicated by teachers in the studies by Borg and Al Busaidi's study [39], and by Balcikanli [46]. The most interesting finding from this study is that more than half of teachers believe in the role of cooperative group activities in supporting the development of learner autonomy, endorsing a social perspective on autonomy.

4.2 Teacher's Beliefs Regarding Practices

The second section of the questionnaire contained three segments on teachers' promotion of learner autonomy in their teaching practices; the first assessed how often teachers encourage their students to do activities in and outside the classroom. Teachers believe that they must encourage learners to take on these practices of autonomy. This finding supports the work of other studies in this area Chan [47] linking autonomous practice with the responsibility of teachers to encourage their learners to carry out various kinds of self-directed activities. The teachers had a positive impression, overall, of their students' abilities in most aspects considered indicators of learner autonomy. Similarly, previous studies have demonstrated that most teachers have positive attitudes towards learners' abilities in most aspects of decision-making.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the teacher's beliefs regarding learner autonomy were positive, they have good ideals on learner autonomy and so they are in strong agreement that specific approaches and strategies might well foster greater autonomy among English learners. On the whole, as an educational concept, learner autonomy found general acceptance among English teachers in a public university. However, there was a gap between their understanding of the definition of this notion and how to implement the concept in teaching practice. Factors such as culture and Malaysian traditional teaching mode negatively affected the effective fulfilment of learner autonomy. Some of our suggestions were that at the theoretical level individual teachers deepen their understanding of learner autonomy and its implementation methods and in their daily teaching they improve the effectiveness of implementation by teaching observation and reflection after class. Besides the efforts by teachers alone, teachers and educational researchers could cooperate to seek out practical and effective ways of the realization of learner autonomy in specific classroom settings. Finally, as for the out-class of environment, policymakers in the domain of English teaching might take as many factors as possible in terms of the effective implementation of learner autonomy to create a favourable external environment for the smooth implementation of this notion

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