

A Comparison of Iranian EFL Vs. Non-EFL Teachers’ “Knowing” of Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Investigating the “knowing”, a module of the KARDS model proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2012) for teacher education, of Iranian teachers of learner autonomy, this study is an attempt to illuminate some of the yet unexplored areas of teachers’ various types of knowledge of learner autonomy. Furthermore, it attempts to illustrate how Iranian Non-EFL teachers’ knowing affects their practices with regard to learner autonomy and how this could differ from that of Iranian EFL teachers. To that end 112 EFL and Non-EFL teachers were purposefully cluster-sampled. Based on convenient sampling but only after data saturation was reached were 12 teachers interviewed. Based on the result of the interviews and the data gleaned from the literature a questionnaire was developed. The samples were asked to complete the questionnaire and then through negative case analysis some were interviewed. The questionnaire tapped into the social, political, psychological and personal aspects of learner autonomy. The results indicated the informants, be it EFL or non-EFL, found learner autonomy to be a psychological construct, which can be traced back to their personal knowledge. Finally, with regard to the feasibility and desirability of learner autonomy implementation in the education system, the informants see learner autonomy as more of a desirable concept than feasible. It is hoped that teachers and teacher educators find the results as well as the suggestions-for-action made at the end of the study helpful and that the results have tangible implications for the Iranian education system when fed into professional development activities and strategic planning.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Teachers’ Knowing, CARDS Model, Teacher Cognition, Teacher Education

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1. Introduction

Common knowledge has it that Homo sapiens are driven and even biased by the belief systems they acquire or possess. Teachers are no exception. This is why it seems undeniable that what teachers do is directed in no small measure by what they think. “If, however, teaching is done and, in all likelihood, will continue to be done by human teachers, the question of relationships between thought and action becomes crucial” (National Institute of Education, 1975, p. 1, as cited in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). In addition, within the sociocultural approach to pedagogy, teachers are expected to bring to pass transformations in the educational system and the contribution of teachers’ beliefs, values, and identities to such transformations is widely acknowledged (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012) but surprisingly not practiced. This dearth of investigation into teachers’ conceptions and their differences and similarities across the subject matters they teach is the problem this study aims to address. This study thus investigates the existence of a certain pattern and makes comparison between Iranian EFL and non-EFL teachers’ knowing of learner autonomy (henceforth LA) to come up with a model for the Iranian context. That is, it makes comparisons between the two groups of teachers to see how their conceptions of autonomy would vary across their subject of teaching and would those differences be significant to have any implications for language teaching in Iran.

The current study tries to shed some light on the teachers’ various types of knowledge, i.e., “*professional, procedural, as well as personal knowledge*” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 24) of LA. Furthermore, it tries to tap into the fact that how EFL teachers knowing affects (if any) their practices with regard to LA and how this could be different if any from that of Iranian Non-EFL teachers. Being context sensitive, the study is believed to have tangible implications for the Iranian educational system if its results and implications

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are considered in professional development activities and strategic planning within the Iranian Educational system.

To this end, an overview of the key concepts as well as the existing literature informing the current study is presented first. Then in the methods section the informants of the study, the instruments used to collect data, the data collection and analysis procedures followed in the study are discussed. Finally, the study concludes with the results and discussion and some closing remarks.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Learner Autonomy

Over the last two decades, the concept of LA has gained momentum to the extent that it has become a 'buzz-word' within the context of language learning (Little, 1991, p. 2). It is a known fact that one of the most important consequences of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the emphasis placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process (see Wenden, 1998, p. xi). This shift of responsibility from teachers to learners, needless to say, does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of changes to the curriculum towards a more learner-oriented learning. Furthermore, this shift of focus away from teacher to learner has yielded a radical change in the old power and authority distribution that used to be prevalent in the traditional classroom. David little (1991, p. 4) puts autonomous learners into a new perspective and contends that they have the "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". Thus, it is expected that such a learner takes up greater responsibility for their own learning. However, this does not mean that teachers relinquish

their control over what is happening in the language learning process to learners and leave the students to their own devices, be it autonomous or otherwise.

2.2. What Is Autonomy?

To quote Henry Holec (1981, p. 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 1), it is stated that LA is “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”. Generally speaking, “autonomy” has been used in at least five ways (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 2): first, in situations where “learners study entirely on their own”; second, it is used for a set of skills learnable and applicable in self-directed learning; third, “for an inborn capacity... suppressed by institutional education”; fourth, “for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning”; and finally, for the learners’ right “to determine the direction of their own learning.”

Another model proposed by Oxford (2003, pp. 76-80) to fathom out different versions of LA, is made up of four constituents: “Technical perspective focuses on the physical situation; Psychological perspective focuses on characteristics of learners; Sociocultural perspective focuses on mediated learning and Political-critical perspective focuses on ideologies, access, and power structures.”

In effect, the autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and seizing learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher or outside world (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992). Within such a paradigm, learning is not parrot fashion memorization, rather “it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events” (Candy, 1991, p. 271).

2.3. Teachers' Knowing

Teacher's knowledge has been extensively researched in the field of general education and to some extent in applied linguistics (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Following Kumaravadivelu's (2003, 2006, & 2012) questioning of the bewildering array of labels and definitions for teacher knowledge in the literature, and his proposal of a simpler frame of reference: professional knowledge; procedural knowledge, and personal knowledge, the authors have used the term teachers' "knowing" to refer to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think" personally, procedurally, and professionally (Borg, 2011, p.3).

Key points to be addressed in teacher cognition research concerns four areas: what teachers have cognitions about; the development of these cognitions; the interaction of these cognitions and teacher learning, and finally their interaction with classroom practice (Beach 1994; Holt Reynolds, 1992; Kettle & Sellars 1996; Weinstein 1990). In the following figure, Borg (2003, p.82) summarizes the results of research studies with answers falling within the four above-mentioned areas.

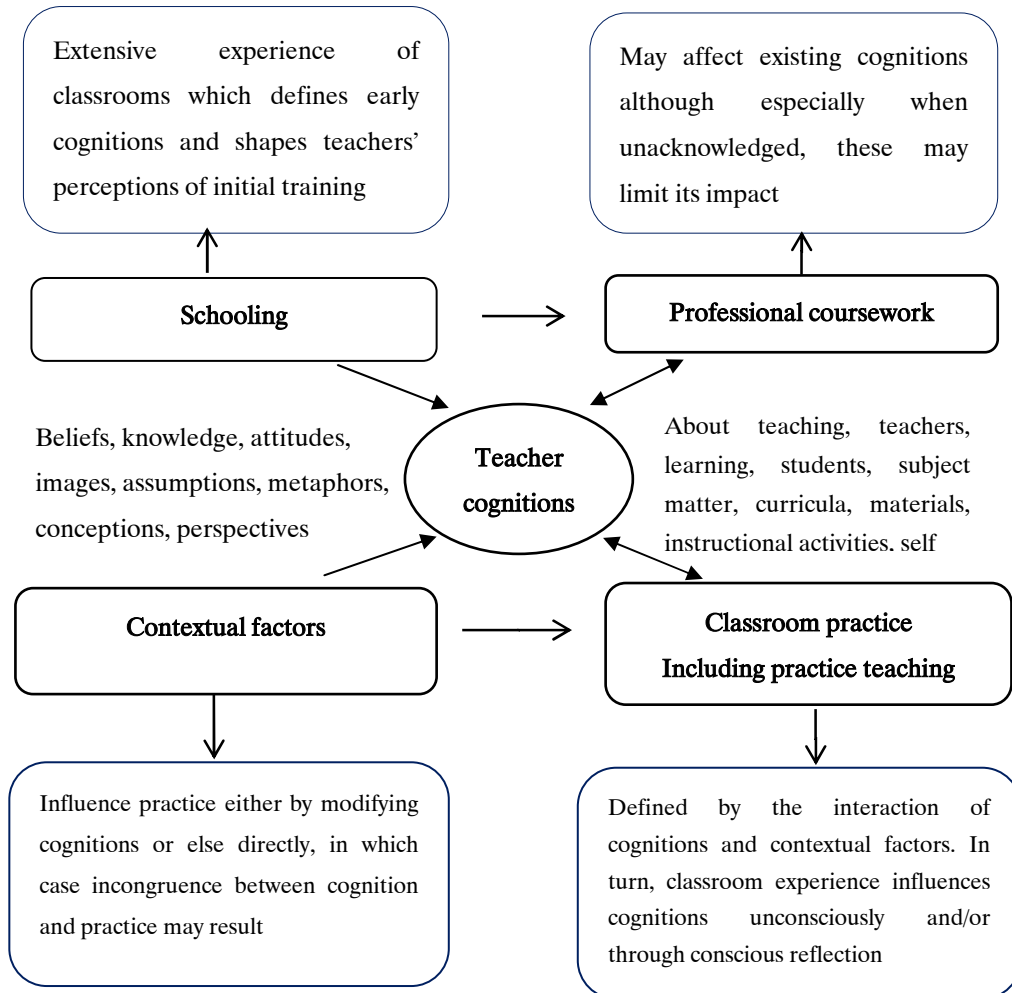


Figure 1. Teacher Cognition, Schooling, Professional Education, And Classroom Practice (reproduced from Borg, 2003).

Another model developed to capture the notion of teacher cognition is the modular model proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2012). His model is composed of the following five modules: Knowing, Analysing, Recognizing, Doing, and Seeing.

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The module knowing, which is purported to capture teacher cognition, has three constitutive components: professional, procedural, and personal knowledge. According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), professional knowledge refers to the “intellectual content of the discipline” (p. 24) which emanates from experts and includes knowledge about language as a system, as discourse and as ideology, knowledge about language learning (e.g., second language acquisition, or SLA), as well as knowledge about language teaching. Procedural knowledge deals with classroom management strategies, while personal knowledge is about the teachers’ “sense of what works and what doesn’t” (p. 34) in the language classroom. This module is schematically represented in Figure 2 below.

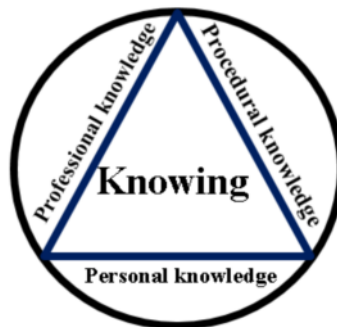


Figure 2. The module of “knowing” from Kumaravadivelu’s (2012, p. 24) CARDS model.

2.4. The Literature on Teachers’ Knowing of LA

The literature is replete with definitions and justifications of LA. However, very little research has been conducted on teachers’ knowing and thus little is known about what LA means to teachers in various contexts and educational settings, in our case EFL vs. Non-EFL teachers, around the world (Borg, 2012).

Studies in the literature (Borg, 2003; Camilleri, 1999; Candy, 1991; Chan, 2003; Crabbe, Elgort & Gu, 2013; Feryok, 2013; Dam, 2003; Kohonen, 1992; Lai, Gardner & Law, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Lier, 1996; Little, 2002, 1991; Oxford, 2003; Sheerin, 1991) indicate that a definition of autonomy would not be complete if it does not consider the teacher, and that autonomy is a process not a fixed state or product, and that it is sensitive to the context including the cultural and educational setting. Chan's study, for instance, highlights the fact that LA cannot be encouraged without support from the teacher. Furthermore, a review of the studies hints that both teachers' and learners' worries should be addressed if autonomous learning is to be practiced.

Borg (2006) tried to add to what it means to be a language teacher through analysing ways in which language teachers are seen to be different from teachers of other subjects. More than 200 practicing and prospective EFL teachers from a range of contexts defined what they meant by EFL teachers' distinctiveness. He further included the opinions of specialists in mathematics, history, science and chemistry on the extent to which characteristics claimed to be distinctive of language teachers applied to these other subjects. His findings suggest that language teachers can be seen to be distinctive in terms of *the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher-learner relationships*, as well as *contrasts between native and non-native speakers*. He also raises methodological and conceptual issues of relevance to further research into the area. One of the most important issues raised is the need to define language teachers' distinctive characteristics with regard to "specific contexts rather than globally, the importance of comparisons between insider views on such distinctiveness and those from outside language teaching, and the value of comparative studies of actual classroom practices of language teaching and other subjects." (ibid, p.3)

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Lee (2010), building on the work of Borg (2006), reports on a study of Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perceptions of some of the unique characteristics of EFL teachers that differentiate them from teachers of other subjects. He collected his data by means of a questionnaire filled out by 163 college level EFL students in Japan. The analysis of the responses indicated that the learners perceived EFL teachers to be unique along four central dimensions which were already highlighted in the study by Borg (2006). That is, the complex nature of the subject matter, the content of teaching, teaching approach and teacher personality were the areas in which EFL teachers were felt to be unique by their students.

Despite the fact that educational researchers agree that certain characteristics are relatively consistent across different subjects, there is little agreement concerning discipline-specific teacher characteristics (Bell, 2005). To a large extent, however, teachers are characterized by the subject they teach and the common practices they share in teaching that subject (Borg, 2006).

Furthermore, often times when concepts, originated from a western culture, i.e. autonomy, are applied in other context such as that of Asia paradoxes might raise their ugly head. Hence, the universal applicability of autonomy is repudiated when researchers obtained findings showing that some Asian learners tend to be more teacher-dependent than autonomous (Mohd Jaafar & Ming Thang, 2013). This; however, does mean that autonomy and its implementation should be ignored as Kwei Kuen (2005) nicely puts it when she says autonomy "needs to be developed by the teacher suppressing the desire to lead, and overcoming her[his] phobia of uncertainty.

This literature review (Bell, 2005; Borg, 2006; Lee, 2010) suggests that more research is needed into discipline-specific teacher characteristics, in our case EFL vs. Non-EFL teachers' knowing of LA. Therefore, the current study

investigates Iranian EFL and non-EFL teachers' knowing of LA. That is, it investigates the existence of a certain pattern and makes comparison between the two groups to come up with an explanation for the Iranian context. For that purpose, the possible answers to the following research questions are analysed.

Where does 'LA' stand in Iranian EFL and non-EFL teachers' knowing of teachers teaching at state-run schools in Bukan, and Mahabad, two cities in West Azarbaijan Province, as well as Shiraz in Fars Province?

To what extent (if any) are Iranian EFL and non-EFL teachers different from each other with regard to their knowing of the feasibility and desirability of LA?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 112 teachers from among more than 4000 teachers teaching at the education offices in Bukan, and Mahabad, two cities in West Azarbaijan Province, as well as Shiraz in Fars Province in Iran. Thirty-eight of the teachers were EFL and the rest were Non-EFL. The strategy employed to select the participants of the study was stratified purposeful sampling. That is, through stratified purposeful sampling, the researchers tried to make sure that all the subgroups were represented so that comparisons between EFL and non-EFL teachers were made possible. As a result, both experienced and inexperienced, male and female teachers from almost all fields of study were proportionately included in the study.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

The items of the interview are extracted from the literature (Lamb & Reinders, 2008), but they were meant to be tentative and open to change. That is, as the title reads, the interviews were semi-structured thus there were additions to the questions as each interview unfolded. For the sake of time the participants were interviewed in three-to-five people strong groups each time.

Furthermore, as Ary, et al. (2010, p. 439) point rightly out “individual attitudes, beliefs, and choices of action do not form in a vacuum.” By listening to others, one is helped to form ideas and at the same time the researcher can become aware of any possible interactions of ideas. Moreover, by carrying out the interviews in focus groups, the researcher tried to keep the interviews more socially-oriented as well as remaining more economical with time and money. Focus group interviews also put the researcher in a better position to further probe into the possible ambiguities of the interactions arising during the interview whose analysis is impossible with a one-on-one interview. Finally, because focus group interviews are recommended by scholars in the field with topics that might be new to the interviewees, and inasmuch as it was felt that the concept of LA could be new to some or even many of the participants, the researcher utilized this data collection tool (Ary, et al., 2010).

One might speculate that when the questionnaire is administered, the problem of unfamiliarity may rear its head. This problem was taken care of by engineering the language used in the interviews as well as questionnaire items such that technical terms were avoided. To put it simply, in the interviews the researchers avoided using the technical terms such as “LA” by asking the interviewees, for instance, whether they saw “giving the students some voice” in assessment as promoting or demoting language learning.

3.2.2. A Researcher Developed Questionnaire Based on the Interviews

The items of the questionnaire were first adopted from the literature (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012) and then further modified through axial coding (Ary, et al., 2010) based on the data collected through the interviews.

Therefore, based on the transcriptions of the interviews and reading and rereading them, the researchers got familiar with the information then tried to look for meaningful groups by fracturing the data into pieces. Following this phase, through constant comparisons of the code labels, the researchers categorized or re-sorted the data. Finally, the resorted data were analysed to develop themes which were fed into the questionnaire as items. Based on the themes developed out of the interviews the questionnaire had twenty-eight Likert-scale items.

To attend to the validity of the questionnaire, the researchers shared a copy with colleagues, who have read on LA extensively and have been implementing and disseminating it for a while now, in order to review and remark on the questionnaire, and to write their expectations of what an LA questionnaire might contain. Receiving their comments, the researchers made some modifications.

As for the reliability of the questionnaire, the researchers employed Cornbach's Alpha, which is sometimes called an extension of the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20). The calculation indicated a value of 0.79 as the reliability index of the instrument. Even though, this is an acceptable value, higher values are more desirable.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

At the outset of the study the participants were informed briefly of the aims and objectives of the project. Some semi-structured focus group interviews

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were held with the participants, through which and a thorough analysis of the literature a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was administered to the target participants and following the questionnaire administration another set of interviews was held with the outliers (i.e. five teachers) based on the result of the two previous phases to see to the possible avenues of meaning as is technically called “negative case analysis” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). By selecting outcasts for the second round of interviews, it is meant that those participants who were at the two extreme poles of the spectrum with regard to their knowing of LA were interviewed. The results of the questionnaire administrations and the two sets of interviews were qualitatively as well as quantitatively analysed to see what their knowing of LA was and how they were different or similar when EFL vs. Non-EFL teachers were compared. There was a difference between the two groups in terms of the questionnaire administration and the interviews held. That is, the non-EFL group filled in the Persian translation version of the questionnaire and the interviews were held in Persian while the EFL group took the English version in both cases; however, they were free to answer in any of the four languages English, Persian, Kurdish, or Turkish. Thus there were instances of diversion to one of the aforementioned languages in some of the interviews with the EFL teachers. This was allowed to make sure the interviews were not impeded in their participation by being forced to use English as the medium of communication.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected through the interviews were transcribed, doubled-checked for any possible data loss, and then organized. That is, the researchers, following Dornyei's (2007) advice, read and reread the transcriptions to get familiar enough with the data. What followed that phase was data reduction

and provisional coding, from which categorizing and interpreting ensued. Put more simply, in these two phases the researchers actually counted and grouped the instances of words, phrases of meaning which could fall into specific categories. However, these categorizations, as Ary, et al. (2010) had warned, were open to change as the study unfolded. That is, some of them, which were thought to be different at the outset of the study, were later on merged into a more general category and subsumed under a new label. This whole process of provisional coding, categorizing and theme development was not linear but conversely it was what Creswell (2007, as cited in Ary, et al., 2010) calls spiral or what Dornyei (2007, p.243) calls “iterative”. Following this phase of data analysis came the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the questionnaires and their comparisons through appropriate statistical formulae. Finally, the contents of the second set of interviews were qualitatively analysed to dwell further on the issue at hand and help come up with any possible further modifications of the model/pattern to be developed out of the first two analyses.

4. Results and Discussion

Looking at the results, one can find a trend in the participants’ answers toward any of the four orientations to LA proposed by Oxford: the social, the political, the psychological, and the technical views towards LA. However, the truth value of the answers depends to a large extent on the extent to which the questionnaire items intended to load under each orientation functioned effectively. Using Cronbach alpha, the researchers analysed the questionnaire items for the four scales for EFL and Non-EFL participants whose results were, respectively, as follows: technical (0.58; 0.62), psychological (0.69; 0.64), social (0.48; 0.41) and political (0.44; 0.46). The results are graphically represented in

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Figure 3. Therefore, one possible answer to the first research question could be that teachers mostly associated LA with the psychological orientation, which relates to 'learning to learn' by checking the item with the statement "Learning how to learn is key to developing LA". This item received the highest level of agreement from EFL as well as Non-EFL teachers.

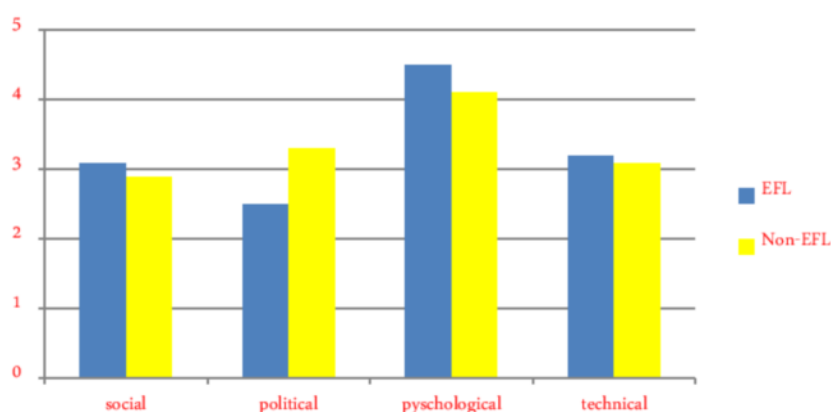


Figure 3. Teachers' Tendency toward the Four General Orientations Proposed by Oxford (2003, p.76)

The next two sections of the questionnaire tapped into two issues at the same time, i.e. the desirability and feasibility of having learners involved in a number of language teaching decisions. EFL versus Non-EFL teachers' responses are summarized and shown in Figure 4. As it is evident in all cases both groups of teachers felt more at home with the desirability of student involvement than with its feasibility. As indicated through the use of Wilcoxon signed ranks test, the differences were statistically significant with objectives, assessment, teaching methodology, and materials related items of the questionnaire. The same themes were recurrent in the interviews conducted. Giving the students some voice in the assessment method was seen to be most

feasible; however, classroom management, topics discussed, and tasks and activities were seen as the least feasible.

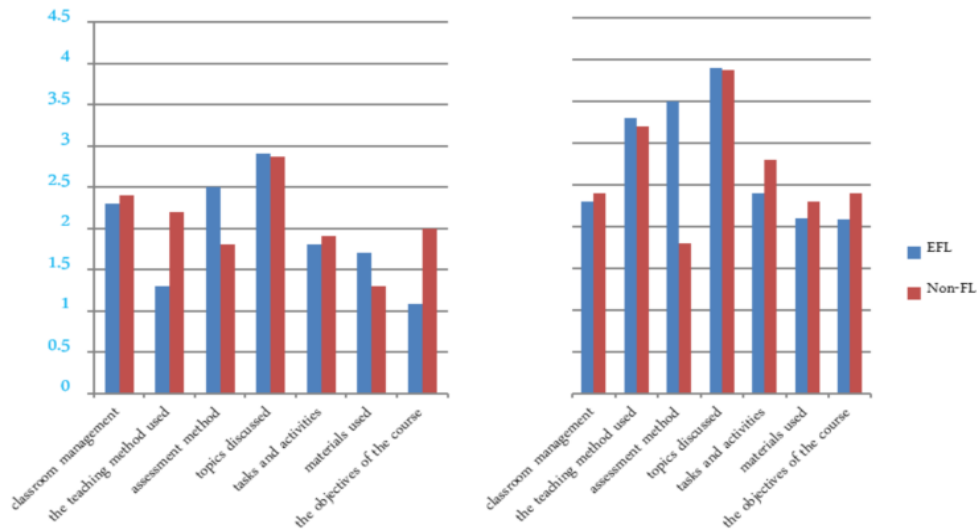


Figure 4. Feasibility (left side graph) and Desirability (right side graph) of Implementing Learner autonomy for EFL vs. Non-EFL Teachers

As for the first research question, that is EFL vs. Non-EFL teachers' definition of LA, the results of this study could mean that EFL and Non-EFL teachers have a lot in common even though some specific differences are inevitable among which one could mention teacher-learner relationship, assessment method, and teaching methodology. That is, to put the above conclusion in Kumaravadivelu's terms, EFL teachers' *procedural* as well as *professional* knowledge seems to be slightly different than that of Non-EFL teachers. This difference should be highlighted/ reflected in the in/pre-service education EFL and Non-EFL teachers receive.

Trying to provide an answer to the second research question: the desirability and feasibility of LA, after analysing the data collected through the questionnaire which corroborated the result of the second round of interviews,

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one can conclude that the teachers who participated in the current study find LA more desirable rather than feasible irrespective of the EFL vs. Non-EFL dichotomy.

Unsurprisingly, these results are in line with what Borg (2003) and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) indicated. That is they have also found that teachers see LA as a psychological phenomenon and this could be looked at from a number of angles. Firstly, in identifying the roots of such a knowing and by looking at what Borg (2003) introduces as the most important factor shaping teachers' cognition, one could easily see what effect all years of schooling teachers go through as students themselves has on their practices as teachers. The participants in our study are no exception in this regard. That is they are influenced by the methods their teachers once implemented in their classes. This is in line with Miliander and Trebbi's (2011, as cited in Lai, Gardner & Law, 2013) study. They concluded that "teachers often tend to teach the way they were taught themselves, and find it difficult, and not always reassuring, to try out new ways of teaching" (p. 3)

This, however, does not mean that such a "knowing" is impervious to change. Rather conversely, the professional constituent of teachers' knowing which is more conducive to change compared to the other two constituents can be developed through appropriate education in teacher training centres or during in-service professional development programs (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). This could gradually make it possible for teachers to realize the potential of such innovative ideas in teacher education as well as to stop avoiding these innovations when it comes to practicing theorizing and theorizing based on their practices. This in turn alleviates the frustrations teachers might confront in their daily practices when their students are stuck in their attempts to try harder simply because they are too dependent on the teacher.

This leads the discussion to the next point to be addressed and that is a justification for why the participants found LA desirable but not practical. This could be simply traced back to their lack of procedural or/and professional knowledge of LA implementation although they have accepted it as a theoretically well-founded concept in the ELT and general education.

5. Implications for Practice

When analysing the data from the second round of interviews an interesting theme which the questionnaire had failed to capture surfaced. That is, the participants indicated a lack of support on the side of their head teachers, as well as a lack of access to a bank of activities which promote and help encourage autonomous learning. This is in keeping with what is proposed by Lewis (2013) and reiterated by Crabbe, Elgort and Gu (2013, p.194) as “a new understanding of LA”. That is, being cognizant of the socio-cultural theory of mind, Lewis (2013) defines LA “as a set of competences (for self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction), exercised by socially integrated individuals.”

Furthermore, the interconnected world which has come into being as a result of the World Wide Web holds some promise to help educators and teachers alike in promoting LA. Thus, the consideration of the wealth of information and opportunities such instruments as cell phones, tablets, and laptop computers can bring to the learning situation as well as the way these instruments/artefacts can facilitate learner as well as teacher autonomy is what the future predictably holds in store for learners, teachers, and teacher educators, be it autonomous or otherwise.

And it is where interested readers could embark on a study of how the integration of such instruments could help learners and teachers with their autonomy of self-directed instruction. The authors believe that the effects of

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the integration of these innovations into teaching and learning are what might keep interested readers/researchers busy for the years to come.

Therefore, the introduction of such a bank could be very much fruitful and a possible answer to the current demands of the classroom, as it, first, could save most teachers a lot of time and energy and, secondly, could be a guide to teachers, especially the adventurous ones, who might dare to traverse an uncharted territory in teaching but might be misguided or might try to reinvent the wheel. And finally, this brings teachers to grips with what socio-cultural theory has to offer practicing teachers. That said, such an information bank can be a collection of ideas and activities which are sensitive to the local socio-cultural, economic and historical exigencies. It could also be the development of localized accessible multimedia online language learning environments, such as Livemocha (livemocha.com) and Duolingo (www.duolingo.com), which allow learners to have a voice in selecting the means and modes of learning which they feel suits their preferences best by tipping the scale to strike a balance between the personal and social dimensions of learning.

Analysing the literature and looking back at the results of the current study, one can see that teachers' attitudes toward learner autonomy irrespective of their subject of teaching has received a lot of attention within the last decade. Feryok (2013) focuses on the integration of formal and experiential knowledge or, in Kumaravadivelu's (2012) terms, on the fusion of professional and personal knowledge to better utilize the unpredictability of the language classroom (the procedural knowledge) to promote LA. Feryok (2013) further contends that teacher autonomy development is an integral part of the development of LA. This can be a reason why Dam (2003) attributes the responsibility for the development of LA mainly to teachers.

In conclusion, this study lends some support to the claim that EFL vs. Non-EFL teachers hold similar views toward LA, i.e., both groups defined LA to be a psychological construct, and that this mind-set could be traced back to their personal knowledge. However, this does not mean that such a mind-set is impervious to change rather conversely through appropriate pre/in-service professional development programs teachers could be educated to fine-tune, adjust and readjust their approach toward (i.e., professional and procedural knowledge of) LA. Teachers, EFL or Non-EFL, need to be supported with their parting with the traditional approach toward education to appreciate a post-modernist, post-structuralist view of education so that they can see LA not only as desirable but also feasible.

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