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EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy: Does STD-Based Training Make a Difference in their Autonomy-Supportive Behaviors?

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy as both an individual and a social concept is considered a vital element in language learning. Moreover, enhancing learner autonomy has been a main concern among language learning scholars. Because of this primacy, this study in two phases, first sought to examine the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy from teachers' perspective, and then sought to study the effectiveness of training on enhancing teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors. Seventy-two Iranian EFL teachers' views were collected via an autonomy questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The results indicated that the teachers conceived autonomy to be more desirable than feasible. They considered autonomy as an ideal optional rather than an accessible purpose. Furthermore, classroom observations indicated that training in workshops that were based on self-determination theory (SDT) enhanced teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors. Trained teachers outperformed untrained teachers in almost all criteria in the ASBI checklist. The study has implications for EFL teachers and teacher educators. The contribution SDT can have on autonomy enhancement indicates its significance and potential to be accentuated in instructional programs as well as pre-service and in-service training sessions.

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1. Introduction

The constantly changing world with the imposition of new demands on learners makes the notion of autonomy a crucially vital requirement in education. It has also been claimed that to make learners ready for lifelong learning, it seems an essential need for language educators to urge their language learners to become autonomous to face new challenges of the current world (Tsai, 2019, Guay, 2022). Considering this importance, two conceptualizations of autonomy have been developed. The first is the language learner autonomy (LLA) perspective which is a learning theory perspective and the second is the self-determination theory (SDT) which is a motivational theory perspective. From the LLA perspective, learners develop their potential in controlling their learning while for the SDT, the focus is on why people do actions that they do, and the amount of energy they consume to do that activity (Lee, 2017). While in the LLA perspective, the learners take charge of their learning, in the SDT perspective the focus is on the volition and support of the activity by another individual (Ryan & Deci, 2006). The SDT is a theory of motivation elaborating on the relationship between autonomy, competence, and the connection between self-determination of motivation and self-regulated behaviors (Hu, & Zhang, 2017).

Dörnyei (2005) asserts that teachers who are in favor of supporting autonomy and promoting a non-controlling atmosphere develop intrinsic and self-determination tendencies in their language learners. Vázquez (2019) believes that teachers' autonomy is crucial in enhancing learners' autonomy and that autonomy is not developed individually but collectively in language learners; “the teacher’s enabling support is one of the keystones upon which learner autonomy is built” (Vázquez, 2019, p. 48). Jiménez Raya (2017) is on the belief that developing autonomy and agency are vital elements in changing the current status of autonomy in language education and shaping teachers' professional identity to foster autonomy. Despite these theorizations, the study and development of autonomy are still far from being a central focus of attention in many educational circles (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2017) although it has been at the heart of language education for decades (Benson & Voller, 2014; Dang, 2012). Changing this status requires defining new roles for teachers (Vázquez, 2019).

Teachers' role can be considered crucial since “the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher's creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted” (Barfield, et al., 2001, p. 3). Necessary for the creation of this culture is teachers' perceptions of the feasibility and practicality of learner autonomy, a quality mainly absent in studies on autonomy as little is known about the meaning of autonomy for language teachers with diverse teaching experiences (Rao, 2006). Added to the already perplexing situation is the fact that language teachers' perceptions of autonomy have received scarce attention in the Iranian context (Alibakhshi, 2015). To fill this gap the present study motivated by an SDT perspective on autonomy, sought to study Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of autonomy in language classrooms and the vitality of training EFL teachers on autonomy in fostering their autonomy-supportive behaviors in the classroom.

2. A brief note of previous works

Even though autonomy has been researched in many domains of language education, little is known about teachers' beliefs and perceptions of the concept. Palfreyman (2003) acknowledges this gap and believes that unlike learner autonomy which has received technical treatments from diverse perspectives, teachers' conception of the topic has remained mainly underdeveloped. Therefore, due to the primacy of teachers in enhancing learner autonomy, it seems necessary to study teachers' perceptions of autonomy and their autonomy-supportive behaviors in the classroom.

These behaviors have myriads of benefits for learners since when teachers support the initiatives launched by their learners, the learners will become more inclined to pursue the activities proposed (Tsai et al., 2008) and to engage in classroom activities (Patall et al., 2018). These autonomy-supportive behaviors even correlate with the learners' autonomous motivation (Reeve et al., 2018). As a result of enhancing learners' motivation, teachers feel more efficient and gain more job satisfaction (Cheon et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is believed that teachers who promote autonomy bestow their learners more opportunities to choose among various alternatives, give them better rationales for tasks, and lessen the pressure they feel while facing new learning situations (Assor, 2012).

One of the first studies on teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy was conducted in Europe by Camilleri (1999). Through questionnaire data, she concluded that the teachers were mostly willing to change the activities of the classroom towards learners' autonomy and they were eager to incorporate their learners in various areas of teaching materials selection or classroom management. At the same time, teachers in this study were reluctant to incorporate their learners in methodological decisions of class, and constraints imposed on teachers by authorities made it difficult to promote learners' autonomy or grant them the right to make choices. In another large-scale study by Chan (2003), the learners' autonomy from teachers' perspectives in Hong Kong was analyzed. The study revealed that teachers took learner autonomy as the main goal of their teaching and favored enhancing their learners' autonomy. The study also concluded that the curriculum constrained teachers from dedicating opportunities to their learners in some areas like learning activities. This study supported the claim that learner autonomy cannot occur without support from the teacher. Using the same instrument, Balcikahn (2010) studied a group of student teachers in Turkey. In addition to the survey method, 20 participants were interviewed in focus groups of four. The results of this study indicated that the student teachers had positive views about learner autonomy in engaging their learners in a wide variety of classroom decisions although they were reluctant to engage their learners in making decisions about the lesson planning.

Another study on teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy was conducted by Al-Shaqsi (2009) in state schools of Oman. The main aims of this study were studying first the characteristics of autonomous students, second, the students' ability to perform some tasks signifying learner autonomy like the appropriate time to use a dictionary or pinpointing their points of readiness or weakness, and

finally ways to enhance learner autonomy. The results revealed that three characteristics identified by teachers were the indicators of autonomous learners. They were the ability to use computers to locate the required information, use the dictionary appropriately, and ask the teachers questions when needed. In another study, Acknowledging the absence of teachers' voices in research on autonomy and the fuzziness of the meaning of the concept for language teachers, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) surveyed a group of language teachers in Oman using questionnaires and interviews. The results indicated that teachers had positive views on learner autonomy but they did not conceive it feasible to enhance learner autonomy in their actual teaching practices. The teachers believed that learners' lack of motivation, scarce familiarity with independent learning, and institutional factors such as an inflexible curriculum thwarted the development of learner autonomy.

As an instance of supporting autonomy in class, Bozack et al. (2008), through classroom observation and field notes, studied the autonomy-supportive behaviors of teachers. The observations were made using the Autonomy Supportive Behavior Instrument (ABSI) checklist which is focused on the existence or non-existence of the following items: opportunities to manipulate objects, opportunities to talk, encouraging learners to relate topics and lessons across the curriculum, opportunities to make choices, verbal exchanges, and finally teachers' encouragement and engaging learners in experiences.

Bozack et al. (2008) showed that teaching practices proposed by the SDT were present in the data with some variations from the SDT recommendations. They concluded that students had ample opportunities to manipulate objects although in a moderate number of cases, students used the same objects in the same fashion without altering the way they used the objects. There were also many opportunities to talk. Teachers elevated student learning in many cases but they scarcely encouraged learners to relate topics and lessons across the curriculum. Students did not have many opportunities to make choices. With verbal exchanges, teachers persistently responded to student questions and dialogues initiated by students. Finally, there was a lack of teachers' encouragement and engaging learners in experiences.

As an example of a qualitative study on the concept of learner autonomy, Martinez (2008) studied a group of language teachers. The teachers in this study were taking a 32-hour training course on learner autonomy when the study was conducted. A mixture of questionnaires, interviews, and observations provided the data for the study. The results made it clear that teachers mostly favored learner autonomy and these ideas were mostly informed by their beliefs as language learners. They also emphasized that autonomy is a better and more effective methodology in teaching language, it fosters individualization and differentiation to be made within learners, it is an idealistic concept, and finally, it is a way to learn without a teacher.

Concerning training teachers to develop their autonomy-supportive behaviors, Cheon et al. (2018) in a longitudinal study of a group of teachers concluded that carefully designed interventions help teachers establish a more autonomy-supportive environment in their classrooms. They randomly

assigned a group of full-time teachers to a year-long course intended to focus on an autonomy-supportive program. They also studied what resources these teachers gained during the course and the reasons they were able to enhance the quality of their autonomy-supportive behaviors. The results indicated that the course enhanced teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors. Also, the intervention led to achievements in teachers' efficiency, and intrinsic instructional objectives accounted for their professional development.

Considering the context of Iran and asserting the paucity of research in this domain, Alibakhshi (2015) examined the challenges of promoting learner autonomy from teachers' perspective in a qualitative study. Using in-depth interviews and content analysis, he studied a small sample of Iranian EFL teachers. He extracted three themes of the institution, student, and teacher-related challenges in promoting learner autonomy. By institution-related challenges, he meant imposed materials, assessments, and objectives. By student-related challenges, he recognized seven sub-themes of lack of motivation, dependence on teacher, limited exposure to language, focus on test results, low proficiency, unfamiliarity with autonomous learning, and inability to identify one's needs. By teacher-related challenges, he recognized four themes: lack of relevant resources, lack of teacher autonomy, fear of losing authority, and lack of experience in using autonomy. He concluded that teachers should receive instruction on autonomy enhancement both in their in-service and pre-service training.

In line with these studies and the lack of teachers' voices in this regard, the present study aims to fulfill the dual purpose of identifying the desirability and feasibility of developing autonomy from teachers' perspective and gauge the effectiveness of SDT-based training on enhancing autonomy-supportive behaviors of Iranian EFL teachers.

3. METHOD

The participants included a total number of 72 EFL teachers in five private language institutes in Kermanshah, Iran. They all answered the questionnaire on autonomy. There were 25 male and 47 female teachers of EFL with Persian and Kurdish as their mother tongues. They were mostly BA and MA holders of TEFL with few PhD holders and most of them were teaching beginner and intermediate level courses except a few who taught advanced level courses. In terms of their teaching experience in language institutes, more than 60% of them were novice teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience. The rest were expert teachers with more than five years of teaching experience (Farrell, 2012). From this pool, 8 EFL teachers who consented to participate in the training phase of the study were chosen for the next phase of the study. They were randomly assigned to the control and experimental groups. The experimental group took eight training workshops on autonomy. Each workshop followed specific objectives and tasks to be achieved by the participants. The topics of the workshops included the essence of learner autonomy, learner autonomy in language institutes, implementing learner autonomy, developing strategies for increasing learner autonomy, conducting teacher research on learner autonomy, SDT and learner autonomy, SDT's principles in practice¹, and

SDT's principles in practice 2. Each workshop took 3 hours. The materials and guidelines for holding workshops were derived from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) who conducted a similar study on EFL teachers' perceptions of autonomy and also from Reeve, Bolt, and Cai (1999) who introduced eight means of fostering autonomy in the classroom environment based on SDT: (1) careful listening to learners (2) constructing situations for learners to work in their desirable way, (3) offering opportunities for learners to talk, (4) organizing instructional materials and arranging seating ways so that learners manipulate objects rather than inactively watch and listen, (5) encouraging learners when they show perseverance and attempt (6) giving slight indications or hints and expressing approval of gradual improvement, skillfulness, and mastery, (7) replying to learners' questions in an acceptable possible way (8) recognizing learners' attitudes and perspectives.

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase of the study, the teachers' views on the feasibility and practicality of learner autonomy were collected using a questionnaire. In the second phase of the study, the teachers' actual conduct in the classroom was observed using a checklist to check their autonomy-supportive behaviors in practice. To answer the first research question, a survey method was applied. To collect data, the questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) was adopted.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) warn about using self-report strategies such as questionnaires alone in this area of research and not observing teachers' behaviors. They assert that "to study teachers' beliefs we must always be mindful of the potential gap between beliefs elicited theoretically and teachers' actual classroom practices" (p. 6). Investigating these different attitudes can clarify what should be done to arrive at a shared understanding of the concept—the questionnaire comprised five sections. The first section, consisting of 37 Likert-scale-type items gauged learner autonomy from the teachers' perspective. The second section consisted of 14 statements, that evaluated the teachers' views on the feasibility and desirability of learner autonomy from teachers' perspectives. This section was divided into two parts, one gauging the desirability of developing autonomy and the next feasibility of its development. The third section contained two open-ended questions asking teachers how and why they provided opportunities for their learners to develop autonomy. The rest of the questionnaire collected teachers' demographic data and their willingness to take part in the follow-up workshops. In general, the questionnaire consisted of 59 items, and its reliability was estimated to be 0.85 in the present study. As the focus of the present study was on gauging the feasibility and practicality of practicing autonomy, respondents' answers to the second and the fourth part of the questionnaire were elaborated on here.

In the second phase of the study, the ASBI checklist developed by Bozack, et al. (2008) was utilized. This checklist, taking an SDT perspective, seeks to check the availability of autonomy-supportive behaviors of teachers and the nature of teacher-student interactions in the classroom. This checklist is based on SDT suggestions on how to develop autonomy in learners (Bozack, et al. 2008). The checklist comprised 12 items aiming to check teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors in class and its reliability has been reported to be 0.84.

To fulfill the aims of the study, a survey method as well as a quasi-experimental method were employed. To collect data for the present study, first, the questionnaire was distributed to 72 teachers to collect their views on the feasibility and practicality of learner autonomy. Then, among those who had agreed to take part in the training sessions, eight were chosen to be observed. They were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. The experimental group received eight sessions of training on autonomy in the form of workshops. Also, to avoid the memory effect of filling out the questionnaire, the observation stage of teachers' classrooms took place over a time interval of 14 days. Both trained and untrained teachers were observed for 10 sessions of 90 minutes each. The ASBI checklist was used to check the autonomy-supportive behaviors of the teachers. To avoid bias in this phase of the study, two other trained raters collaborated in filling out the ASBI checklists.

The questionnaire was analyzed statistically using SPSS 26. Mean, and percentages were calculated for comparing the two variables of desirability and feasibility of autonomy from teachers' perspective. For the second phase of the study, the eight volunteer teachers' classes (four comprised the experimental group and four comprised the control group) were observed consistently. The eight teachers' behaviors were analyzed using the ASBI checklists. The results of the checklists were compared to gauge the effect of training on increasing teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors.

4. Findings and results

The two issues of desirability and feasibility are better understood if compared together. The measurement scale of desirability items was Likert scores from 1 (undesirable) to 4 (very desirable), and feasibility items were measured from 1 (unfeasible) to 4 (very feasible). The mean of desirability and feasibility for each item was compared to a constant value of 2.5 as an average response.

As Table 1 indicates, most of the teachers believed that it is possible to involve learners in decisions about the objectives and materials of the course. In the case of the tasks to be followed and the topics for discussions, the majority of the teachers believed that the learners could have a say. For major stakes of the class like assessment, the teaching methods selected, and the procedures of class management, the teachers believed that the learners may take a prominent role. As it is clear in total, there is a strong tendency in teachers to involve their learners in class dynamics. In the case of the feasibility of applying these measures in the actual classroom, as it is clear from the data in Table 1, fewer teachers believe that it is possible to involve the learners in class dynamics. So, in comparison with the desirability measures, although again most teachers believed that learner autonomy is applicable in real classroom affairs, it does not seem possible for teachers to involve their students in making decisions in class.

In the case of classroom conduct involving learners in specifying the objectives of the course, choosing the topics to be taught, procedures of assessment, and the methods of teaching fewer than half of the teachers considered it possible in action to involve the learners although they considered them desirable. In the case of materials to be chosen for the class and tasks to be covered, as well as classroom management practices, nearly more than half of the teachers in actuality were able to

involve their learners in classroom decisions. In fact, in teachers' views, autonomy is easier said than done in actual classroom practice.

Table 1. Teachers' Attitude Toward Desirability and Feasibility of Learner Involvement

Item	Desirability		Feasibility	
	M	%	M	%
Learners are involved in decisions about:				
1. The objectives of a course	3.00	66.67	2.26	42
2. The materials used	2.85	61.67	2.79	59.67
3. The kinds of tasks and activities they do	2.93	64.33	2.98	66
4. The topics discussed	3.08	69.33	2.46	48.67
5. How learning is assessed	2.75	58.33	2.20	40
6. The teaching methods used	2.70	56.67	2.41	47
7. Classroom management	2.83	61	2.53	51
Total	2.86	62.12	2.51	50.40

In the case of teachers' assumptions of learners' ability to be autonomous, table 2 can be consulted. As it is clear from the table, more than half of the teachers consider it favorable that learners can identify their own needs and their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, learners' ability to monitor and evaluate their learning was considered a welcome ability by a majority of teachers in the present study. Cooperation in learning with other learners was also a benefit in teachers' views. On the contrary, less than 50% of the teachers considered individual learning as a bonus for learners. In the case of the ability dimension of the feasibility, the mean scores were slightly lower than the desirability measures. For instance, less than 60% of the teachers believed in the ability of the learners to identify their needs or identifying their weaknesses and strengths although above 60% of them considered such an ability as desirable. In the case of self-evaluation and monitoring their learning, again teachers reported the feasibility of these measures less than their desirability.

Table2. Teachers' Attitude toward Desirability and Feasibility of Learner Autonomy

Item	Desirability		Feasibility	
	M	%	M	%
Learners have the ability to:				
1. Identify their own needs	2.95	65	2.77	59
2. Identify their own strengths	3.08	69.33	2.67	55.67
3. Identify their own weaknesses	2.82	60.67	2.55	51.67
4. Monitor their progress	2.85	61.67	2.67	55.67
5. Evaluate their own learning	2.93	64.33	2.39	46.33
6. Learn co-operatively	2.92	64	2.80	60
7. Learn independently	2.39	46.33	2.54	51.33
Total	2.84	61.49	2.60	53.34

In the case of the applicability of cooperation in learning, 60% of teachers believed that learners have such an ability but for independent learning the reverse was true. Less than 50% believed that it is desirable but more than 50% ascertained its applicability in the classroom. It can be concluded that

similar to results for learner involvement, teachers considered learner ability to be autonomous more desirable than feasible in the classroom.

4.1. Trained and Untrained Teachers Autonomy-Supportive Behaviors

The teachers in this phase of the study were randomly assigned to the control and experimental groups. The experimental group teachers received training in 8 workshops while the control group teachers did not receive such training. Then the teachers in both groups were observed using the ABSI checklist developed by Bozack et al. (2008). Analyzing the observation checklists of the control group revealed that learners had some opportunities to manipulate objects, such as books, pencils, and papers. In 20% of the checklists, it became clear that the teacher presented the lesson while learners sat passively listening. The observation of learners working similarly and in the same manner suggested that there was little opportunity for learners to decide on or choose how they preferred to work with objects. Learners were exposed to language while they were listening or not doing anything special in many cases. Learners had some opportunities to talk. It was found that in 80% of the checklists, learners were using the same objects for the same activities in the same manner (e.g., following along in their textbooks or doing the same exercises of their workbooks).

Analyzing the ASBI observation checklists of the experimental group showed different results from those of the control group. The learners had more opportunities to manipulate objects such as books, computers, whiteboards, and/or teaching aids in the classroom. In these classes, only 8% of the observation checklists indicated that the teacher presented the lesson while learners sat passively listening. Opportunities for learners to decide on or choose how they preferred to work with objects were reported in the checklists of this group. The teachers in this group brought maps to the class, asked learners to do so, and were not strict with seating patterns. Learners brought CDs, flash memories, posters, and side books to the class and used them.

In the case of providing opportunities for learners, talking to their assigned partners occurred in 75% of the learner-talk by sharing a comment, asking a question, or answering a question in the control group. Such opportunities were provided through pair work in four teachers' cases and through group work in two teachers' classes only. So almost 50% of the teachers in the control group implemented group work in their teaching strategies. In the case of the experimental group, learners had ample opportunities to talk. Opportunities for learners to talk to their partners (who were not necessarily determined by the teachers) occurred in 88% of the learner-talk by sharing comments, asking questions, or answering questions. Such opportunities were provided through pair work and group work. The partners and group members were chosen by the learners themselves in most cases. Group work was reported as a valuable teaching strategy in 100% of the observation checklists of the experimental group and all four language teachers used group work in their classes.

SDT considers giving hints and praising mastery and progress as a way of supporting learner autonomy. These characteristics were investigated by noticing how teachers engaged learners in the process of learning. Engaging learners in the process of learning was reported at 53% in the observation

checklists of the control group. In 85% of the field notes, learners did not have an academic or social choice and the classroom environment was described as teacher-controlled not learner-centered. In limited cases where choice opportunities were reported, the choices were often recorded as academic rather than social. The academic choice involved the completion of an assigned task, the social choice was often determined by learners' choice of social configuration for work (e.g., group, partner, alone) or help-seeking from a classmate (Wiley et al., 2008). Based on the above explanation, the type of autonomy the participant teachers in the control group expected their learners to achieve, was of the academic type and more related to the narrow concept, while autonomy enhancement can produce some broad and long-term results.

In the experimental group, giving hints and praising mastery and progress were reported in 93% of the observation checklists. In 58% of the cases, learners did not have a choice at the level described by the SDT theory, the classroom environment was still described as teacher-controlled not learner-centered, but choice opportunities were reported more in these classes. Choice opportunities were recorded as both academic and social although the number of academic choices was still more like what was observed in the case of the control group. It can be inferred that the type of autonomy the participant teachers expected their learners to achieve was both academic and social.

Considering teacher-learner verbal interaction, the researchers found that teachers in the control group satisfactorily responded to learners' questions and learner-initiated dialogue in 71% of the cases. However, teachers elaborated or expanded on learners' questions or dialogues 5% of the time. They mostly answered the learners' questions quickly and personally and moved forward to the next instructional item. Teachers were reported unwilling to expand the topic of the question or focus on the importance of question-asking as a significant activity in autonomy enhancement. Regarding teacher-learner verbal exchange for the experimental group, it was found that teachers satisfactorily responded to learners' questions and learner-initiated dialogues in 89% of the time compared with 71% for the control group. Unlike the control group, teachers elaborated and/or expanded on learner questions or dialogue 38% of the time.

Opportunities to code encouragement occurred in half of the data (50%) in the control group. Teachers provided the learners with feedback. When encouragement was recorded, 82% of the codes indicated specific encouragement that provided learners with feedback about their learning on a particular task. The remaining 18% concerned global encouragement that was limited to times when the assigned pages for teaching in the session were covered and the teacher thanked the learners or happily or energetically finalized the session. Such opportunities occurred in 93% of the cases in the experimental group. When encouragement occurred, 80% of the cases showed specific encouragement that presented individual learners with feedback about their achievement on a particular instructional item. The remaining 20% indicated global encouragement. When the planned content for the session was covered, the teacher thanked the learners or happily or energetically concluded the session,

reminded the learners the joy of the learning process, indicated satisfaction with the learners' performance, said something about her eagerness to teach, and reminded her learners their capabilities.

Teachers were expected to make the information relevant to the learners by engaging the experiences, expertise, or perspectives of learners. This behavior was reported only in 19% of the codes in the control group. The classroom activities were reported based on the syllabus not on the dynamics or requirements of the class. This behavior for the experimental group was reported in 39% of the data obtained from the checklists.

5. Discussion

This study sought two aims. First, it was to find out how Iranian EFL teachers conceived of the desirability and feasibility of learners' autonomy in class. The second aim was to gauge the effectiveness of SDT-based teacher training in enhancing learner autonomy. To reach the first aim of the study, the questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) was adopted in which the participants were asked to check in the form of a Likert-scale how desirable autonomy is and how it is practical in their classes. To answer the second research question, eight volunteer teachers were assigned to two groups control and experimental. The experimental group attended eight workshops on autonomy. Then both groups were observed using the ABSI checklist developed by Bozack, et al. (2008) to pinpoint whether training had any effect on their autonomy-supportive behaviors in class. The results indicated that in general, EFL teachers considered autonomy more desirable than feasible in their classes and also that SDT-based training had an effect on their autonomy-supportive behaviors.

Regarding the first research question, the desirability of autonomous behaviors was considered consistently higher than its feasibility. This finding confirms the results of Camilleri Grima's (1999) and Balcikanli's (2010) study which indicated that teachers held positive attitudes about the desirability of involving learners in activities such as deciding on the place or position of desks, assessing themselves, and working out learning procedures but not on the selection of textbooks or time and pace of learning. The result is also in line with Camilleri Grima's (2007) that showed teachers' positive views towards the specific aspect of autonomy such as learners' setting their short-term objectives, their limited involvement in the selection of materials, and self-assessment.

One threat of such a distance between desirability and feasibility of autonomy is looking at it as "an optional extra" (Little et al., 2002, p.1) or an ideal absolute concept (Martinez, 2008) which acts as an obstacle in the way of learner autonomy promotion. The results of the analysis to a great extent validate those of Bullock (2011), Little et al. (2002), Yoshiyuki (2011), and also Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) in which there was a significant gap between the extent to which teachers thought their learners should have developed a series of abilities connected with autonomy and their attitudes towards the feasibility of achieving it. This gap is what is referred to as a distance between theory and practice (Bullock, 2011; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011). In fact, consistent with the results of other studies, autonomy is viewed as more feasible than practical as most teachers have little say on some components of the course or they believe manipulating them would run the course away from its intended purposes. Instances of these

conceptions can be seen in engaging learners in curriculum-related decisions or planning phases of the class.

Considering the second research question, trained teachers outperformed untrained teachers in almost all areas of the ASBI checklist. Although the classroom activities in the experimental group were reported as activities based on the syllabus, not on the dynamics or requirements of the class (similar to the situation observed in the case of the control group), the teachers in the experimental group explicitly and asked about learners' experiences, expertise, or perspective and based some of the classroom discussions on what emerged to be interesting in the classroom not on a pre-planned discussion. The learners in the experimental group reacted to those situations eagerly, they tried to contribute to the class and express their feelings regarding their friends' experiences. Teacher training based on the SDT principles seems to be influential in changing the EFL teachers' motivating style. This type of training may be among the possible answers to Holec's question (2008, p. 3) of "how can teachers be trained to adequately play their roles" in autonomy enhancement or how to train teachers explicitly raised by Tutunis (2011) which may result in building the facilitating style (La Ganza, 2008) in EFL classroom.

The primacy attached to teacher training on autonomy confirms the finding of Cheon et al. (2018) in which meticulously designed interventions helped teachers to enhance their autonomy-supportive behaviors. These results can also be considered as an experimental sequel initiated by Borg and Al-Busadi (2012) as they only proposed the training workshops for teachers and did not conduct any experimental treatment of the workshops they proposed for teachers. Therefore, this study, by utilizing the workshops as developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and adding SDT's strategies to the content of the workshops corroborates the fact that the training sessions were effective in enhancing the autonomy-supportive behaviors of language teachers. Furthermore, the results can be a response to a call by Duong (2014). Duong asserts that there should be some explicit training for teachers to familiarize them with the concept of autonomy and show them how autonomy should be integrated into language teaching.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this study generated responses to two questions of the feasibility and practicality of promoting autonomy in class and the efficiency of training on enhancing autonomy-supportive behaviors of language teachers. The first phase of the study revealed that from teachers' perspective, autonomy was more desirable than practical. It means that it is not easy for Iranian English teachers to enhance their learners' autonomy in class irrespective of their inclination to do so. This may have implications for curriculum developers and administrative authorities. As it is proposed, teacher autonomy leads to learner autonomy, and learner autonomy, in turn, is conducive to better learning. Therefore, it seems a good choice for administrators to empower language teachers to become more autonomy-supportive in their classes.

Concerning the second question, it is recommended that administrators organize in-service or pre-service training for language teachers to become familiar with the concept and ways of enhancing it.

In the case of the limitations of this study, the first limitation is concerned with choosing surveys or checklists. More qualitative and longitudinal studies may yield better illuminating results with the problem. The other limitation may be the small number of participants. Further studies can be conducted by taking more ethnographic or case studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the concept. By replicating such studies in other contexts, more factors and dimensions of the topic can be delved into.

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