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Professional Development of Pakistani EFL Teachers and the Culture of Learner Autonomy

Abstract

The value and impact of professional development of teachers are never-ending phenomena and it continues to develop betterment in the teaching performances. The current study aimed at giving professional development training to Pakistani English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers with reference to bringing, promoting and practicing the culture of learner autonomy in the EFL classrooms. Learner autonomy is a widely used concept in foreign language teaching and learning which makes learners more independent, self-conscious and self-aware of their own learning process. This experimental study represents Pakistani EFL teachers as the population, whereas 60 EFL teachers from the various universities of the province Punjab were taken as the sample. The results obtained showed a clear difference in the agreement of the teachers on using and practicing learner autonomy in their classrooms. Their concepts and mindsets on learner autonomy were changed after the training sessions.

Key Words:

English as a foreign language (EFL), Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), Foreign Language Classrooms, Learner Autonomy (LA), Professional Development

Introduction

The concept of autonomy in learners cannot be considered as a new idea (Thornton, 2010). Benson (2011), refers autonomy to the ability and capacity of a learner to take charge of his own learning. Its implications in the scenario of teaching and learning of a foreign language started widely during the last few decades (Ding & Shen, 2019). It was previously defined as the practical interventions of learning where the independence and creativity of the learners were more focused (Seeger, 2019). The impact and the role of teachers in fostering autonomy among foreign language learners and their individual importance cannot be denied in the learning process (Little, 2007). Teachers are referred to as facilitators and counselors in the process of bringing autonomous abilities among the learners of the foreign language (Smith, 2008).

The present study highlighted the perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers on learner autonomy and their views regarding its importance in the foreign language (FL) classrooms, in the Pakistani context. Moreover, it explored the problems and the challenges faced by EFL teachers while implementing the practices of learner autonomy (LA) in language classrooms. Teachers' readiness with reference to practicing the development of LA in their context was also investigated. After the systematic study of the above-mentioned issues, a series of professional development workshops were conducted for the EFL teachers, on the basis of their current perspectives and practices of LA. The purpose of the workshops was to train EFL teachers at first to know about the significance of LA, and secondly on developing useful practices of LA along with the strategies and techniques that may be used to modify the teaching pattern

towards the enhancement of LA. The changes in the attitudes of the Pakistani EFL teachers were also measured after the series of workshops.

A number of theories, key concepts of learner autonomy and the perceptions of EFL teachers in different contexts globally were used as the theoretical framework for the present research. The mindsets and conventions of Pakistani EFL teachers regarding LA presented in various researches were also used in framing the conceptual outlines for the present study, whereas the perspectives of Pakistani EFL teachers were investigated primarily in the present study as well. The series of professional development workshops used by (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012), were adopted in the present research. Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012), researched the beliefs of teachers regarding learner autonomy in the EFL context of Oman and designed workshops to develop mindfulness of learner autonomy among EFL teachers and to further give them professional training on how to implement the practices of LA in the language classrooms. The mentioned series of workshops were used in the present study with the little modifications according to the EFL context of Pakistan.

Theories and Previous Studies

Little (2004), gave some details about the various perspectives about the autonomy of a learner in a language classroom. The belief

*Professor & Director, Institute of Education, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

†Lecturer, TESOL, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: ayeshabuttlcwu@gmail.com

‡Lecturer, Lahore School of Accountancy and Finance, The University of Lahore (UOL), Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

which comes first is about the self-control of the learners, second belief says that the stamina of language learning is constructed by the learner himself by learning alone, whereas the third belief says that language learning can only be maximized by enhancing its usage. Reinders (2010), identified a few stages that learners have to know in the process of learning a language or to be an autonomous learner i.e. to set targets according to the needs, make plans about how to learn, choosing resources, understanding which language strategies to use to enhance learning, doing more and more practice, self-monitoring, self-evaluation of the progress, self-assessment and then revisiting and revising. Furthermore, he mentions that all these stages cannot be worked well, unless a teacher instills them in the minds of the students who are learning the language, thus teacher's role cannot be overlooked in the process.

The participatory role of EFL teacher holds a vital value in the process of the development of LA among EFL learners (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011). In his study, he highlighted what teachers think of learner autonomy, what are their beliefs and attitudes. The focus was given to the perceptions and practices of the EFL teachers. The results obtained from the current study showed that the teachers were reluctant to use language learning strategies for independent learning in their classrooms so at the end it was suggested to train the teachers at first to prevail the practices of LA in the foreign language classrooms and then to train the learners in this context.

The role of a teacher in autonomous learning can be described as the person involved in the organization of the learning process, a facilitator, an entity who keeps on giving feedback, encourages the learners, a resource person, an atmosphere creator, a support system, and a person who creates the learning space and comfort for the learners (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). In creating LA, a teacher works as a cooperative person who draws the guidelines for the learners, to walk on (Joshi, 2011). According to (Kormos & Csizer, 2014), a teacher should have an understanding of pedagogy and of management skills to develop LA among the learners and should have a personal influence on the learners.

Borg & Al-Busaidi (2011), puts more emphasis on teachers' education and on the professional development of the teachers rather on teaching learners about the use of autonomy practices. He further says that autonomy in the language classrooms cannot be seen unless the language teachers are ready and trained to take the initiative. The initiatives in bringing LA in the classrooms of a foreign language are surely a greater responsibility of the teachers and if the teachers do not take this responsibility then the whole learning process cannot work (Yan, 2012).

Feryok (2013), conducted a study on learner autonomy development and concluded that interference of the teachers in the learning process was proved to be successful. In his study learners were given control over the selection of resources, in modeling activities and they were involved in the process of self-evaluation as well. Though, the need for the teacher and the guidance of the teacher was still considered important to put them on the track, as they were to be guided in the whole process either about the selection of the resources or about monitoring their own performance. Alzubi & Singh (2017), also concluded from their research that the learners felt more confident and motivated with the presence and notifying involvement and interference of the teachers in the learning process.

A study was conducted in Pakistan on EFL teachers' beliefs and practices on LA by (Yasmin et al, 2018), which mentioned about the unawareness of the EFL teachers regarding the concept of autonomy among the EFL learners, moreover they were not yet ready to give independence to their students in the classrooms. The study resulted that the EFL teachers must be having awareness about the concepts of autonomy, additionally, they must have the knowledge about the basic techniques and strategies of LA. Another study by (Shamim, 2012), described a few facts about the EFL classrooms of Pakistan, mentioning that the overcrowded classrooms in Pakistan give teachers fewer opportunities to teach well. It was further suggested in the study that teachers need to be professionally developed on how to tackle such classrooms and they should have an awareness of the language learning strategies and collaborative learning strategies to cope up with such problems. (Yasmin et al, 2019), (Panhwar et al, 2017), (Kausar, 2012), (Qasim, 2016) also conducted studies on the practices and attitudes of Pakistani EFL teachers towards LA and concluded that teachers were not well aware with the ideologies, conceptual frameworks and techniques of promoting LA and a dire need was felt to professionally develop them in this field.

EFL Context of Pakistan

The importance of English cannot be denied in the context of Pakistan as it has been the official language of the country since it gained independence. According to Ashraf (2007), English is referred to as the language belonging to economy, academics and politics. In the Indian subcontinent, the foundation of the English language was laid by the British rulers and it was the language of all the spheres including social, official, political and educational affairs (Mahboob, 2009). After Pakistan came into being, it was clearly declared that Urdu would be the national language of the country but the English language still has the status of Official language in Pakistan and is learned formally in the educational institutions of Pakistan (Mansoor, 2004). It is the language of all the socio-economic spheres and holds great importance academically as well (Rahman, 2001).

In Pakistan, more than 25 languages are spoken, which makes it a multilingual country with Urdu as a national language and English as the official language (Mansoor, 2005). Despite various efforts of promoting Urdu in the country and making it an official language, the English language still enjoys the status of the language of power, language of dominance, language of class consciousness and class division (Yasmin et al., 2016). English has the status of a compulsory subject in schools, colleges and universities and acquaintance with English is very important to get nice jobs and social mobility (Rahman, 2001). Pakistan's government has been putting a lot of effort into organizing professional development workshops to train EFL teachers throughout the country. Though it should be noted that LA is still not considered as a goal and target of any of the workshops. They are focused on professionally developing teachers on teaching language skills in isolation but not on training them on how to make learners independent and autonomous (Ahsan & Anjum, 2012).

The present study addressed the above-mentioned issue by first investigating the current perspectives of Pakistani EFL teachers on LA and then on training them professionally on how to make their classrooms autonomous, so that the EFL learners may learn the language more independently.

Statement of the Problem

The present study investigated the current perspectives of Pakistani EFL teachers on learner autonomy. It also identified the challenges they face in the applications of the practices involved in LA and their readiness towards the process of teaching, adapting and applying the practices of LA in their English language classrooms. Moreover, the changes in the perspectives and readiness of the teachers regarding learner autonomy were also explored, after the training sessions, which were based on the importance and development of autonomy among EFL learners.

Research Questions

What are the current mindsets of Pakistani EFL teachers on learner autonomy?

How far are the Pakistani EFL teachers ready to learn, adapt and apply the autonomy practices in the EFL classrooms?

What are the changes in the mindsets (perspectives and readiness) of Pakistani EFL teachers towards learner autonomy after the professional development training sessions in LA?

Significance of the Study

The significance of the current research can be described in the following ways:

The study can be a line of guidance for the teachers of EFL to use the practices of LA in their language classrooms.

The workshops used may be helpful for the EFL teachers in the Pakistani context to have more engaging and interaction-based classrooms.

Delimitations

The current study was limited to the Pakistani EFL classrooms and to the Pakistani EFL teachers only.

Research Methodology

The current study was an experimental study, where a single group was taken as the experimental group. The effect of the experiment was measured on the same group as before and after the professional development training sessions. The purpose of the research was at first to investigate the current mindsets of the Pakistani EFL teachers regarding the ideologies of LA and of its practical usage in the EFL classrooms. The study also highlighted the difficulties and challenges in the applications of the autonomy practices faced by the teachers in the Pakistani context. The readiness of the Pakistani EFL teachers towards practicing autonomy in their own classroom scenario was also measured. Workshops were conducted for the EFL teachers in order to revitalize their concepts in LA, to discuss and solve the issues they face in their classrooms and to train them on the practical usage of LA. The effect of the workshops on the mindsets of the Pakistani EFL teachers was later measured through their perspectives regarding LA.

Population

Pakistani EFL teachers practicing in the context of Punjab (Pakistan) were the considered population of the study.

Sample

60 EFL teachers from the 6 universities of Lahore (Punjab), were taken as the sample of the study. The details of the sample are in the table below:

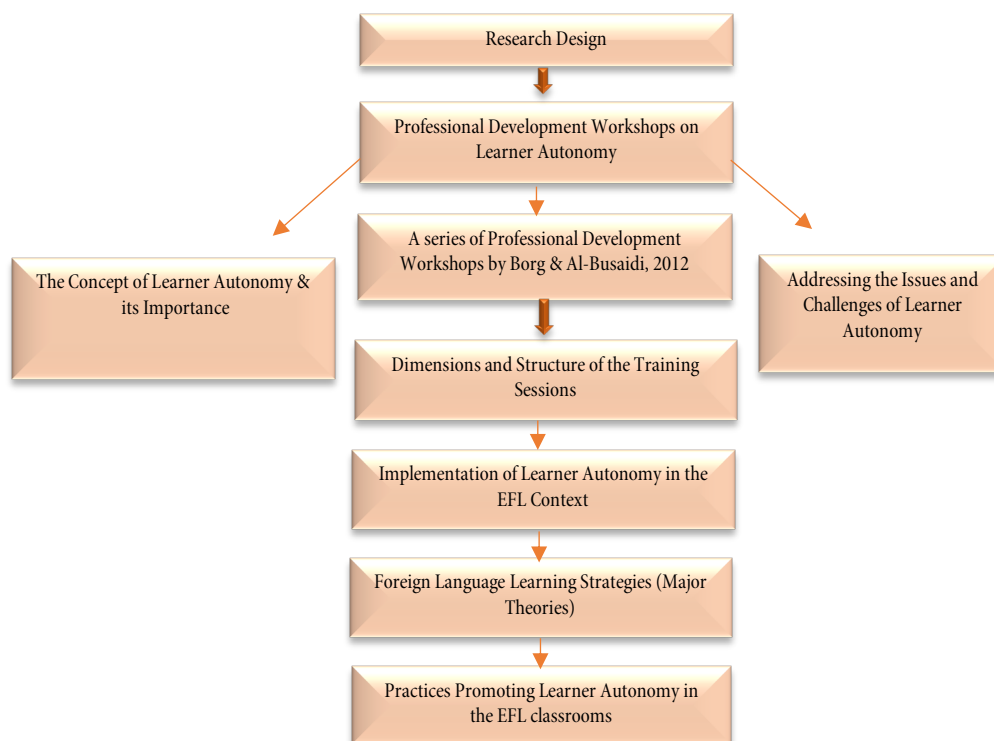
Table 1. Sample

Number of Universities	City	Number of EFL Teachers	Number of Workshops	Total Contact Hours of the Workshops
6 (3 Public Sector Universities & 3 Private Sector Universities)	Lahore	60 (Teaching English at Tertiary Level)	5 (3hrs each)	15

Research Design

The present study aimed at conducting a series of professional development workshops for the teachers, with the purpose of developing insight, towards bringing in, the practices of LA in the Pakistani EFL classrooms. At first, the current perspective of the teachers involved in the FL teaching, regarding LA was taken to see their basic understanding, wherever the problems they face while using the strategies of autonomous learning were also identified and discussed.

The workshops of professional development on learner autonomy by (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012), were taken as the basic pattern for the training of the EFL teachers in the various universities of Lahore. The materials of the workshops and topics were developed in light of the responses of the research participants. The duration of the experiment was 2 months, with 5 workshops in each university. The duration of each workshop was 3hrs and it included theories along with the activities on how to implement the practices of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. The foreign language learning strategies (FLLS) that are more often used to develop LA were discussed in details and various practicing exercises based on FLLS were the part of the workshops too. At the end of the research, the assessment of the involved participants was measured to see the effect of the workshops on their mindsets.



Instruments

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to collect the data from the research participants. The questionnaire was adopted from the research study of Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012). It was given to the teachers before the experiment. The purpose of the questionnaire was to

have an analysis of the perspectives of Pakistani EFL teachers on the autonomy of the learners before the training sessions. The same questionnaire was given to the participants towards the ending point of the experiment again, to analyze the effect of LA workshops on their perspectives.

Data Collection Procedure

The research data was collected from 6 universities of Lahore, whereas 3 universities were of the public sector and 3 universities were of the private sector. The data were collected in 2 months. The data was collected in two divisions: before starting the experiment and when the experiment got to an end.

Table 2. Data Collection

Divisions	Tools	No. of Participants
I	-(Pre-training) (Questionnaire)	60
II	(Post-training) (Questionnaire)	60

Analysis of Data

The data gathered through the questionnaires were analyzed by using mean, standard deviation and paired sample t-test. The questions and the statements of the questionnaire were taken as the scores of the participants whereas the questionnaire inquiring about the ideologies of the participants was taken as a test. The paired sample t-test was run to see the difference between the aptitude of the teachers before and after the professional development training workshops.

Results and Findings

The study found a difference in the perceptions and ideologies of the Pakistani EFL teachers after the experiment. The participants showed acceptance and readiness towards practicing LA in their language classrooms. They were also motivated to implement the strategies of foreign language learning and teaching in the classrooms.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre-Training and Post-Training Scores of the participants

	Group name	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-training	Experimental	60	112.223	4.908	.777
Posttraining	Experimental	60	191.45	6.219	.819

The above table no. 3 is briefly mentioning the scores of the experimental group in the pre-training and in the post-training. It further details that the post-training scores of the experimental group, N=60, M=191.45, S=6.219 are higher as compared to the pre-training scores of the same group, N=60, M=112.223, S=4.908.

Table 4. Paired Sample T-Test

Score	Paired Samples				
	Sig	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	MeanDifference
	.024	92.231	62	.000	-79.227

Table 4 shows the paired sample t-test values of the group which was under the experiment. The purpose of the use of paired sample t-test was to recognize and identify the differences between the ideologies of the experimental group before and after the professional training workshops. It was quite evident that the t value had significance with $t(62) = -92.231$ and $p = 0.024 \leq 0.05$. Moreover, it further elaborates that the experimental group holds a significant value of the t-test scores. Hence it can be said that the difference in the concepts and mindsets of the EFL teachers was very significant by the end of the training workshops.

Discussion

The role of a teacher in the development of autonomy among EFL learners cannot be denied. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the readiness of the EFL teachers towards LA in various contexts, whereas most of them showed the reluctance of teachers towards adopting the strategies of foreign language teaching and learning to enhance autonomy among the learners. Studies conducted in different countries by Joshi (2011), Yan (2012), Feryok (2013) and Alzubi & Singh (2017), clearly identified the great and valuable importance of the EFL teachers in developing LA. According to them, a learner can never be

autonomous unless the language teachers take initiative or start reinforcing the practices of autonomy. Teachers' guided learning can only lead toward independence and can develop consciousness among the learners in a foreign language context.

A study conducted on the beliefs and perceptions of teachers revealed that the Pakistani EFL teachers were not ready to bring autonomy practices in their classrooms and had very less knowledge of the concepts (Yasmin et al, 2018). The current research in its first phase also identified that the EFL teachers in the Pakistani context were not showing any positive responses towards autonomy, neither they had a sufficient amount of information about the concept nor they were prepared or ready to take initiatives. Another study resulted that teachers were not able to manage active and interactive classrooms and it further suggested that teachers should be trained on the use of foreign language learning strategies of LA in Pakistan. Furthermore, (Qasim, 2016), (Panhwar, 2017), (Yasmin et al, 2019) also suggested that the Pakistani EFL teachers should be professionally developed in order to bring LA among Pakistani EFL learners and they must be well informed with all the theories and concept of LA. In the same vein, the current study held workshops in order to train Pakistani EFL teachers on autonomy with a series of training sessions and measured positive changes in their perspectives towards autonomy.

Conclusion

The present study concluded that the Pakistani EFL teachers were not well aware of the concepts and theories of LA in the beginning. They had concepts about the active classroom learning activities but the awareness regarding the use of the strategies of foreign language teaching was not enough to meet up the requirements of bringing LA in their classrooms. Moreover, they were not willing to initiate those practices in the classrooms and were complaining about the fewer classroom hours and were not ready to have autonomous classrooms because they thought the completion of the syllabus is not possible in such ways.

The workshops conducted in the present study included the various concepts of autonomy, the knowledge of the strategies of foreign language teaching and learning, solution of the various issues regarding time management and making appropriate lesson plans to enhance autonomy among EFL learners. By the end of the experiment, the research participants were aware of the concepts of autonomy and were motivated to begin these practices in their EFL classrooms. They also showed a positive attitude towards bringing the culture and the practices of autonomy in their classrooms and the level of their awareness was also raised by the end of the workshops. Hence the difference between the perceptions of the Pakistani EFL teachers before and after the experiment was quite noticeable and their knowledge about LA was also immensely enhanced.

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