An Analysis of the Development of Learner Autonomy among EFL Learners through Language Learning Diaries in the Context of Punjab (Pakistan)

| Ayesha Butt* | Uzma Quraishi† | Asma Shahid Kazi‡ |

Abstract   *Learner autonomy refers to a state where a learner takes charge of the learning. The students in foreign language classrooms are still much relying on their teachers and take less responsibility for their own learning. The present study is quasi-experimental research that designed an autonomous learning program to develop autonomy among Pakistani foreign language learners. The study aimed at examining the development of autonomy among learners through analyzing their language learning diaries. The target population of the study was tertiary level students of Lahore, Punjab (Pakistan) and the sample was the tertiary level students of a public sector women university of Lahore. The autonomy development program was implemented as an intervention for 27 weeks. The data was collected through the language learning diaries during the program and was analyzed descriptively. The analyses of the student diaries revealed that the autonomy development program proved to be successful.*

Introduction

The interest in learner autonomy is witnessed to be growing from the last three decades. It was earlier considered as acquiring language learning skills and then was named as self-learning (Ayesha Sohail & Musarat Yasmin, 2017). Learner autonomy has gained significant value in the field of English as a foreign language learning, where it puts more focus on learner-centered approaches (Lee, 2011). Various researches on the target language development of learners indicate that autonomy has a positive influence on the growth of the learners (D. Little,2008).

According to Thomas (2010) other than contact hours of learning in a boundary, independent learning happens outside that wall and adds to the consequences of the specific courses. Without the role of any teaching staff, the student himself takes a charge of learning and it can be in the group or on their own. McEwan (2015) states broadly that self-motivation, judgment, developing skills and research are the main ingredients of autonomous learning.

What is Learner Autonomy?

Holec (1981) stated the most influential definition of learner's autonomy which according to him is the capability of taking the initiative of one's own learning and to own such responsibility as far as the decisions about learning are concerned and the specific decisions he listed were:

- The learners' have to shape the objectives of learning.
- The learners' have to classify the contents and the development regarding learning.
- Which technique and methodology are to be used is defined by the learner.
- The learners' have to screen the course of action of acquiring.
- Evaluation is the part of a learner to check the level of acquisition.

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* PhD Scholar, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: ayeshabuttlcwu@gmail.com
† Professor, Institute of Education, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
‡ Assistant Professor, Institute of Education, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Benson (2007) elaborates this definition further by mentioning 'the word ability' sometimes replaced with 'capacity'. Some phases of learner autonomy are recommended by Sinclair (2000).These aspects are highly appreciated by the language teachers and the people related to this profession. Some of the aspects are discussed below:

1. Construction of capacity is the second name of autonomy.
2. Willingness plays a vital role if talk about autonomy as it deals with the learning by the learner himself thus is responsible thoroughly on his own.
3. It is not intrinsic quality to be willing for this kind of responsibility.
4. Thorough autonomy is not easy to attain.
5. There are degrees of autonomy.
6. It is nothing to deal with a condition to provide to the student to perform independently.
7. If the learners are needed to adopt autonomy, the awareness is desired to impart: intentional reflection and decision making.
8. It is beyond teaching strategies to market autonomous learning.
9. It is an experimental and informal kind of learning which can occur inside and outside the classroom.
10. The individual and social aspects come with autonomy

(Sinclair, 2000) shares the depth of autonomous learning more by dividing responsibility to academics and researchers whose connectivity is with the field of learners' autonomy. The misbelieve of autonomy being taken as a self-instruction was negated by Benson (2009).

English as A Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in Pakistan

English language learning is the key concern confronted by the larger part of the EFL students in Pakistan (Bhamani & Sarwar, 2018). The condition of educating learners in the English language is not meeting the standards and lacking to address the issues of the students (Albadry et al., 2018). To apply for studies in abroad, English is also obligatory for specialized examination. English Language teaching is still not meeting the standards regardless of its significant part in the training framework (Raza, 2015).

Warsi (2004), records and provides the factors which are the reasons for the failure of English language teaching, for example unskilled teachers, lack of advancement in textbooks, inexplicit objectives of curriculum, absence of language and teaching aids. While insufficiency of appropriate training and certifications is an addition to it. Due to fewer marks in English students' career becomes at stake, when they try to get admission in their respective fields and they encounter hardships because of not meeting the merit (Sarwar & Bhamani, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The study measured the development of learner autonomy among English as a foreign learner through analyzing their language learning diaries.

Objectives of the Study

The study focused on the following objectives:

- To assess the development of learner autonomy among EFL learners by analyzing their language learning diaries.
- To examine the differences between the language learning diaries of the EFL students during the language learning program.

Significance of the Study

This study can be significant in the following ways:

1. The language learning diaries used in the present study can be used in foreign language classrooms to assess the self-awareness of the EFL students towards their learning abilities.

2. The language learning diaries can be used as an instrument of students' self-improvement towards foreign language learning.
3. The autonomous learning program can be helpful for EFL learners to develop autonomy.
4. The study may also be used at higher levels to develop learner autonomy among EFL learners through the use of language learning strategies.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis tested for the study was as follow:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the learner autonomy of the students before and after the autonomy development program.

Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to the tertiary level EFL students in the context of a single public sector women university in the city Lahore of the province Punjab (Pakistan).

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Learners should take responsibility for their own learning, where they are to design their own learning strategies with the help of teachers in a motivational classroom environment. This kind of classroom can enhance learner autonomy which gives learner the charge of his own learning (Benson, 2006).

Conventional teaching is all about teacher-centered classrooms but autonomy has brought a paradigm shift in teacher-centered environment by making learners autonomous enough to learn independently; thus learner-centered teaching model is a gigantic change of this era (Benson, 2011). Autonomy initiates to make a learner responsible enough to learn independently but never favors the segregation of a learner and teacher relation. It creates the thought of one's own liability towards learning. Holec elaborated on the term autonomy in 1981 and presented the view of autonomy as learners' accountability of learning himself. Benson and Voller (1997), exposed five methods a learner should concentrate being an autonomous learner.

- Situations of single focus.
- Plan of aptitudes that may be learned and associated with one's self coordination.
- Improvement of attributes covered by the directions given by institutions.
- Learners' initiation of creating new activities.
- Learner's role in designing the course to be studied in future.
- Giving chance to the student to perceive what ought to be the plan of the course, to be examined.

Conditions for Learner Autonomy

Some conditions are required to make the learning occur through autonomous learning, which relies on the intellectual and cognitive development of the learner, his instincts regarding intuitions, knowledge about the learning of the language and perspectives. Students need to adopt various strategies to become autonomous learners. Teachers are also supposed to be stronger and more motivated towards the practices of autonomy. However "autonomous learning is legitimate" as "teacherless learning." As Sheerin (1997), cited in (Benson & Voller, 1997. p.66) compactly puts it, "teachers- - have a critical part in provoking learners to self-access and in loaning them a general assistance to stay above water".

Apart from all the facts discussed above, an instructor has his own role to play that cannot be negated as he is the one who works as a guide to choose the right direction. Under the perception that teachers are not masterminded and reluctant to "wean students- - far from educator reliance", Sheerin (1997), referred to in (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 63). The point of discussion is "it is difficult for educators to defend their content or learning assets all unaccompanied - And it is difficult for instructors to let learners tackle issues for themselves", (Little, 1990, referred to in Dang, 2010, p.11). Candy stated that "learner-control- which is subordinate to

autonomous learning - 'is not a solitary, unitary idea, instead a continuum along which different instructional circumstances may be put" (Candy, 1991, p.205). Deprived of instructor, autonomy learning cannot be constructive.

Learner Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (1990), studied foreign language learning strategies and proved them as "important assessment project". They stated that methods of learnings are "not so ordinary meditations and practices that people use to offer them some assistance with comprehending materials", (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, as cited in Cook, 1993). These strategies are supportive for the learners to learn a foreign language as they provide different learning techniques. Skehan (1998, p.237), noted that the methods or the styles used for learning "might halfway reflect individual inclination as opposed to inborn blessing".

Language Learning Strategies are divided by Oxford (2001), into two classes: one is direct and the other is indirect. To construct communicative competence, these strategies are aiding material stated Oxford (2001). To self- regulate and organize learning, metacognitive strategies are opted by learners. Two kinds of strategies were under discussion such as affective strategy's concern was emotional factors and to deal with the confidence of the learners, whereas the other strategy, the social strategy deals with the interaction in the classroom or outside the classroom in the target language.

Cognitive, Memory and Compensation Strategies have their own role in autonomous learning. Compensation Strategy deals with fulfilling the communication gaps by making the momentum in duration. Memory strategy is a mechanical insertion of keeping the storehouse full of information whereas Cognitive strategy is prominent to enlighten learners of their own learning and activate their sense in this matter. These strategies widen the concept of learner autonomy. Scholars called the learners as commandos, who are responsible for their own decisions, which can only be done by managing the mechanism which is handling it.

O`Malley and Chamot (1994), signify the use of theory and research in learning strategies and to support his argument he proposed the four basic proportions of the use of learning strategies as follow:

1. Better learners are active learners.
2. Strategies can be learned.
3. Academic language learning is more effective in learning strategies.
4. Learning strategies transfer to new tasks.

Chamot and O'Malley (1994), also talk about the psychological techniques which proved to be cooperative in the future when there is a question on accomplishing development in learning.

This kind of scholarly methodology assists the learners as stated by Cook (1993). Further he exposed these techniques below:

1. Exercise the same discourse of anybody else repeatedly is the Repetition technique.
2. For diverse kinds of materials, action plan is there for the reference of word is Resourcing technique.
3. The translation method deals with comprehension with the help of L1 which is laid down the bases of intended language which is needed to learn.
4. Note-taking.
5. Deduction approach is to enlighten the learner according to L2 standard
6. Guessing a word with the help of a situation or surrounding words instead of literal meaning is Contextualization.
7. To understand the content in L1 appropriately for the utility of the same word in the context of L2 is the Transfer technique.
8. The learners assume the meaning of the word themselves is the Inference technique.
9. Question for elucidation; while requesting that the instructor clarify, and so forth.

Theories of Promoting Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning

Theories of learner autonomy differ but there are some common assumptions that they share. As Esch (2010), defines the advancement of student independence: the delivery of circumstances and settings for language

learners, which will make it more possible that they take charge-at least temporarily-of the entire or part of their language learning program and which are more likely to help rather than from exercising their autonomy.

Benson (2011), explained the concept of learner autonomy by identifying six different approaches i.e. resource-based, teacher based, technology-based, classroom-based, curriculum-based and learner-based approaches. The framework given by Littlewood (1999), for enhancing learner autonomy in foreign language teaching validates this issue very well. According to Little wood the importance of two components i.e. ability and willingness cannot be overlooked in order to be autonomous in any of these listed domains. Ability is further subdivided into knowledge and willingness has to do with the motivation and confidence level of a learner.

Dam (2011) claimed that a classroom-based methodology to the expansion of learner autonomy as it deals with everyday learning experiences of the learners. Dam introduced the philosophies for promoting learner autonomy but the key feature of those principles is that they are not bound to the age, which means it can be applied to the learners of all ages. Dam (2011), elaborated that learner autonomy is a developmental process which moves from a teacher-focused teaching environment to the learner-focused learning environment. According to Dam (2011), the activities in the autonomous language classroom require the active participation of every learner that is obviously in target and authentic language and teacher should be optimistic about the results, as every learner has different level of learning, so the output may differ than the input. As practical implementation evaluates and reflects the learning so, Dam (2011), suggests the use of such tools as posters, logbooks, etc., in order to go through the process and to know the progress.

Lewis and Reinders (2010), worked on the idea of generating the sense of willingness among students to take responsibility to learn with interest, and the major problem they identified of learners resistance is that the teacher-centered students, who are spoon-fed with the answers and tailor-made courses (with such activities) are being taught in which students have no interest. In this case, students are not able to acquire anything, they are not motivated by the teacher, lack of guidance and motivation, which is required to engage with higher thinking, is seen in these types of classrooms, students just learn for some particular type of evaluation. Apart from learner's resistance, Lewis and Reinders (2010), presented some other issues as well such as formal classrooms have curricular guidelines, strict timetables, and materialistic limitations.Lewis and Reinders (2008) proposed a couple of suggestions based on the development of learner autonomy in language classes:

1. Interaction and cooperation are the basic tools of a language class.
2. The teacher needs to be a facilitator.
3. The scope of learning must be clear to the learners; students must have a clear vision regarding learning process. Diaries and portfolios may provide chances to point out students' lacking and help them to overcome those issues through self-assessment.
4. According to Lewis and Reinders strict curricular demands, course designs, etc. are not the problems informal language teaching.

Cotterall (2000), suggested five postulates of autonomous and effective learning. for instance, he demonstrated that a language course that is designed to promote student's autonomy should be according to the learner's language when this postulate was applied practically on the students of Victoria University (Wellington, New Zealand) it was proved that it supported the learning process. The second postulate was about there should be the connection between course tasks and learning this makes learning obvious and enlarged the ability transfer easily. Whereas, third principle suggests that course tasks should either reproduce or provide drill methods during learning process. However, task should be designed in such a way that it also enhances the confidence self-motivation and speaking skills of the learners, Moreover, the fourth postulate was about different types of learning.

Methodology

Population of the study

The target population of the study was the tertiary level EFL students in the context of Lahore, Pakistan.

Sample of the study

The sample of the study consisted of 50 students, selected from a public sector women university who were

studying English as a compulsory subject at tertiary level and their age range was 18-21.

Research Methodology

It was a quasi-experimental study involving an intervention. The intervention was framed on the foreign language learning strategies and was further based on the theories of promoting and developing learner autonomy among foreign language learners. The intervention was carried out through an autonomy development program that used direct and indirect, cognitive, metacognitive and social affective language learning strategies to enhance learner autonomy in the EFL classroom. The autonomy development program was implemented in the class of 50 students. The duration of the program was 27 weeks.

Research Design

The present study aimed at investigating the development of learner autonomy among EFL learners through an autonomy development program. The development of learner autonomy was to be measured by analyzing the language learning diaries of the participants. The autonomy development program was developed in compilation with the multiple theories of fostering learner autonomy. Hence the eclectic approach of foreign language teaching and learning was used in the present research. In the eclectic approach used for this study, the development of learner autonomy was further divided into different themes. The program was implemented through an intervention, with several language learning activities in an EFL classroom. The language learning strategies were blended with the regular classroom teaching materials i.e. the prescribed textbooks of EFL. The analysis of the language learning diaries of the EFL research participants before the intervention, in the middle of the intervention and at the end of the intervention was used to see the development of autonomy among the learners.

Instrument of the study

Language Learning Diaries (LLD)

Learning diaries are instruments through which students can reflect on their learning experience. Students' sentiments, emotions, opinions, and attitudes are embedded in their learning diaries as part of the process of understanding their progress during the course and the self-awareness of their goals (Porto, 2007).

The phenomenon of interest, i.e. emotion, cognition, action, situation, learning, and behavior, within a particular field of research usually determines the name and characteristics of a respective diary to be used. The format of the items may include free-text responses, standard Likert scales or simple check items in closed format (Rausch, 2014).

The language learning diaries used in the present study were at first not structured with the statements or having a closed format of items. At the start of the experiment, the participants were told to write diaries at the end of each week. The self-explained and self-assessed diaries of the students were administered by the researcher in the first week. They showed no responses at all where a few of them had some sketches of the classroom, some had cartoons and a few of them were having one or two-word descriptions. The data collected was insufficient to meet the objectives of the research so the diaries were structured with the statements, to meet the objectives of the research, in accordance with the context of the study.

The language learning diaries were based on closed format and were the records of students' self-assessment, problems they faced in the learning procedure, their planning for using the new strategies and future plans to be more autonomous. They were used in the present study to get an in-depth understanding of learner autonomy. The language learning diaries consisted of 40 statements and they were given to the students in the beginning and each of the diary was explained to them. Students used to fill those diaries at the end of every week due to limited contact hours of the classes. They kept the record of their diaries till the end of the intervention.

Procedure of Data Collection

The data of the study was gathered from a public sector women university, located in Lahore, Pakistan. The data was collected during the autonomy development program of 27 weeks as before the intervention in week 1, in

the middle of intervention in week 13 and at the end of the intervention in week 27.

Data analysis

The data were descriptively analyzed in form of the graphs.

Results and Findings

The participants of the research n=50 filled the diary entries for 27 weeks during the experiment. The diary entries of 50 students were analyzed in the present study. Each diary entry was based on four sections as (a) self-assessment, (b) problems, (c) strategies and (d) future plans, where these sections were further comprised of 10 options for each. The diaries were based on closed ended statements and students were instructed to choose options under each section, whereas they could choose more than one option for each section. The sections and the options given under each section can be seen in the table below:

Table 1. Language Learning Diaries

Self-Assessment	Problems	Strategies	Future Plans
1. I participated well in all interactions.	1. I couldn't understand the content and felt the need for teachers' guidance at every step.	I would try to actively participate in classroom activities.	1. I would always look back at what I would learn in each lesson.
2. I was confused at the start while talking to my pair members or group	2. I couldn't complete the task on time.	2. I would share my ideas with the class so that they may add more for further improvement.	2. I would take feedback as an instrument for improvement.
3. I had anxiety in the beginning while working on the tasks given.	3. I couldn't understand the instructions. 4. I felt disinterested in the task given	3. I would come prepared to focus more on the teacher's instructions for class activities.	3. I would practice speaking English, inside and outside of the classroom.
4. Tasks given were so challenging.	4. I felt disinterested in the task given.	4. I would give a reading to the content to be taught in class beforehand.	4. I would read books and other literature to develop my interest in language.
5. I liked presenting my ideologies in front of the class	5. I didn't like taking homework.	5. I would summarize all the points of the lessons at the end of the class.	5. I would practice my presentations in class and at home too.
6. I felt great for being appreciated in completing my task.	6. I didn't want to participate much in the classroom.	6. I would practice doing my tasks independently with a little help when required.	6. I would complete my home assignments timely.
7. I felt as if I have achieved or actually learned something new today.	7. It disturbed my learning when everyone was talking in the class or when the teacher asked many questions.	7. I would always reconnect my previous knowledge with the new knowledge given in class.	7. I would get myself more engaged in language learning activities by using more resources.
8. I took the feedback so positively and felt firmed to perform even better in the next class.	8. I didn't like working in pairs or groups.	8. I would carefully edit my written assignments and complete them on time.	8. I would go through the contents of my next class at home to be more efficient.

9. The content and classroom practices added much to my previous knowledge.	9. I didn't feel very confident about talking in front of the class.	9. I would take much interest in classroom activities and would work on my collaborative learning skills.	9. I would be more responsible for learning English and would put in more effort by doing my tasks more independently.
10. I felt an improvement in my language skills after the classes.	10. I didn't want to move inside or outside the classroom during class hours.	10. I would take and appreciate feedback on my work by my class fellows.	10. I would not feel hesitant about asking questions from my teacher.

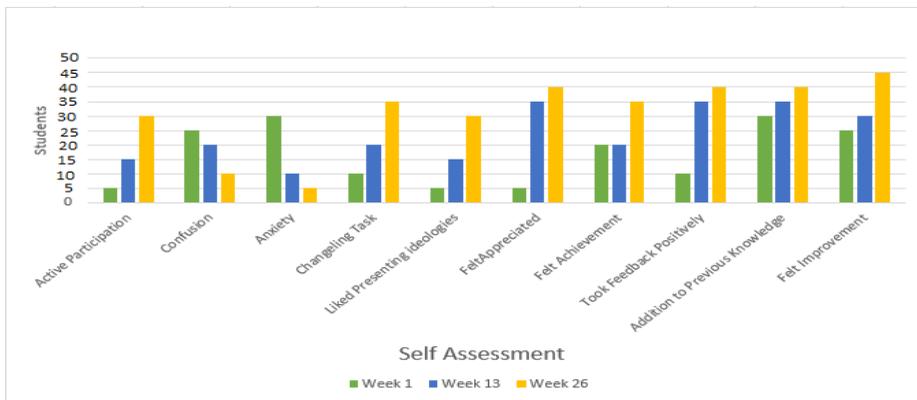**Comparison of the language learning diaries in week 1, week 13 & week 26**

Figure 1: Self- Assessment of week 1, 13 and 26

The above graph shows the self-assessment of the students in week1, week 13 & week 26 of the intervention. The comparison of each week in bars clearly shows a change in the self-assessment of the students throughout the experiment. The graph further explains that the anxiety level and confusion among the students was reduced by the end of the 26th week, while they were actively participating, liking presenting their ideologies, and took feedback as a positive instrument of learning. They felt an improvement in their learning and reported high degrees of achievement as autonomous learners. There is a gradual increase in the improvement of the students, from week 1 to week 13 and then to week 26 as presented in the graph.
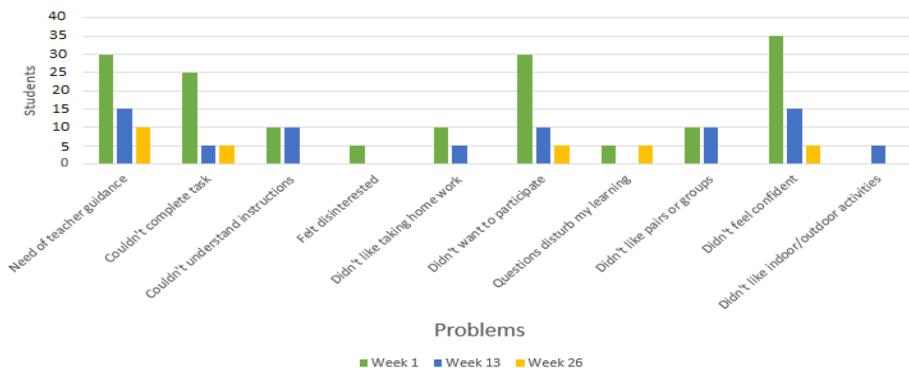

Figure 2: Problems of week 1, 13 and 26

The multiple ranges of the problems that students faced during the intervention, can be seen coming at lower levels, in the graph above. There is a salient reduction in the problems from week 1 to week 13 and then in week 26. The graph illustrated that students felt a decrease in their language learning problems at the end of the experiment as they were not in need of the teacher's guidance in all class activities, we're able to complete tasks in time and were able to understand the instructions. They were confident to great extent, participation was high and they were more interested in autonomous learning activities.
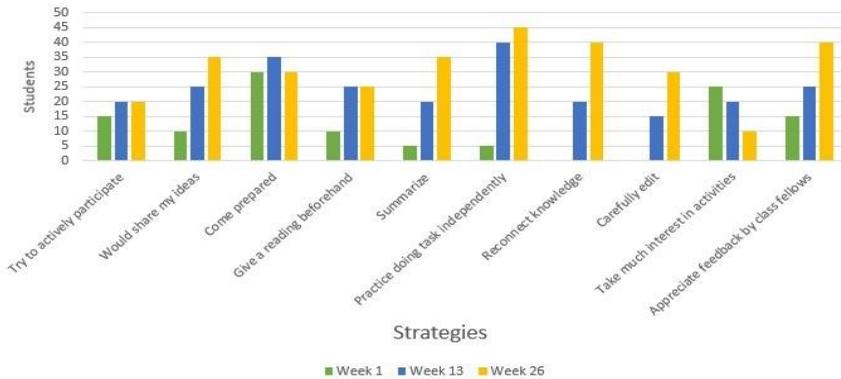
Figure 3: Strategies of week 1, 13 and 26

There is a clear description in the graph above that a good number of students were planning effective strategies, to further enhance autonomous learning, by the end of the intervention. The graph shows that the strategies planned by the students were more promising in week 26th as compared to week 13th and week 1. The bars can be seen at little lower levels in strategies like active participation, sharing ideas, reconnecting knowledge and taking much interest. As mentioned above in their comparison of self-assessment of all the weeks, where they reported being highly active, taking much interest, and sharing ideas, it is assumed in the graph presenting strategies that as they felt already fulfilling those areas, therefore, they didn't opt much for them.
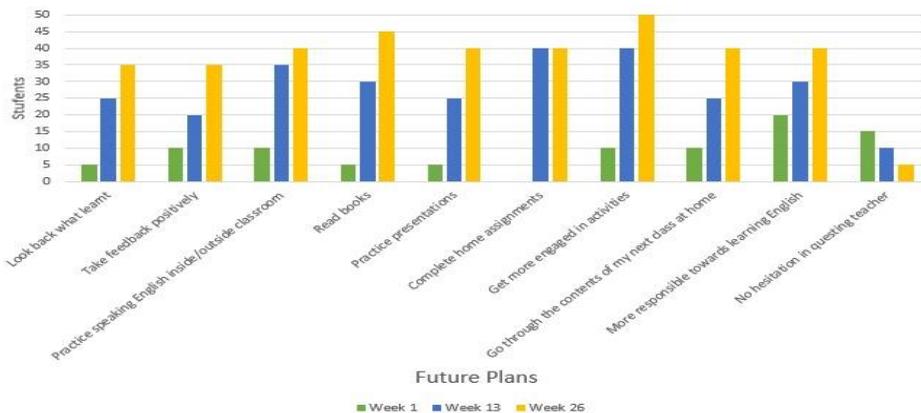
Figure 4: Future plans of week 1, 13 and 26

The graph above shows the students planning their future, with reference to the use of autonomous language learning strategies to enhance autonomy. The difference in the planning is evidently increasing from week 1 to

week 13 and further in week 26, of the intervention. The graph depicts that the students were planning to be more efficient towards autonomy by practicing speaking the target language more, getting more engaged in activities of EFL, feeling not hesitant and by preparing their classroom contents beforehand. Hence it can be said that they were more reassured towards autonomous learning, by the end of the experiment in week 26th and made effective future plans to be more consistent.

Discussion

The present study was conducted to see the effect of the autonomous learning program on students 'autonomy with the help of language learning diaries. The findings of the study revealed that the program enhanced the use of language learning strategies among foreign language students and developed autonomy among them and it further enabled them to assess their own learning with the use of language learning diaries. They were able to judge their own learning and were able to solve their learning issues themselves at the end of the intervention.

The study supports various theories of promoting learner autonomy among foreign language learners which are mentioned in section 2 of the present article. It supports the theory of Esch (2010), which also focuses on the provision of independent circumstances to the students as it helps in bringing them autonomy into practice. The conceptual framework of Benson (2011) giving autonomy to the teacher, was also catered in the present study where everyday lesson plans were designed by the teacher herself based on foreign language learning strategies. Dam (2011) relates the development of learner autonomy with the motivation level of students, names it as a continuous process that moves from teacher to student. In the present study autonomy was first developed as intrinsic motivation and further was developed extrinsically by introducing interactive activities involving self-evaluation by students themselves. The dam also highlights the importance of the logbooks in the self-assessment of autonomy by the learners. This study uses language learning diaries as an important tool to analyze the development of autonomy among foreign language learners and make them self-sufficient in the process of autonomy not only in the learning procedures but also in the evaluation procedures as well.

The sense of willingness and preferring doing tasks more independently among the participants of the study is quite evident in the research findings which supports the theory of Lewis and Reinders (2010). A connection was made between the existing English compulsory course of the tertiary level students and the autonomy development program in the research. The lesson plans and classroom activities based on foreign language learning strategies were used on the topics already prescribed in the syllabus of English compulsory. So the program was implemented without disturbing the practiced syllabus of the selected university. This shows the relevance of the study with the theories presented by Cotterall (2000) who also suggested postulates of autonomous learning by keeping intact with the existing syllabus and providing drilling and introducing language skills in it.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at the development of learner autonomy among EFL learners through an autonomy development program based on foreign language learning strategies. It further aimed at analyzing the development of learner autonomy through the language learning diaries of EFL learners. The autonomy development program was developed by using various language learning strategies and was more focused on the use of direct and indirect, cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective language learning strategies. It was further divided into weekly and daily lesson plans, which were carried out over the period 27 weeks.

The study obtained data from a group of EFL learners studying English as a compulsory subject at a public sector women university. The data was collected in the form of language learning diaries during the intervention. The study successfully analyzed the levels of the development of learner autonomy among learners before and after the experiment. The findings of the study indicated the positive effect of the autonomy development program on the development of learner autonomy among EFL learners. The success of the program was measured by the language learning diaries of the research participants. The present study clearly demonstrated that the use of language learning strategies to develop autonomy and the use of language learning diaries to measure the development of autonomy was effective ways to enhance foreign language skills among EFL learners.

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