

Available online at ijci.wcci-international.orgInternational Journal of Curriculum and Instruction 12(1)
(2020) 235–250**IJCI**
International Journal of
Curriculum and Instruction

A Qualitative Study on EFL Teachers' Self-perceived Beliefs about Teacher Autonomy

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Abstract

Teacher autonomy has been debated for a long time as a term and for its possible functions. It is a multi-faceted term which has lots of definitions in the literature. And more studies have been conducted to investigate it but there is still a need for in-depth analysis of the term and its dimensions. The purpose of this study is to explore EFL teachers' self-perceived beliefs about teacher autonomy. The present study seeks out the answers to what EFL teachers know about teacher autonomy, how they define it, whether they have had any practices in their teaching career so far or not regarding teacher autonomy and what assumptions are underlying behind their self-reported practices. The participants of this study were EFL teachers (12 female and 2 male) who work in different contexts. The data was collected through written interviews and primary data was further discussed in a focus group interview. The findings of the study reveal that all the participant teachers have an idea about teacher autonomy. While most of the teachers have a broader perspective about the issue, a few of them have some views about the term even if they don't perceive themselves as a fully autonomous teacher. It also shows that most of the participant teachers in the current study are aware of the importance of teacher autonomy.

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Key Words: Teacher perceptions, teacher beliefs, teacher autonomy, ELT, EFL

1. Introduction

Teacher autonomy has a lot of conceptualizations which have been developed and broadened through the years. Whereas the term has many definitions by the various scholars, there is still not an agreement on it. Although lots of studies (Crawford, 2001;

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LaCoe, 2006; Rudolph, 2006) have been conducted to investigate it, there is still a need for in-depth analysis of the term and its dimensions. Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that

teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes are really significant for understanding and improving educational processes as they have important roles in teachers' decision making processes. While there are some quantitative studies, there are not many qualitative studies about the issue. Depending on this, present research aims to fill this gap. In the literature, there exist a number of definitions on teacher autonomy. Despite the existent definitions, it is argued whether EFL teachers are aware of its definitions, functions and importance in EFL teaching and learning. In line with these, the present study was designed to explore EFL teachers' self-perceived beliefs on teacher autonomy.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1. Teacher Beliefs

Borg (2003) conceptualises teacher belief what he terms “teacher cognition as teachers' knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions, perspective about teaching, teachers, learning, students, subject matter, curricula, materials, instructional activities, and self” (p.81). All these are closely associated with teachers' strategies for coping with challenges in their daily professional life and their general well-being while shaping students' learning environment which influences student motivation and achievement. In a similar vein, Ghaith (2004) proposes that the teachers' beliefs are a total combination of conceptions of several aspects such as education, teaching and learning, curricula and the teaching profession in general and those beliefs create the “education culture” which is linked to pedagogical objectives and values.

For Borg, on the other hand, “a belief is a mental state, which has in its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding it, although the individual may recognize that alternative beliefs may be held by others” (2001, p.187). Similarly, Pajares (1992) asserts that belief systems are like a personal guide that helps individuals define and understand the world and themselves. Nonetheless, Mansour (2008) and Richards (1998) suggest that the teachers' beliefs are described as being the most valuable in the psychological composition of the teacher. Furthermore, Borg defined teachers' educational beliefs as “pedagogic beliefs or those beliefs of relevance to an individual's teaching” (Borg 2001, p.186). Borg also highlights that “teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thought, and beliefs” (2003, p.81).

Moreover, regarding the nature of perception, Hardy and Heyes (1979) explain that the perception system filters some information that will be brought to conscious awareness, organizes and interprets this information to build up the model of the world that is experienced.

1.2.2. Teacher Autonomy

Autonomy means “having a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one's environment, including a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy” (Benard, 1995, p. 1). Similarly, teacher autonomy is “the independence teachers maintain in exercising discretion within their classrooms to make instructional decisions” (Street, 1988, p. 4).

On the other hand, teacher autonomy may emphasize “critical reflection” (Smyth 1989) and “transformation through dialogue” (Shor & Freire 1987). According to Little (1995, 179), “...successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising through continuous reflection and analysing the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers”. What is more, teacher autonomy can

simply be defined as “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others” (Smith, 2003, p. 1).

Lacoe (2006), O’Hara (2006) and Rudolph (2006) categorized the autonomy depending on their practices in terms of six distinct aspects such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, student behaviour, classroom environment, and professional development. Teachers’ autonomy appears to function as two major regions. The first one is that teaching pedagogy, which is so called individual classroom operations. It is the most common area in which teachers perceive having autonomy (Blase & Kirby, 2009; LaCoe). And the second one is that school-wide autonomy, which is about management and planning for the overall school. And it is the other inclusive region that teachers’ autonomy may be manifested (Ingersoll, 1994).

Another element of teacher autonomy, which is common in literature, is decision-making ability (Pearson, 1995; Sentovich, 2004). This element allows teachers choice and determination in the critical issues concerning their responsibilities. Crawford (2001) views a teacher’s power to make decisions as the symbol of teachers’ autonomy.

Moreover, freedom is another aspect of teacher autonomy. Teachers with autonomy are accepted to possess certain freedoms to determine their work processes (Blase & Kirby, 2009). Brunetti (2001) claimed autonomy is the type of freedom out of demands or pressure from other teachers or administrators.

Finally, one more dimension of teacher autonomy is control (Rudolph, 2006). The concept of control is closely related to latitude (Ingersoll, 1994; Ingersoll, 1996; LaCoe, 2006). Sentovich (2004) viewed autonomous control as the teacher being “in charge” of classroom duties. A teacher with autonomy will have the authority and latitude to control his/her classroom.

1.3 Research Questions

Within the scope of this study, it is attempted to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What do teachers think about teacher autonomy?
- 2) How do the teachers define teacher autonomy? What metaphors do they use to describe teacher autonomy?
- 3) What strategies or practices do the teachers benefit from to enable teacher autonomy?
- 4) Are the teachers aware of the importance of teacher autonomy in EFL context (teaching and learning)? Why/ Why not?

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design methodology to seek out the answers of the research questions since qualitative methodology provides in-depth analysis of an issue. Burn (1997) asserts that the purpose of the qualitative researcher is to conceptualize what people say and do as a product of how they perceive the world and interpret the events from the perspectives of the participants. Therefore, qualitative research methods were utilised in this study for gathering the data as it seeks the answers of what the teachers’ self-perceived beliefs and practices are about teacher autonomy. The data was collected through two phases. First, a written interview involving demographic info was applied. While some of the participants preferred to complete the written interviews via e-mails, the others preferred to complete the hard copy of written interviews. After that, a focus

group interview was conducted to further evaluate the primary data and the emerging themes.

2.1. Participants

This exploratory study was conducted with fourteen EFL instructors. There were twelve female and two male participants. They all had different backgrounds. Only two participants had BA and MA degree. However, nine of these EFL instructors were PhD candidates and three of them had PhD degrees. Four of these instructors had less than ten years of experience. And six of them had experience more than ten years. Finally, four of them had experience more than twenty years. Detailed information is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Teachers/ Type of Institution	Degree	Gender	Years of Experience
Teacher 1/ State School	PhD Candidate	Female	13
Teacher 2/State University	PhD Candidate	Female	8
Teacher 3/State School	PhD Candidate	Male	5
Teacher 4 /State University	PhD Candidate	Female	24
Teacher 5/State University	PhD Candidate	Female	18
Teacher 6/Private University	PhD Candidate	Female	18
Teacher 7/State School	PhD Candidate	Female	1
Teacher 8/State University	MA	Female	28
Teacher 9/State University	PhD Candidate	Male	7
Teacher 10/State University	PhD	Female	16
Teacher 11/State University	BA	Female	25
Teacher 12/State University	PhD	Female	20
Teacher 13/State University	PhD	Female	12
Teacher 14/State University	PhD Candidate	Female	11

2.2. Sampling

The present study applied purposive sampling which is one type of non-probability sampling to determine its participants. In applying this sampling, the criterion was that all the teachers were EFL instructors who had different educational backgrounds with various years of teaching experiences in different contexts. The participant teachers in the current study work in different contexts such as state schools, state universities and private universities.

2.3. Data Collection

2.3.1. Written Interview

First of all, primary data for the current study was gathered through in-depth written interviews which benefitted from open-ended questions. The interview questions (see

appendix) were prepared by the researchers. It was piloted with two instructors and revised based on the comments and feedbacks before it was given to all the participants. Interview questions prepared by the researchers were used to identify teachers’ self-reported beliefs, experiences, practices and views about teacher autonomy. Demographic information was included in the interview which also gives information about the nature of the study and asks for the consents of the participants. The written interviews were applied in English since all the participants were English language teachers with proficient language skills.

2.3.2 Focus Group Interview

As a second tool, a focus group interview was applied after the analysis of the primary data for the triangulation. Three instructors (T4, T8, and T13) participated in the focus group interview and they were given the results of the study which figures emerging themes for each research question. Then, they were asked to contemplate on the findings. It lasted twenty-five minutes.

3. Results

3.1. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis. First of all, the researchers analysed the data individually and then they compared their analyses to identify the emerging themes and categorize the data. While analysing the data, member checking was carried out when the researchers felt the need to understand the participants better and overcome the ambiguities. The researchers asked some follow up questions to the participants informally when it was needed to verify the data. Additionally, the researchers had informal and short interviews with the participants in person when the participants did not answer a question. The researchers carried out these steps to be able understand whether the participants did not have an idea on the issue or they did not want to answer the question since it was a written interview. When all these steps were completed, the data were classified based on the aspects investigated in the study. Following the initial coding, participants of the focus group were asked to check the primary findings of the study independently to ensure internal validity. Therefore, the categories were revised with the participants in the focus group interview to guarantee reliability because of the nature of the study.

3.2. Findings

Direct quotations from the interviews were used to clarify the findings and strengthen the emerging themes out of reported data.

3.2.1. Teachers’ Definitions on Teacher Autonomy

As seen in Table 2 below, emerging themes were categorized based on the analysis of the gathered data.

Table 2: Teachers’ Definitions on Teacher Autonomy

Emerging Themes	Responses of Participants	Participants	Total
Freedom	Making Personal Decisions	T1, T2, T3, T4, T7, T8, T10, T13	8
	Professional Freedom	T4, T6, T7, T8, T13	5

	Free from administration/ outer factors	T2, T3 T9, T13	4
	Teacher Power and independence	T13	1
Responsibility	Professional Responsibility	T1, T13	2
	Personal Responsibility	T1, T11	2
Awareness	Self-Awareness	T7, T8, T14	3
	Professional Awareness	T6	1
	Knowledge Awareness	T6	1
Development	Personal Development	T1, T8, T14	3
	Professional Development	T14	1
Other Factors	Motivation and Job Satisfaction	T5	1

3.2.1.1. Freedom

Most of the EFL instructors in the current study consider that teacher autonomy is about freedom; however, they have different reasons behind their thoughts. Eight of them focus on making personal decisions. And five of them focus on professional freedom. More, four of them talk about being free from the outer factors. Following excerpts are some examples that present their ideas:

T2: I suppose that it means teachers' being free in the decisions related to their teaching.

T4: It is about professional freedom about what to teach and how to teach and how to deal with problems occurring in the class by finding your own solution.

T3: Teacher autonomy, for me, is the ability of teachers to make their own decisions, plans and organizations about teaching independently without being dependent on colleagues, school administration or materials.

T13: I think teacher autonomy is the power and independence of teacher in preparing or selecting of materials, his/her independence in choosing of teaching methods, and also his/her independence in selecting the methods of evaluation and assessment in his/her classes according to the needs of his/her students.

In short, the results show that there is a strong relationship between autonomy and freedom from the point of teachers.

3.2.1.2. Responsibility

Two of the teachers touch upon the issue of responsibility and their ideas are provided below.

T1: It is the ability to plan one's own learning procedures and the ability to take a part in planning goals, materials and processes of learning.

T11: It is personal responsibility for the techniques I use in class changing according to the aim of the profile of the students.

It can be understood from the excerpts that the first teacher talks about professional responsibility while the other deals with personal responsibility.

3.2.1.3. Awareness

One important point emerged from the teachers' definitions of teacher autonomy is that there is a strong relation between autonomy and awareness. The extracts below reveal it clearly:

T8: It is about the teacher's attitude towards students, her self-development, self-awareness of her own teaching, self-reflection, tendency to criticize and assess herself to improve skills needed. An autonomous teacher should be innovative in all aspects of teaching.

T6: It is related to knowing what to do as a next step in your teaching or being conscious of your professional skills. It is the knowledge of realization about where, what and how to teach.

T14: It means that you are aware of what, how and why you do something. You have a rationale behind your actions as a teacher.

To sum up, teachers perceive that their autonomy is connected to their self-awareness and professional awareness.

3.2.1.4. *Development*

Teacher autonomy is seen as a way of development by the participant of the study. Two teachers share the belief that teacher autonomy is about self-development. They reflect on this aspect stating that:

T1: We need to take responsibility for our own development rather than allowing the others provide us with the practices they consider the best for us.

T14: It is about being a professional and following your own development as a life-long learner in your profession.

As it is clear from the excerpts, two of the participants conceive teacher autonomy as a method of development.

3.2.1.5. *Other Factors*

There is a teacher who is talking about more factors about teacher autonomy. She shared her ideas in this way:

T5: *Teacher autonomy is related to many different factors such as motivation, and job satisfaction. That is if teachers are autonomous they will be motivated and satisfied with their jobs or vice versa. I think they are interrelated issues.*

As a result, the emerging themes with the reported data show that participants have a variety of definitions on the term from multiple aspects.

3.2.2. *Teachers' Metaphors on Teacher Autonomy*

The participants were asked to define teacher autonomy providing an explanation for one metaphor and to explain why they associated their definition with it. The intention was that it would help to reveal the participants' self-perceived beliefs, feelings, and experiences regarding teacher autonomy. However, we ended up with really interesting metaphors.

The metaphors which the participants depicted were 'being like a bonsai tree', 'choosing a meal from a menu', 'perspective of a musician', 'like being a single mother', 'empowerment' (mentioned twice), 'creating a pottery', 'being the queen of the field', 'being an inventor', 'like a bird', 'being a teacher of yourself', 'teacher independence' (mentioned twice), 'creativity' (mentioned twice). As it is seen, the metaphors used for 'teacher autonomy' are mostly different from each other. Most of the teachers approached the term from a different perspective except for a few teachers. There are only three metaphors

which are repeated. Furthermore, all these metaphors are described positively even if they may have some negative connotations as the following excerpt shows:

T4: It is like being a single mother. A single mother takes over the responsibility of the father in a creative way. She has to cope with all the challenges by coming up with different ideas and strategies. She always reflects on the results of her actions to keep the children happy and for their personal and psychological development.

Some other descriptions for the choice of metaphors, which teachers see the term as an individual responsibility, are demonstrated below:

T1: The bonsai tree can grow 24 meters if not pruned by a gardener. Our relationship with students or our relationship as teachers with the institutionally superior parts always reminds me the story of bonsai tree. We need to take responsibility for our own development rather than allowing the others provide us with the practices they consider the best for us.

T14: Being a teacher of yourself. You are the teacher and you can teach yourself as well. You know how to teach and why not teaching and guiding yourself. It is always possible to approach yourself critically and change yourself when/if necessary. It is about being open-minded and let yourself grow. There is always time for it. If you want it intimately, you can do it in a way. It is about standing on your feet as a person who believes in self-determination and improvement.

On the other hand, others perceive the term from other aspects in a creative manner as provided below:

T3: Teacher autonomy can be viewed from the perspective of a musician. Sometimes musicians on the stage decide to change the pre-determined order of the songs because they realize that the audience is not enjoying. They play more enjoyable songs earlier than planned. Or sometimes singers or instrumentalists make an unexpected mistake, and professional musicians are able to realize it immediately and compensate for it by being more slowly or faster while playing or singing to catch up with each other.

T9: We all know that a potter processes the clay and creates pots out of it. When creating these pots, he/she may sometimes use creativity in order to make different types of pots unlike those of ordinary ones. And the potter sells those unusual pots with a higher price. It can be stated here that when the potter uses this autonomy by going out of standard tradition, he/she can create better products. Using teacher autonomy has a similar effect on the teaching and students. When the teachers use their creativity and autonomy during the teaching practice, they can create better learning and teaching atmosphere for the learners.

As it is expressed in the excerpts, it is clear that they really expressed themselves creatively from the perspectives they stand on. It is understood that all the teachers participating in this study have an idea about teacher autonomy even metaphorically.

3.2.3. Teachers' Strengths and Weaknesses Regarding Teacher Autonomy

In this study, it was aimed to investigate more about teachers' self-perceived strengths and weaknesses in terms of teacher autonomy. Teachers talked about them intimately and they provided rich bulk of information about the reasons behind their beliefs.

3.2.3.1. Teacher-Perceived Strengths Regarding Teacher Autonomy

Teachers evaluate themselves from many different aspects in terms of their strengths and the emerging themes are presented in the Table 3 below.

Table 3: Teacher-Perceived Strengths regarding Teacher Autonomy

Teacher-Perceived Strengths	Responses of Participants	Participants	Total
	Adapting and arranging materials	T4, T5, T8, T9, T12, T13	6
	Being able to choose the best methodology for the learners	T3, T5, T11, T13, T14	5
	Reading articles	T7, T14	2
	Trying to understand students' needs and plan the lessons accordingly.	T1, T7	2
	Using Technology	T9	1
	Doing research and sharing the results with colleagues	T4	1
	Being able to not care school administration too much.	T3	1
	Appreciation of students, parents and the management	T1	1
	Involving student in the learning process and being patient.	T4	1
	Asking for help from more experienced teachers	T7	1

As it is shown in Table 3, six of the teachers state that adapting the materials is their strength and also five of the teachers assert that being able to choose the best methodology for the learners is their strength. However, only two teachers see understanding students' needs as their strength. And two teachers focus on reading articles in terms of strength. For the others, there are a variety of strengths which are presented on the table.

3.2.3.2. *Teacher-Perceived Weaknesses regarding Teacher Autonomy*

The table below demonstrates emerging themes from the self-reported weaknesses of teachers with respect to teacher autonomy in different ways.

Table 4: Teacher-Perceived Strengths regarding Teacher Autonomy

Teacher-Perceived Weaknesses	Responses of Participants	Participants	Total
	Not being able to choose the course content according to needs, problems or expectations of my students/ Following pre-determined syllabi.	T1, T2, T10, T5, T7, T9, T13	6
	Not having enough time and workload	T3, T13, T14	3
	Having problems with time management.	T7, T10	2

	Reading fewer articles about the profession and not attending the conferences.	T 8	1
	More dependent on learning rather than test policies at schools	T6	1
	Getting feedback from the learners	T6	1
	Acting more autonomously	T12	1
	Feeling demotivated when seeing no progress	T7	1

As it is clearly shown on the table, six of the teachers depict that following a pre-determined syllabus is a limitation for them to be autonomous teachers. Three of the teachers complain about not having enough time and busy workload. And two of them touch upon time management.

In conclusion, teachers evaluate their strengths and weaknesses from different aspects. Some of them approach the issue with regard to internal or personal factors while the others were talking about external factors. Additionally, there are some teacher-perceived overlapping strengths and weaknesses. While some of them perceive something as a weakness, the others can perceive it as strength due the fact that all the individuals have different perspectives and experiences. When the two tables are evaluated together, it can be seen that strengths of teachers are mostly associated with internal factors while the weaknesses are mostly because of the external factors.

3.2.3.3. *Teachers' Strategies and Practices for Their Weaknesses and External Factors*

Most of the teachers talk about reading articles, getting professional support, or getting help from their colleagues. Nonetheless, four of the participants report that they do not or cannot cope with their weaknesses for some reasons. And some following excerpts present their ideas:

T2: I don't make an effort to deal with my weaknesses. I am more focused on instant solutions than deeply analysed and researched ones.

T3: Honestly, I am not able to deal with my weaknesses. If I were able to deal with them, they would not be weaknesses.

On the other side, there is a teacher who prefers using adaptation techniques and shares her ideas as in the following.

T5: I try to adapt what I cannot change in order to compensate the weaknesses. For example I cannot change the fact that I am going to teach a reading text that day but I can arrange a reader, runner, writer game to deal with the same reading text.

Even though most of the teachers do not like being observed and evaluated by an outsider, there is an exceptional teacher. She relates her ideas as follows:

T11: I prefer being monitored by other teachers for PhD research with certain ways to see real class situation and having genuine feedback from the other sides' view.

To sum up, while some of the teachers have common assumptions, some of them react really differently from the others.

3.2.4. *Teachers' Self-Evaluation Strategies Regarding Teacher Autonomy*

Most of the participant teachers prefer using self-evaluation strategies. And nine teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T8, T10, T12, and T14) prefer getting feedback from students and/or colleagues but not from the administration or mentors. Their reasons are presented in the following excerpts:

T3: I get no feedback from school administration or colleagues as they are mostly unaware of what is happening in the classroom. However, I get mostly positive feedback from my students as they are not used to teachers who do not follow an ordinary teaching style but sometimes behave differently from other teachers.

T12: I believe the only people who should evaluate me as an autonomous teacher are my colleagues and students. So far, I have only got feedback about my teaching from my colleagues.

On the other hand, the others do not believe that they need evaluation by the others. They only believe in self-reflection. Some excerpts can be seen below:

T5: In my opinion I try to be as autonomous as I can. I do not get any feedback from others but when I reflect on my classroom experiences I am satisfied with what I do in the classroom.

T9: To say the truth, I evaluate myself on my own in general. I rarely request help from my colleagues, students or mentors. I have some methods to check my autonomy as a teacher. The most important of them is to reflect on my classroom practices. I try to remember and write down my negative experiences caused of my lack of autonomy, I try to avoid doing the same mistakes again for my future practices.

Furthermore, there is only one teacher who believes that autonomy is not about evaluation as below:

T2: At the end of every semester I have student feedback about my classes. But being autonomous is not a fact that is evaluated.

To this end, most of the teachers in the current study benefit from evaluation techniques in terms of being an autonomous teacher even if they prefer different ways of it.

3.2.5. *Teachers' Thoughts about the Importance of Teacher Autonomy*

In the light of our findings, it is revealed that teacher autonomy is a term which can be described by the teachers from many different perspectives. Even though a few of them state that they do not know the term exactly, still they can describe it based on their understanding and experiences. They have both positive and negative comments on it depending on their personal and professional experiences. However, they mostly find it significant as they perceive themselves as autonomous teachers. Hence, following excerpts were exemplified to show their ideas:

T9: Teacher autonomy is a very important concept not only for teachers but also for the students. I think teacher autonomy even has positive impact on the autonomy level of the learners who will be the future teachers in this profession. For this reason, more attention and emphasis should be given to the teacher autonomy phenomenon in order to increase the quality of education.

T14: Teacher autonomy leads to learner autonomy as well. Autonomous teachers can be good role models for their students and they can equip their learners with autonomous learning. Teachers can teach what they believe. So, if teachers broaden their way of thinking, they can broaden their way of teaching. This is really significant to me.

To conclude, the participant teachers in the present study consider that teacher autonomy is significant for some reasons mentioned above. And all these show that they are aware of the importance of teacher autonomy in teaching.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings from the current study, rich descriptive data were gathered to get a deeper understanding about teacher autonomy from the teachers' perspectives. The findings revealed a variety of definitions about the term which are parallel to the literature and beyond it. In the present study, the first and second research questions seek out the teachers' definitions of teacher autonomy. Teachers in the current study approached the term from multiple aspects not only with the definitions but also with the metaphors. Frase and Sorenson (1992) contends that teacher autonomy is perceived very differently: one teacher may perceive autonomy as a means to gain substantial freedom from interference or supervision; another may perceive it as the freedom to develop collegial relationships and accomplish tasks that extend beyond the classroom; and even some others may perceive it as a means for principals to avoid their duties. In line with this, our findings which are completely based on self-reports of the participants without the interventions of the researchers provided insightful examples to our questions.

The third research question in the present study focuses on teachers' practices about teacher autonomy. And most of the teachers talked about their adaptive expertise with the specific examples. Studies in the literature also reveal that teacher autonomy is vital to educational effectiveness and empowers individuals within the system to adapt teaching to the changing needs of the students. To illustrate, Pearson and Hall (1993) found that the degree of autonomy perceived by new teachers is a symbol of job satisfaction and a positive reaction to teaching, and teachers who had higher autonomy scores showed a willingness to enter teaching again when necessary. This study also shows that teacher autonomy is really important for teachers. Teachers' autonomy appears to be a critical component in working conditions. For instance, teachers' autonomy is perceived to affect teachers' conception of their professional life and job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001). This is specifically depicted by one of the participant teachers in the current study as well. Moreover, in another study Stockard and Lehman (2004) concluded that first-year teachers mentioned a sense of control and influence over their work environment was an important factor in their job satisfaction. The findings of the current study support these results as well.

Finally, the last research question deals with the importance of teacher autonomy. The reports of teachers in the present study reveal that they are aware of the importance of teacher autonomy even though they have a limited perspective of it and they mostly focus on external factors rather than internal factors. Similarly, teacher autonomy is seen as a crucial factor in many of the studies on teacher retention (Guarino et al., 2006; Horng, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland).

5. Conclusion

All in all, this study sheds light on the term of teacher autonomy through the eyes of the teachers with a rich bulk of data from teachers' self-reports. Since the teachers are the real practitioners, it may be useful to learn more about their opinions about the issue to get in-depth insights in terms of understanding their perceptions. That's why this research topic should be investigated and evaluated more through the eyes of the teachers from various perspectives in the future studies.

However, there are some limitations of this qualitative study since there is a limited number of participants in the current study. Therefore, it can be conducted with more

participants with an equal number of female and male participants. Moreover, some different data collection tools can be used for further steps to get more reliable data.

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Appendix A. Written Interview

Dear Participants,

We are working on a study about EFL teachers' self-perceived beliefs of teacher autonomy. To carry out this study successfully, we need volunteer participants. If you are willing to participate in this study, please answer the questions below, keeping in mind that this is a qualitative study. The research will be conducted according to ethical guidelines. Accordingly, we promise that your names and identities will be kept anonymous. Your answers will be treated in confidence and the data will only be used for the purposes of this research. Your positive response will mean that you have provided your consent to participate in this research.

Thank you very much in advance.

I- Please answer the following by putting a tick in the places provided.

Gender: (Female) _____ (Male) _____

Work Experience (please write the number of years you worked): _____

Type of Institution you work for:

University

State: _____

Foundation: _____

Minister of Education:

Primary: _____

Secondary: _____

High School: _____

Latest Degree of Education:

BA: _____

MA: _____

PhD: _____

II-Please answer the questions below.

- 1) What does 'teacher autonomy' mean to you? Please explain it in your own words.
- 2) What metaphors do you use for explaining 'teacher autonomy'? Please specify them.
- 3) Do you believe that you are an autonomous teacher? Why/Why not?
- 4) Can you identify your strengths and weaknesses in your teaching profession regarding teacher autonomy? Please specify them.
- 5) How do you deal with your weaknesses in terms of being an autonomous teacher? Please explain it with examples if any.
- 6) How do you evaluate yourself as an autonomous teacher? Do you get any feedback about your teaching from your colleagues, students or mentors if any? Please specify it.

7) Do you have any further comments which you would like to add on this topic?

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