An Experimental Study on the Development of Learner Autonomy among English as a Foreign Language Learners at Tertiary Level

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The development of autonomy in foreign language has been a much discussed area over the last three decades, even though it is not under the practice yet. The aim behind the present research was to design a program for the training of autonomy, and to implement it through an intervention in a foreign language classroom. The basic theme behind the program was the use of foreign language learning strategies. The participants of the research were tertiary level students, studying English as a foreign language and the data was collected from a government university of Pakistan. The training was conducted on the experimental group while the traditional teaching methods were used for the control group. The results showed that the training proved to be fruitful to enhance autonomy. The research further suggests that autonomous learning practices can be incorporated into regular foreign language programs and can be beneficial for the learners.

Key words: *Learner autonomy, Foreign language teaching and learning, Language learning strategies, English as a foreign language.*

Introduction

In the last few decades, curriculum designers and educators are increasingly focusing their attention on learner development and independent learning procedures in the teaching of foreign languages (Eaton, 2010). The emphasis on the learner-centred approach to acquire foreign language proficiency has increased the value of promoting learner autonomy (Kajiura, 2006). Research indicates that learner autonomy positively influences the growth of learners towards the target language development. (Little, 2008). The autonomy of a learner means that a learner should be provided with the practical approaches of learning a language, by which he may gain the capacity to learn independently (Smith, 2008). An autonomous learner is a learner

who seeks extra self-study materials to practice language and makes an effort to learn more independently. (Bursuc, 2017). Autonomous learning can also be called a long learning process, which is based on the gradual improvement of the learners (Almusharraf, 2018).

Learner Autonomy as Practiced in Pakistan

The students getting tertiary education in Pakistan must study English, which is the language of instructions in the regular classrooms (Irfan, 2017). Pakistani teachers mostly use the teacher-centred method for teaching in the classrooms, where students act as passive learners, while the teachers are more active (Hashim, 2016). The teacher dominating practices of teaching in Pakistan make learners less autonomous and dependent on the teachers, hence they don't rely much on their own capacities of learning the foreign language (Akhtar, 2016).

Problem Statement

The multiple effect of the training to increase autonomy in the learners was deeply measured in the present research.

Study Objectives

The following objectives were the part of the study:
1. To design a program of training learner autonomy development in English as a foreign language learners.
2. To implement the learner training program through an intervention.
3. To examine the differences between the autonomy development of the intervention and non-intervention EFL students.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is as follow:

1. The teachers of English can have more interactive and activity-based classrooms by using the training program, to develop autonomy. It can be make their students more motivated towards learning.
2. The program can be considered of importance for the EFL learners to increase their capacities of language learning and to develop autonomy.
3. It can also be said that the program used in the present study can be useful for learner autonomy in the future, in the same context or in a context of some other reality.
4. The study may also be used in higher levels in order to create autonomy in language learners.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis tested by the research is mentioned below:

Ho: The learner autonomy of the students of intervention and of non-intervention group holds no significant difference.

Study Delimitation

The present research was only confined to the tertiary level EFL students in the context of a single university of government in Lahore.

Literature Review

Origin of Learner Autonomy

In the mid of 1970s, the concept of learner autonomy was highlighted by different researchers. (Little, 1991), (Benson, 1997), (Broady, 1996), (Gremmo, 1995), and (Holec, 1981) were the originators of the concept. Learner autonomy can be called a trigger that motivates learners, enhances the capacities for learning, and that works best for the teachers' development.

(Zhuang, 2010) stated that the studies and works on autonomy started in 1970 and learner autonomy was made part of education. It was also used in different educational institutions. The concept of learner autonomy was discussed by (Little and Dam, 1998) for the very first time. The existence of learner autonomy in education involves the idea of student-centred learning, in which teachers in the process of learner autonomy only transfer information and become supervisors in the learning procedure. (Little, 2009) defines learner autonomy as a mode of learning which happens with the intention of the learner, and in which autonomy can also be considered as a power given to the learners that makes them more independent and self-structured. According to him in the process of autonomy development a learner becomes more conscious about his own learning procedures.

Little (1991) saw autonomy as a procedure in learning in which a learner is less dependent on the teacher and learn without or with less involvement of a teacher. Benson (2006) sees an autonomous learner as a person who decides his own directions, states and contexts in the learning procedures, which makes him more responsible towards his learning. (Dickinson, 1995) calls learner autonomy as a phase that includes self-instruction, where a learner decides to take up his own preferred materials for the learning procedure.

Benson also explains autonomy as self-evaluation and as involving the internal capacity of a learner to take care of his own work.

The Relation between the Language learning Strategies and Autonomy

The successful learning results of a foreign language classroom depend on how much the students are using the strategies for learning the language and how truly they exhibit a pattern of learning more actively (Kim, 2013). The strategies for learning the language may further involve patterns of behaviour, the active participation of learners, as well as their methodologies and techniques in the learning procedures (Ellis, 2008). The learning strategies are divided in some other categories such as the strategies of the direct plans and the strategies of the indirect plans. Moreover they have a division in cognitive, socio- affective compensation and metacognitive language learning strategies (Herrera, 2011).

There has been a lot of change in the patterns of teaching a foreign language and in the learning of foreign language from the past three decades (Orellana, 2014). The importance given to the foreign language teaching methodologies has become lesser now and more importance is given to the strategies. The classes of the foreign language are to be dominated by the students in comparison to the teachers (Moeller, 2015). There is comparatively a high rate of stress on the strategies of learning a language by the students, who are more successful in their studies (Benson, 2011). The much-highlighted element, pointed out by the various researchers that helps the students in learning a foreign language, is the use of the strategies. In practice the implementation of learning strategies makes students more independent, responsible and active. Furthermore, they position teachers as facilitators and take charge of their own learning. The awareness about the use of the strategies encourage learners to wisely select the appropriate strategies according to the learning context in different situations and they become more confident about their learning in turn (Camilleri Grima, 2007). There is a clear link between the selection of the learning strategies by the teachers for a classroom and the production of active learners, who are greatly involved in the activates of the learning of a language (Benson, 2010). The strategies of learning a language typically develop the sense of taking the responsibility and encourage achievement among the learners, which makes them hard workers and more active in a classroom (O'malley et al., 1990).

The strategies of Language Learning

Metacognitive Strategies (MS)

The word Metacognitive has a meaning in itself, which is quite clear from its own name. The meaning of the word "Meta" is beyond, which states it as thinking and cognitive process. Thinking process can further be elaborated as a process in which a person thinks about his existence, his presence in some certain context and what he does in his life. (Flavell, 1971) says that metacognitive strategies are intentionally planned procedures by learners in which they set their goals to complete the tasks in future. The process of the cognitive development

of learning runs through metacognitive strategies that monitors the cognitive process and the completion of the goals in the procedure. The metacognitive strategies involve the strategies of self-monitoring, self-evaluation, attainment and attention, focus and self-reliance (Wenden, 1998). In this strategy the learner is himself aware of the fact that he is involved in the process of learning and in the selection of the strategies (Hacker, 1998).

(Wulf, 2015) categorized the awareness of the learners in various ways:

1. The thinking process involved during the course.
2. Curiosity of the learners to identify and solve their own learning issues.
3. The selection of the thinking process by the learners at the initial, middle and final level during the learning process.

Cognitive Strategies (CS)

Cognitive strategies are the selected patterns taken by the learners to complete the learning tasks (Chamot, 1990).They further include the skills of summarizing, comprehension, paraphrasing, transfer of information, relating the new and the old concepts, the act of translation and the ways of asking questions. According to some previous studies, learners who use metacognitive strategies become more dominant in their classrooms as compared to the ones who don't. As stated by (Van Dijk, 2013) there is an improvement in the comprehension skills of the learners who acquire summarizing skills, which is a very basic element of metacognitive strategies.

Socio-Affective Language Learning Strategies (SLLS)

Communication in society is an integral part of socio-affective language learning strategies. These strategies further include social behaviours, social patterns of learning, the effect of the society on the learning procedures, connection between society and the learners and the effect of the cooperative learning environment on the learners (Dörnyei, 2014). The effort of the learners in controlling the various levels of anxious behaviour. Motivation, reinforcement to ones' own self, giving encouragement to one's own self are important elements of the socio-effective language learning strategies (Erten and Razi, 2009). If the learners are trained in these strategies they can control their imbalance of emotions and can face the situations of social interactions during language learning process (Rossiter, 2003).

Approaches to Strategy Training

Theorists have offered a number of inventories to enhance FL learning and multiple approaches to learn effectively. A few of them are used for the framework of the present study.

(Andrews, 2007) mentioned that learner autonomy can be efficiently enhanced by providing strategy training and by implementing strategy training as part of the FL curriculum. According to him strategy training should provide the following tools to learners:

- Understanding their own strengths and weaknesses in FL learning
- Having a capacity for problem-solving
- Making their own decisions to select and complete language tasks
- Getting into new experiments of familiar and unfamiliar strategies of learning
- Getting an awareness of the activities that help to better understand the areas of the target language
- Using and transferring different strategies to the new learning tasks
- Self-monitoring and self-evaluation of their own performance over different learning tasks

Oxford (2011) brought a sequence of the use of the strategies such as:
- Awareness of the strategies
- Having a discussion on the benefits of using FLL strategies
- Practicing strategies in different contexts
- Functional use of strategies
- Self-monitoring
- Self-evaluation
- Self-suggestions
- Transferring strategies to upcoming tasks

The framework stated by Chamot (2005) is comprised of various elements of problem-solving as mentioned below:
- The planning before the class to accomplish the learning tasks
- Self-monitoring by checking understanding of different learning tasks and procedures
- Solving their problems and looking for the solutions they encounter during learning
- Learning to evaluate themselves after using a given learning strategy

Previous Studies on Learner Autonomy

As the interest in learner autonomy increased, a number of programs were developed to enhance autonomy in learning and to check the motivation of learners towards such programs (Danilenko, 2018). The studies showed positive achievements of the students towards autonomy and further elaborated their interests in becoming independent learners. (Benson, 2003). A few studies on learner autonomy are mentioned in table 1.

Table 1: Previous studies on learner autonomy

Results & Key Findings	The practices of autonomy had certain constraints due to lack of guidance for learners and due to the less trained teachers. Participants became more autonomous after the training.	The attitudes of learners were found to be positive towards autonomy, though fixed curriculum goals were described as problematic.	Metacognitive and self-regulatory training improved learners' autonomy.	Participants started using learning strategies and became autonomous learners. In the beginning they faced difficulties which they overcame gradually.	The autonomy created classrooms resulted in lowering the anxiety level of students and enhanced their confidence and motivation towards learning.
Methods	Questionnaire, training materials	Questionnaire, interviews, teaching materials, workshops	Training module, pre and post test	Questionnaire, learning diaries	Questionnaires, teaching materials
Level	University	University	University	University	University
Country	Indonesia	Japan	Vietnam	Macedonia	N/A
Source	Lengkanawati (2017)	Stroupe, Rundle, and Tomita (2016)	Nguyen and GU (2013)	Xhaferi. B and Xhaferi. G (2011)	Black and Deci (2000)

Methodology/Materials

Population of the Study

The population which was targeted for the present research were the students of English as a foreign language at tertiary level in Lahore, Pakistan.

Sample of the Study

The study was experimental nature and had two groups: one group was the experimental group and the other group was the control group. Each group had 52 students and they were taken from a government university of women.

Research Methodology

It was an experimental study by method, and by purpose it was catering research and development. It was further categorized as an intervention research, which involves systematic development of structures, classroom procedures and practical settings (FRASER, 2009). The control group was taken as the non-intervention group whereas the intervention group was referred as the experimental group. The training was conducted on the group which was under the experiment. The total duration of the training is shown in the table 2.

Table 2: Training Duration

Group	Semesters in total	Weeks	Number of classes in a week	Contact hours per week
Experimental Group (intervention students)	2	27	3	3

The Design of the Research

The study was conducted with the purpose of designing a training program that would be implemented in the foreign language classroom. The base of the program was based on the strategies of foreign language learning. Moreover, it aimed at developing the practices of autonomy in the groups of the language learners. It used multiple theories of autonomy, which were taken into consideration for the development of the training program. Therefore, the approach that was used in the development of the program was named the eclectic approach, which refers to the compilation of the multiple theories of learning. The program was divided into different themes and the implementation of the program was done with an intervention, with the mixture of several strategies of language learning. The regular classroom materials taught were blended with the learning strategies. The prescribed book of the university was taught with a blend of strategies to enhance language learning and activities, to promote autonomy. Before the experiment started, a pre-test was conducted for both the groups i.e. the control and the experimental group. A post-test was conducted for both the groups at the end of the experimental study. The figure 1 below explains the research design.

Figure 1. Study Design
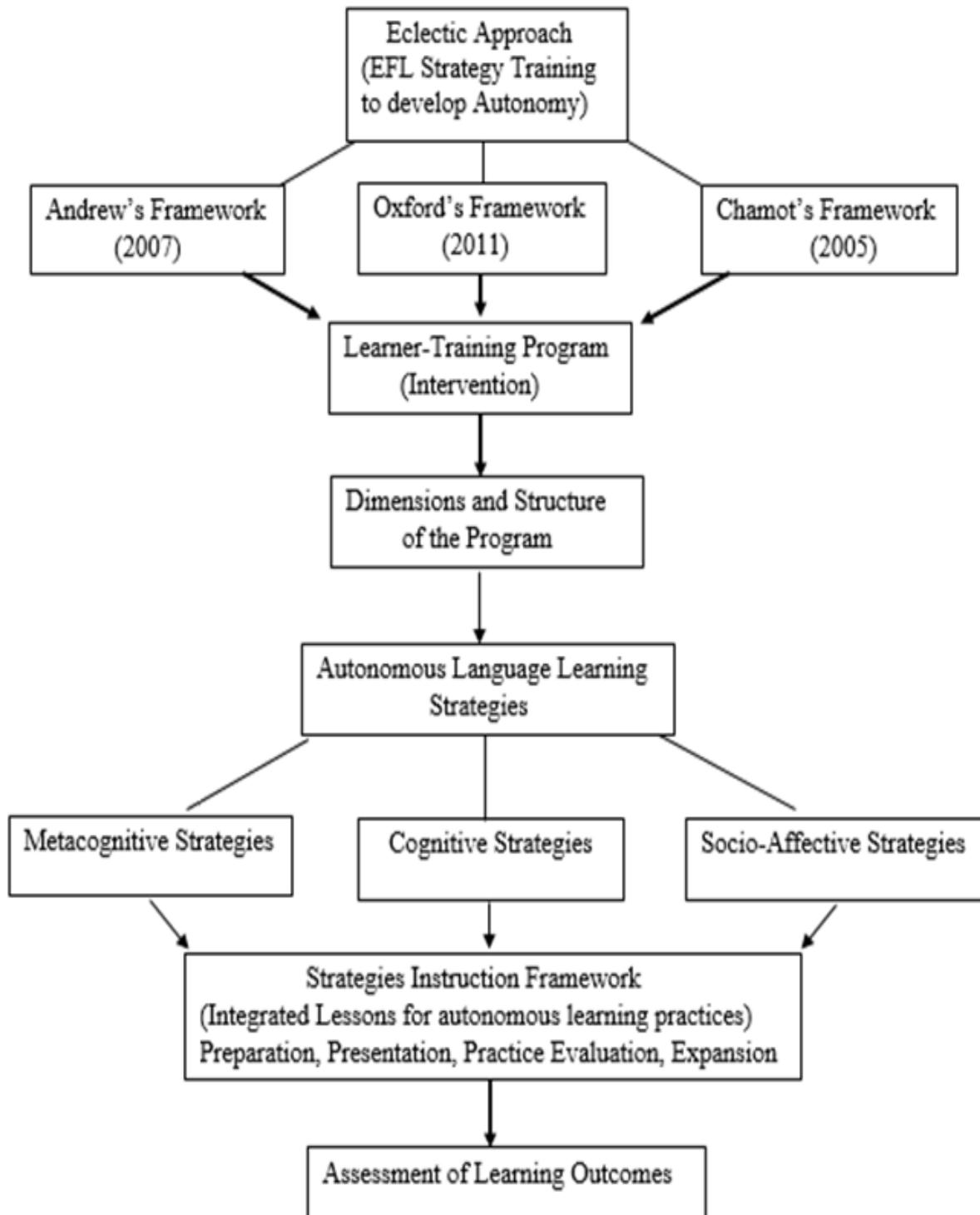
Instrument of the Study

The data was collected from the students, by using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was filled by the students at the beginning of the study as a pre-test and was also filled when the experiment ended as a post-test. The questionnaire used in this study was taken from a study conducted by (Saidur *et al.*, 2011). It was used to gather the information about the practical use of the strategies of learning language by the foreign language students in the context of Pakistan. The questionnaire was developed by (Chamot, 1990). The practices involved in autonomous learning were the basic idea of the investigation of the questionnaire. The various sections of the questionnaire are revealed in tables 3 & 4.

Table 3: Sections of the questionnaire

Skills of Language	Total Statements
Listening	**14**
Speaking	**12**
Listening and Speaking outdoor	**09**
Reading	**16**
Writing	**12** **Total=63**

Table 4: The distribution of the questionnaire

Skills of Language	Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Socio-Affective Strategies
Listening	**1,13**	**2,4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,14**	**3,10**
Speaking	**1,2,8,10,11**	**4,6,7,9,12**	**3,5**
Listening and Speaking Outside	**1,4,8,9**	**2,5,6**	**3,7**
Reading	**1,5,8,10,11,15**	**3,4,6,7,9,12,13,14,16**	**2**
Writing	**10,11,12**	**2,3,4,5,6,8,9**	**1,7**
	Total=20	**Total=34**	**Total=9**

Procedure of Data Collection

A government university of Pakistan was chosen for the collection of the data. The collection of the data was comprised of 2 semesters of BS of the year 2. The data collection procedure had a further distribution into 2 phases as shown in the table 5.

Table 5: The collection of data

Phase		Participants	Number of Students
I	-Pre-intervention	-Experimental group **-Control group**	**52** **52**
II	-Post-intervention	- Experimental group **-Control group**	**52** **52**

Analysis of the Data

The collected data was gone through SPSS for the analysis as below:

Standard Deviation and Mean

Standard deviation and mean of the scores which were gained by both the groups were calculated.

T-test

The comparison of the scores gained by both the groups was calculated by using Independent sample t-test.

Results and Findings

The results obtained from the statistical analysis are given in table 6.

Table 6: The gain scores in comparison

	Group Name	Numbers	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gain Scores	**Control group**	**Total 52**	**33.65**	**4.23**
Gain Score	Experimental group	**Total 52**	**66.80**	**5.92**

The table shows that the scores gained by the experimental group, N=52 has, M=66.80, SD=5.92 are greater in comparison to the scores gained by the control group, N=52 has, M= 33.65, SD=4.23.

The graph in figure 2 shows that the gain scores of the experimental group are higher than the gain scores of the control group.

Figure 2. The difference of Mean
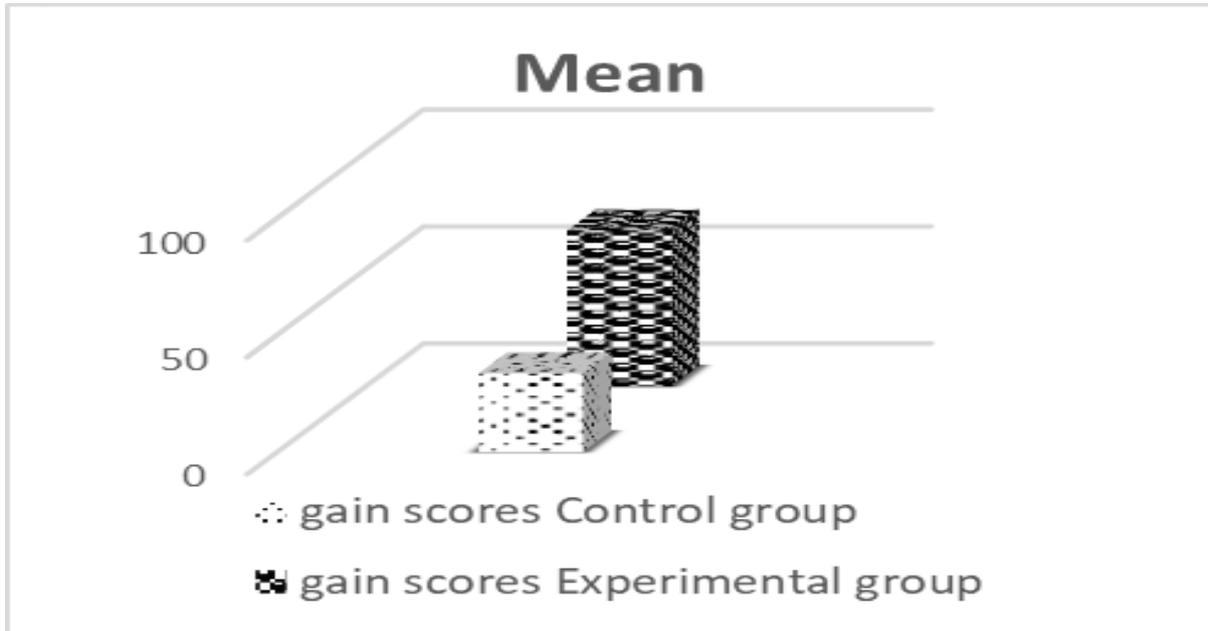
The values calculated from the t-test of the control group and the experimental group are presented in table

Table 7: Independent sample t-test

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig	T	Df	Std. Deviation
Gain Scores	Equal variances assumed	4.765	.031	-32.82	102	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-32.82	92.27	.000

The t value is t (102) = -32.82 while p = 0.031 ≤ 0.05. This shows that there is a significant value in the independent sample t-test. There was a clear significant difference found between the scores gained by the control and the experimental group.

Thus, the hypothesis of the study, which stated that there is no noticeable value of differentiation between the autonomous learning of the intervention group and the non-intervention group is rejected here. As the difference was quite clear and had a significant value.

Discussion

The study was designed to see the value of training and its impact on learner autonomy development of English language students at tertiary level. The findings of the study suggested that the practices of the strategies of learning may increase the level of autonomy among EFL learners. The study also established the view that autonomy can be developed through a systematic learner -training program, as was found in the study conducted by (Black, 2000), in which learners became more autonomous after the induction of the autonomous training module. The study also supported the findings of (Lengkanawati, 2017) and (Xhaferi, 2011), who found the practices of learning strategies to be more effective in developing autonomy among learners.

The research on autonomy by (Stroupe, 2016) showed that the autonomy of learners was increased after the training program, though the fixed curriculum goals created problems. In the present study, the researcher was also aware of the issue of restrained curriculum goals, and of the limited time available to cover the prescribed syllabus. Engaging students in active learning through language learning strategies and further enhancing their autonomy is a gradual process (Bursuc, 2017). Hence the present study was conducted for 27 weeks so that it may not disturb the completion of the prescribed syllabus and all the activities to enhance autonomy were blended into the prescribed teaching materials. The research also supported the findings of (Nguyen, 2013), who found that metacognitive learning strategies help the language learners to be more independent. The study further suggests that a blend of all the mentioned learning strategies can develop learner autonomy, even if they are combined into the regular teaching materials like textbooks etc.

Conclusion

The aim behind this study was to design a training program for the learners of language, to enhance autonomy among them. The basic theme of the training was the regular practices of using the strategies of learning the language, which further included metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective language strategies. The training was put into practice for 27 weeks, where each lesson for each day aimed to enhance the autonomy of learners, by maximizing the applications of learning strategies in a foreign language context. The program was designed for the students of a tertiary level studying in Pakistan, and was conducted at a government university. English was the compulsory subject whereas their prescribed books were comprised of poetry, literature and communication skills. The topics of the textbooks were taught by using independent language learning strategies instead of traditional teaching methods. And the results showed that the scores gained by the intervention group were greater in comparison to the non-intervention group. The researcher carried out the experiment personally by teaching both the groups. The non-intervention group was also taught by the researcher, in a controlled

environment invovling traditional teaching methodologies, and resembled a teacher-centred classroom.

The program was found to be effective as can be seen through the results. The learners under the intervention program were found to be more autonomous as compared to the learners who were not under the intervention, which shows that the program developed was quite useful in bringing an evident change in the autonomy practices of the language learners. In conclusion, it can be said that the training sessions of the autonomy practices increased the motivation of learners towards language learning, enhanced their confidence and changed their attitudes towards the learning process.

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