

## **Chapter 2**

# **Learner Autonomy and the MENA Region Context**

This chapter gives an overview of learner autonomy perceptions in the MENA region context, addressing misconceptions and portraying learners in relation to their capacity and penchant for individualisation and autonomy but within an environment that respects their culturally adopted concepts of collectivism and inter-dependence. Using findings from the explorative research conducted in Omani HEIs, the chapter identifies characteristics of learner autonomy specific to Omani learners and re-defines learner autonomy accordingly. The chapter equally addresses negative attitudes and resistance to autonomy which emerge as major issues that have always accompanied the development of learner autonomy.

A thoughtful reading of the 21st century teaching and learning environment shows that the responsibility is not only on the learner's side but it equally falls on other stakeholders. These, as much as the learner, may be unable to recognise the need for new approaches to learning in a rapidly changing society. In the same vein, Lambert (2001) asserts that the needs of the learners, irrespective of their background, may have some common elements. In their higher education, learners need a keen perception of new social trends and change. They need to develop the skills of self-reliance, risk-management, setting goals for learning, and identifying the value of the learning opportunities provided to them. The successful development of these skills helps learners become confident and enjoy a sense of self-worth supported towards responsibility in learning. This argues for the importance of adopting the Collaborative Learner Autonomy (CLA) gradual approach through learning opportunities of hard and soft skills combination following the Individual-Competitive-Collaborative Autonomous Learning Continuum (ICCALC).

Mercer (2008) refers to learners' self-constructs which are likely to have an impact on behaviour and attitudes. These are self-confidence, self-concept, self-efficacy and self-esteem, and as Mercer (2008: 182) claims "can be found in work on affect, autonomy, strategies, individual differences, motivation, identity,

attributions, anxiety, and willingness to communicate”.<sup>1</sup> They are fundamental principles in the development of learner autonomy as perceived from the CLA perspective. Concomitant with the above interest in portraying learners’ profile, it is important to explore the extent to which developing an ability to take charge of learning can be significant from learners’ own perspectives. Despite novice attempts to involve learners in course design and in various aspects of the learning process, learner voices contribute in a limited manner to professional discussions. In the spirit of developing autonomy and getting learners to take responsibility for some parts of their learning, it is vital to involve learners as much as possible in the decision-making process. Such involvement makes them feel happy and enables the process to work better. Involving learners in many aspects of learning develops in them a clearly evident culture of ownership.

## **2.1 Misconceptions About Learner Autonomy in the MENA Region**

Autonomous learning has emerged as one response to the growing challenges and the changes that continually happen in the field of education, and has become central to teaching and learning. Learning problems relate in one way or another to learner autonomy, learner-centeredness and the absence of reflective and exploratory practice in most EFL classes.

Scharle and Szabo (2000: 1) acknowledge the “frustration [most language teachers experience] investing endless amounts of energy in their students and getting very little in response”. They explain this situation by learners’ passive approach to learning characterised by their “over-reliance on the teacher” (Ibid) concluding that promoting learning autonomy involves changing learners’ attitudes and the redistribution of roles in the learning process. Pierson (1996) characterises Chinese students, for example, as passive, dependent and lacking in initiative. Findings from various research studies suggest that this statement is valid about Omani students at the tertiary level, who show limited interest and incentive to learn outside regular classrooms and tend to stick to teachers’ instructions and what is taught in the course mainly as they are almost, and by default, mark-driven.

Littlewood’s (1999) assertions about autonomy in the Eastern context can apply to the Omani context and reflect related T&L situations. These assertions triggered the interest in the issue of autonomy as they also appeared to apply to the MENA region, the Omani context in particular:

1. Students perceive themselves as interdependent with other students. Omani students prefer to form groups which work towards common goals. This is mainly because groups provide the learner with the sense of protection that

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Dornyei (2005), Yang (1999) and Yashima et al. (2004).

enables them to perform collaboratively and at a later stage autonomously (see Littlewood 1999; Jones 1995). However, in an open classroom situation, learners are often reluctant to participate and voice their views.

2. The teacher is often perceived as “an authority figure whose superior knowledge and control...should not be questioned [providing knowledge that they conceive as] “something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners” (Littlewood 1999: 85). Omani students still perceive the teacher within this authority image and perceive formal class learning as most important.
3. East Asian students enjoy a high level of ambition and motivation that is transmitted through group belonging and combined with the readiness to put effort into their learning. Consequently, they are more likely to have “reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups” (Littlewood 1999: 87). Reactive autonomy here manifests itself in learners’ gradual development of self-regulation skills that enable them to self-regulate their motivation, readiness and willingness through their responsible reliance on the teacher. Teachers take a guidance provider role, offering learners training, support and a sort of modelling and piloting. Omani students have a clear penchant to work in competitive and collaborative modes that enable them to form groups that provide them with a sense of comfort and security and help them develop self-confidence.
4. Irrespective of their background, learners have the same capacity for autonomy. It is therefore the classroom [and implicitly the teacher and the institution] which bears the responsibility of providing learners with a “favourable environment for developing the capacity for autonomy” (Littlewood 1999: 88). The positive performance of Omani students in competitive and collaborative learning opportunities indicates that they have an innate capacity for autonomy and enjoy reasonable levels of readiness and willingness to develop it.

According to Gan (2009), in the last few decades the impact emphasis has moved from the cultural traditions to the institutional contexts and social environments. Gan (2009) reiterates the view that strategies and motivation in English language learning are largely determined by institutional contexts and social environments. This view echoes one of the major claims the CLA defends, advocating a new role teachers and HEIs should adopt, facilitating the learning environment conducive to autonomy. Gan’s view (2009) is relatively valid for the Omani and MENA region context in general. Reviewing some major findings from a study on the use of Professional Reading Circles (Brown and Hayes 2000) to enhance learner autonomy and from a replicated study of Reading Circles (RC) in Oman, a number of observations emerge.<sup>2</sup> RCs emerge then as a competitive-collaborative-autonomous learning venue, encouraging participants to

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<sup>2</sup>The model of RC they developed was based on a number of earlier models, such as *Culture Circles*, *Literature Circles*. Brown and Hayes (2000) propose the *Professional Reading Groups* (PRG) and *Journal Clubs* (JCs), and, as a later development, *Professional Reading Circles* (PRCs) where a group of learners meet to research and discuss particular problems or issues.

think about relevant topics or problems and solve them. The first finding is that RCs were successful in proving the readiness and willingness of Omani students to develop autonomy. The research came out with specific aspects and properties that characterise learner autonomy in the Omani context. Using them in a reading support course fostering learner autonomy, the research concluded that RCs can represent a successful mode of autonomous learning. The second finding is that students in Oman are mark-driven and do not value the merits of their learning experiences. In an attempt to foster reading, students were required to keep personal reading notebooks as records of autonomous learning. They were often asked either to submit them for written correction and feedback or present them in class as part of speaking-reading activities. All students' enquiries were of the type: "*Is this part of our assessment grade?*" and "*How much is it worth?*" This implies that they are not interested in the positive impact such activity has on their learning and the capabilities for autonomous learning it generates. They only engage in any task if a mark is connected to it. Why do they fail to see the value of keeping a reading notebook in helping them with their English and with their reading skills in particular? Thirdly, reference can be made to an ambitious *Reading Drive* project approved by the management of a HEI in Oman,<sup>3</sup> availing an amount of money to any group of students to use in order to purchase any book they like, read it, circulate it and conduct post-reading activities in groups. This project aims at fostering a reading culture by the creation of a pool of reading books, and autonomous reading and learning activities that reflect learners' needs and preferences. Only five groups, that is 7 % of the targeted students, seized the opportunity and used this scheme. Can this be explained by students' fear or lack of interest in this kind of autonomous learning? No matter what the explanation is, these students had a negative reaction to the project. With this negative attitude, not exploiting this opportunity, students showed a limited sense of autonomy. This begs the question, why are Omani tertiary students scared of reading in general, and probably reading autonomously?

The exploration of students' feedback forms in two major HEIs in Oman indicate that students in Oman lack the ability to reflect on their own learning, thus tend to develop some misconceptions about it. Strikingly contrastive were the students' responses as the majority of them highly evaluate their lessons and often rate class sessions as "well organised", course delivery as "efficient and enthusiastic" and learning opportunities availed by the course as "sufficient". However, when asked to rate their benefit from the course and whether they had improved their language ability over the semester, the responses sometimes indicate otherwise. Deeper exploration of these responses shows a correlation between students' grades and their evaluation of the courses. They rate their improvement in the language as limited, which indicates limited degree of reflection on what really goes on in class.

Omani students show a significant degree of readiness and innate capacity for autonomy. Findings from previous research show that they are consciously, and

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<sup>3</sup>The management of Majan College (University College), Muscat, Oman.

sometimes unconsciously, ready and motivated to take the role of autonomous learner. The RCs showed how fundamental and innate learner autonomy and self-actualisation were among students. However, hardly any adequate provision and measures were taken by HEIs to exploit learners' readiness and willingness to develop learner autonomy.

Cotterall and Reinders (2001) suggest that exploring learners' beliefs, orienting them to the available resources at the Self-learning Venue (SLV), providing adequate training and support to the students, and strengthening the link between the classroom and these venues, are expected to enhance students' use of autonomous learning opportunities, and ultimately develop learner autonomy. This echoes one of the main focuses of the research underpinning the CLA, which is exploring Omani students' perceptions of the effectiveness of SLVs and ultimately strengthen these venues and their ability to provide what their name implies. Cotterall and Reinders (Ibid) conclude their research on the use of the Self-Access Centres (SAC) at the University of Victoria in Wellington, New Zealand with four suggestions for improving students' use of the centre, and thus develop and enhance learner autonomy:

1. Exploration of learners' beliefs by SAC staff (teachers and learners as done in the research underpinning the CLA),
2. Provisions for an effective initial orientation to SAC and autonomous learning opportunities (similar to the ALOP the present research underpinning the CLA explores and recommends),
3. Provisions for on-going support to students by SAC staff (teachers and learners as well).
4. More links between the Self-access Centres (SACs) and formal learning (courses and exams).

Reviewing Cotterall and Reinders (2001) and the above four suggestions was influential in establishing the direction of the CLA to advocate a redefined concept of autonomous learning in the Omani context through the gradual approach to learner autonomy development. The gradual aspect is achieved through the adoption of the *Competitive-Collaborative-Autonomous Learning Continuum (CCALC)* in an environment that fosters learners' genuine participation in and ownership of their learning as well as an active engagement in self-actualisation (Benson 1997; Benson and Lor 1998) and self-development. With a wider perspective, the CLA reflects current educational tendencies shifting the focus from teaching to learning and developing in students the skills and attributes needed to become autonomous learners. It is expected that the sum of experiences learners are exposed to and teachers bring into play would provide students with insights into reflective practice and autonomous learning that match the contemporary educational trends in a collaborative and autonomous environment.

## 2.2 Attitudes to Control and Authority in Learner Autonomy

Learners' perception of intervention from others in their own learning and of control in relation to learning activities, tasks and opportunities influences their readiness and willingness to develop learner autonomy. In the same vein, Hofstede (1991) suggests the term "power distance" to refer to learners' attitudes vis-à-vis these intervention, referred in Hofstede's words, as "control power and authority". The degree of power distance learners have, whether low or high, determine their attitudes to differences in a group. High levels of power distance mean some degree of readiness to accept differences and adapt to the requirements of group belonging whereas low levels mean lack of acceptance and an inclination to reduce differences. Hofstede's works show that most cultures which rate high in collectivism also rate high in power distance, which echoes the situation in most MENA region educational contexts. Using data resulting from surveys in 53 countries, Hofstede (1991) compares the ranking of selected East Asian and Western countries, on both the degree of collectivist orientation and degree of their acceptance of differences in power and authority. Using Hofstede's works to explore Omani students' attitudes to power and authority, it appears that reaction to power in the Omani context does not take the form of total resistance. Students, on the contrary, perceive power and authority as guiding and supporting whether from a teacher or even a peer. This underpins the principle of *peer scaffolding* the CLA advocates. In the same vein, Chu (2007) refers to definitions of the term "resistance" to learner involvement as an aspect of students' behaviour in relation to autonomy in language learning. According to Chu (2007), learning resistance is not necessarily to the teacher but rather to the system and it can appear in different forms and variations, full or partial, permanent or temporary, can be detected. For example, learners can be covert, latent and passive. These aspects and similar learner features are bound to disappear with proper guidance, competition, collaboration and, particularly interest raising and enhancement. Escandon (2004) describes seven patterns of resistance including, among others, sleeping in class, being late or absent and pretending not knowing the answer to a question. Omani students' resistance is due to lack of engagement. The question that arises is whether this resistance indicates a principled rejection of involvement in learning and autonomy or a rejection of specific applications in their context. Omani students are rarely given the opportunity to be decision makers in class, and when they are, they may feel insecure of how to organise their own learning. However, over time they come to appreciate the benefits of a more active engagement in learning English. It can be safely argued that teachers' awareness of different cultural orientations can provide a useful correction to assumptions about learning. Variation in individual student cultural differences is a factor that is influential. Promoting autonomy does not necessarily, at least at its initial stage, require the teachers to transform the way their students perceive their selves, their relation to others and the value of hierarchy and authority. These rather need to be preserved, respected, taken into account as

influential factors, and at an advanced stage, gradually tuned towards responsibility, control over learning and autonomy.

Autonomous learners could well choose to learn in what is generally regarded as being the more passive modes. Thus the activity of autonomous learners is best thought of as the pursuit of whatever learning activities the learners consider would best help them to achieve their learning goals. Autonomy does not mean the absence of guidance. It is rather the outcome of a learning process that provides the learners with the opportunity to work with such guidance as they wish to take, whether it is from peers, from electronic media, or from tutors. This, it seems to me, accords much better with the idea of respecting students' decisions in the learning process rather than the prescription from teachers, that students must be made to take responsibility for their learning.

There is a misconception that Eastern ways of learning are non-autonomous, mainly based on memorising. In fact, it seems unquestionable that the exclusive use of memorising as a learning style component is associated with lack of autonomy and reflects refusal to reflect and understand. This reflects the assumption that the educational tradition of Arab and Muslim cultures are non-autonomous due to the emphasis on memorising texts. Learners in these contexts are thought to be dependent on syllabus, passive and lacking initiative due to their educational background and tradition of surface, teacher-driven and institutional-bound approach to learning. However, it is important to address the activity of memorising not as an issue in itself, but in relation to the way it used constructively for learning purposes. The same is true of dependence and reliance on the teacher for advice and information.

Research on learner autonomy in the MENA region context in general, namely Oman, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar (see Palfreyman 2001; Mynard 2003) links the concept of autonomy with self-direction and the refined roles that teachers and learners need to embrace. It is important to recall learner autonomy continuum that distinguishes between learner-based self-direction and materials-based self-direction. In a materials-based self-directed situation, the directive pedagogic element is in the learning material. Self-instruction refers to the situation in which learners learn by themselves, with or without having selected materials themselves, with or without being conscious of it. Lee (1997) depicts a common confusion in using autonomy interchangeably with self-direction.<sup>4</sup> She considers that autonomy is a capacity while self-directed learning is a way of organising learning (Lee 1997). Little (1991) describes autonomy essentially in terms of the psychological relation the learner establishes with the process and content of learning. According to Little (1991: 4), learner's "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" is essential for autonomy to be achieved. The psychological dimension of the relationship the learner establishes with the learning

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<sup>4</sup>See Holec's (1983) Distinction between self-directed learning (a desired learning situation or behaviour) and learner autonomy (concept that refers to the capacity of the learner for autonomous learning).

process and content, on which Little (1991) lays emphasis, implies that autonomy is not a skill or a technique to be taught. It cannot be imposed or forced on learners, yet if properly redefined in concordance with the learning environment, the need to impose it disappears and it becomes a need emerging from the learners themselves.

It is important to add to Little's focus (1991) on psychology that the learner-learning relationship involves social, intellectual and psychological aspects that intersect and interact in a complex way. Little's emphasis (1991) on the learner's psychological readiness to be autonomous is valid. Holec (1983) describes such readiness as the willingness of the learners and the capacity they develop to control or oversee their own learning. However, in defining learner autonomy, the active dimension is given much more importance than the dimensions of readiness and willingness. Holec (1983) describes the autonomous learner as a learner who enjoys the independence of choosing their learning purposes, freely sets goals, enjoys the freedom to choose materials, methods and tasks, and, in short, deliberately and independently exercises choice in all aspects of their own learning. In other words, for autonomy to be achieved, the learner should play an active role in their own learning process through the use of the learning opportunities available to them and by them. Autonomous learners are as such expected to engage in genuine participation in learning activities with the ideas they generate and the exchange of information and experience they make with peers rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Kohonen 2000).

Contrary to theory about the teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy where the image looks ideal and promising, the actual situation in practice is not as neat as it should be. Some teachers still bear the traditional portrait of knowledge provider with an authority in class that is unquestionable, making students passive receptors and leaving little room for them to take responsibility over their learning. In fact, in most classes teachers still face difficulties to detach themselves from the teaching role in class in favour of the role of learning facilitator. McGarry (1995) describes such situations as a class where students are taught in ways which reinforce teacher-dependence and fail to develop in them the necessary skills that enable them to apply the knowledge they learn and the skills they acquire beyond the classroom. The teacher's role is a further important condition for autonomy to be achieved. It may be safe to venture into considering that autonomy can never happen without developing an appropriate role for the teacher. In an attempt to portray effective autonomous learners, McGarry (1995) implicitly puts the teacher at the heart of the issue:

Students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plans of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess their own work, and, generally to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future (1995: 1).

The passive constructions ("are encouraged" and "being given") are a clear reference to the central role the teacher can play in developing learners' autonomy.

This role paves the way towards autonomy and reiterates the gradual aspect that its development entails. Although the reduction of the teacher's role in the class is at the heart of developing learners' autonomy, the teacher remains central in supporting the development of autonomy.

The responsibility autonomous learners are expected to take for their learning involves a redistribution of control in the learning situation. It has to be shared between the learners and the teacher. Teacher's control and learners' control are not contradictory and they can efficiently complement each other. Teacher's control should be guidance and orchestration while students' control has to be proactive engagement and participative involvement. The new distribution of control can be viewed as a means by which teachers can facilitate autonomous learning. Teachers deliberately surrender certain prerogatives and accept learners' responsibility. Meaningful sharing of responsibility and control is important at this stage to avoid falling into the trap of having a redundant teacher and learners at a loss. Unfortunately, current implementations of autonomous learning do not really deviate from such practices. Learners view teachers as abandoning their guidance and orientation role, leaving them desperate, unguided and bound to lose interest.

This further stresses the need to explore the current practices and the concepts behind them to redefine learner autonomy and bring the teacher back to the stage with a refined and redefined role and enable the students to reshape their position in the learning stage with a refined and redefined perception. A crucial issue for consideration is the definition given to autonomy from an educational perspective, considering it as a learner's capacity to use their learning independently from the teacher, which implies that it would be a shared goal for every learner everywhere. The goal attached to the teaching of a language will influence the learning outcomes, the classroom learning experience, the development of discourse, skills and styles which are all to be achieved autonomously.

A later development of the concept of autonomy in relation to the teacher's role is the distinction Holec (1983) made<sup>5</sup> between the concept of self-direction, a desirable learning situation or behaviour, and learner autonomy as a concept that refers to the capacity of the learner for such learning. This practically calls for a vital role the teacher plays in making learning arrangements such as self-access, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and distance learning which are potentially learning platforms that can best host learner autonomy. These are the learning environments where learners genuinely enjoy decision-making in the areas identified by Holec (Ibid). However, it has to be admitted that such forms of learning may require the exercise of autonomy but they do not necessarily develop this capacity (Benson 2006) in the absence of a guiding role of the teacher and an active role played by the learner. In the same vein, the teacher continues to play an important role to prepare the learners for autonomy through promoting the psychological attributes and developing in them the practical abilities involved in learner autonomy. This implies the need to unveil the innate capacity for autonomy

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<sup>5</sup>This distinction was largely accepted in the literature. See Benson (2001, 2007) and Little (1991).

through practice.<sup>6</sup> One implication of this unveiling effort is to embrace the belief in the value of interdependent learning in classrooms and beyond to defy the common individualistic interpretations of learner autonomy. Interpreting autonomy as interdependence leads practitioners to perceive learner autonomy as learners' readiness and willingness to perform independently and in cooperation with their peers in a spirit of social responsibility. The CLA builds on the readiness, interdependence and responsible reliance on the teacher that characterise the Omani students.

In continuing with the aspects of teacher's role, it is vital for teachers to resolve the conflict between pedagogical approaches which perceive autonomy primarily as a learner need and the approaches which perceive autonomy as innate, at least to some degree, in all learners irrespective of their background. The conviction that learners innately have the desire and tendency to exercise control over their own learning (Smith 2003) means that teachers are required to support them in putting into practice their innate readiness for autonomy. This is believed to be an important basis for the progressive and gradual development of learner autonomy. Developing and exercising learner autonomy as a capacity to be reinforced with practice and engagement, and not a particular method or a tendency for individualism, can be seen as an educational goal. Yet this goal requires different forms of pedagogy and meets with different kinds of constraints according to context (Palfreyman and Smith 2003; Barfield and Brown 2007). Learners need help to develop their autonomous learning skills, which require the presence of the teacher whose role in the learning process will not decrease but will rather change (Little 1995). However, the current focus on the psychological aspect of learner autonomy without increasing the learner's awareness of its political aspects, such as freedom of choice, poses a practical implication (Pennycook 2001; Benson 1997; Benson and Lor 1998; Kenny 1993). Offering learners the freedom of choice does not necessarily mean that they will become autonomous and that they manage to develop learner autonomy. Preparing students for proper exercise of freedom and guiding them towards the development of responsibility over their choices in learning are vital endeavours teachers and HEIs are required to engage in.

Gibbs proposes a definition of learner autonomy that reflects the tendency to incorporate political elements into learning curricula (1979: 119) and the teachers to take into consideration these political aspects:

An autonomous individual must have both independence from external authority and mastery of himself and his powers. He must be free from the dictates and interference of other people, and free also from disabling conflicts or lack of coordination between the elements of his own personality. He must have the freedom to act and work as he chooses, and he must be capable of formulating and following a rule, pattern or policy of acting and working.

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<sup>6</sup>See Benson (2001) for an overview of different pedagogical approaches, Lambert (2001) for an interesting profile of the 21st century learner and Dam (1995) for an account of innovative classroom practice.

The exploration of the political aspect of learner autonomy calls for an emphasis on its relation to culture. Learner autonomy is often, and wrongly it can be argued, perceived as a concept that is typically limited to Western educational contexts and that cannot be applied in other contexts and cultures. Commenting on this assumption, Pennycook rightly relates it to the ethnocentrism of the Western post-modernist culture and claims that:

This is not to say that autonomy as a concept or an educational goal does not exist elsewhere, but rather that a notion of autonomy will be very different in different educational contexts. To encourage 'learner autonomy' universally, without first becoming acutely aware of the social, cultural and political context in which one is working, may lead at best to inappropriate pedagogies and at worst to cultural impositions (1997: 44).

The notion of different autonomy concepts in different educational contexts is central to the CLA advocated here and represents a principle underpinning the focus of the present book to redefine responsibility, authority and autonomy in the MENA region context.

### 2.3 Redefining Responsibility and Autonomy in the Omani Context

A major principle autonomous learning entails is that students should take responsibility for their own learning (Holec 1981).<sup>7</sup> However, a common obstacle identified by teachers in the MENA region context, Oman in particular, it seems, is that students from Arab and Muslim cultures are particularly resistant to this idea and are overly dependent on their teachers. Does this reflect a rejection of autonomy? Or, does it indicate a different perception of autonomy and responsibility?

The interpretation of dependence on teachers by Western researchers as rejection of responsibility stems from their culture where responsibility is identified with autonomy. This, however, does not have the same interpretation in the MENA Region context. Students' reliance on the teacher does not necessarily mean the rejection of responsibility, it rather means acceptance of responsibility but in a redefined manner. Hence, redefining the concept of learner autonomy and responsibility emerges as a vital need within the Omani context. Using Boud's words, the goal is to "enable students to become more autonomous in their learning: that is, assist students to learn more effectively without the constant presence or intervention of a teacher...the role of teachers is not just to transmit knowledge but also to help students take increasing responsibility for their own learning" (1988: 7).

Perceived as the concept which entails that learners set their own goals and develop their own standards, learner autonomy does not mean the mere pursuing of learning activities without a teacher. Autonomous learners are learners who are able to define what they really want, or what interests them. This implies the ability to

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<sup>7</sup>See also Benson and Voller (1997), Little (1997), Champagne et al. (2001) and Cotterall (2000).

conceive learning goals, policies and plans, and to form purposes and intentions independently of any pressure from others. It also implies that the teacher's role is to do the ground work for students in order to help them achieve the above and thus develop learner autonomy. This echoes the works of Rogers who writes (1983: 158):

The evaluation of one's own learning is one of the major means by which self-initiated learning becomes also responsible learning. It is when the individual has to take responsibility for deciding what criteria are important to him, what goals must be achieved, and the extent to which he has achieved those goals, that he truly learns to take responsibility for himself and his directions.

It is this task that teachers in the MENA region need to carry out and it is for this purpose that dependence and reliance on the teacher remain vital within the overall attempt of redefining learner autonomy. Autonomy is in tune with the natural processes of psychological development, which ends up with maturity through a process of gradual growth. The individual learner develops an increasingly deep psychological need to be independent, first, of parental control, and then, later, of control by teachers and any other type of institutional control. So, developing the ability to take increasing responsibility and become gradually and increasingly autonomous is an essential aspect of maturity. This process does not happen suddenly. It is gradual, multi-faceted and requires the contribution of all, not an individual undertaking within the culture of individualism, as wrongly perceived.

However, the identification of responsibility with independence is a cultural assumption, rather than a natural or universal truth.<sup>8</sup> The effect of placing ideas within such a framework of psychology is to naturalise assumptions and to make them seem universally applicable. The commitment of the learners to autonomous learning cannot hide the fact that many of them cannot readily discover autonomy for themselves, and that they are bound to ask for support. In any new situation the learner faces, it is a sign of responsibility to depend on more knowledgeable individuals in the sense of seeking support and guidance, for example. It is through this support and guidance that learners can learn how to operate in any new context. The shift to autonomous learning has developed in some practitioners a sort of orthodoxy that teachers, perceived as tutoring and learning support providers, should not be directive and interventionist to the extent that they should teach by refusing to teach (Clark 2001). In fact, Pemberton et al. (2001: 21) claim that they "feel it necessary for advisers to be aware of the danger that learners' ability to develop their self-directed learning might be undermined if these tendencies are not guarded against". They justify this by what they term as the ability of the teachers, as advisors and learning support providers, to "control the impulse to teach" (Clark 2001: 23), lest their tendencies to intervene in the learning process hinder the development of learner autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup>See Benson and Voller (1997) and Pennycook (2001).

Relating the concept of interventionism to the MENA region context, it is evident that in its radical and extreme sense the non-interventionist policy above is bound to fail in the Omani context given that Omani students come from another language and a different cultural background from English. As Second Language (SL) and Foreign Language (FL) practitioners, teachers in the Omani context cannot yield themselves to this tendency “to teach by refusing to teach” (Ibid). Increasingly, teachers still hold the role of knowledge informants and skills developers. This implies the need to consider “the schemata needed for successful study” (Clark 2001). These include, in addition to knowledge about the language, knowledge about the skills, structures and styles. It is in the hands of the teacher to support learners in seeking, developing and acquiring this knowledge.

From the perspective of the responsible dependence on teachers, it is necessary for students to recognise how much they do not know about the underlying principles, the structure of knowledge, and the learning skills they need. Accordingly, learners’ need for assistance through teacher guidance and peer scaffolding does not necessarily represent some rejection of and resistance to autonomy. In the same direction of thought, it should be reminded that autonomy is not a monolithic concept. Teachers need to develop their own standards and criteria that match the needs of the learners and the requirements of the learning environment and realities which will be applied on. With this objective in mind, the teacher can be portrayed as a manager who creates a supportive and stimulating learning environment, and is available as a resourceful person who challenges learners to achieve their potential and helps them to become aware of institutional requirements and expectations associated with the disciplines they follow. Responsibility in the sense of autonomy may well be desirable but it is at the same time a luxury that not everybody can afford.

Over the last few decades, a series of psychological, educational, political and social developments had a pertinent impact on learning, autonomous learning in particular. One major development was the shift from teacher-centeredness and behaviourism to student-centeredness and constructivism. This led to the emergence of learner autonomy with various typologies, versions and levels. The concept of autonomy as the capacity of the learners for individualism and responsible reliance on the teacher, in full respect of the learners’ collectivist learning behaviour is central for autonomy the CLA advocates. It suggests the redefinition of autonomy in the Omani context, advocating the gradual development of autonomous learning among students with collaboration being an aspect of the Omani students’ autonomy.

## **2.4 Impact of Learning Styles on Learner Autonomy**

This section aims to explore the way students learn and investigates their learning habits and styles in order to assess whether these habits and styles reflect a readiness to develop autonomy (see Appendix 1, Section 1). The explored learning styles and

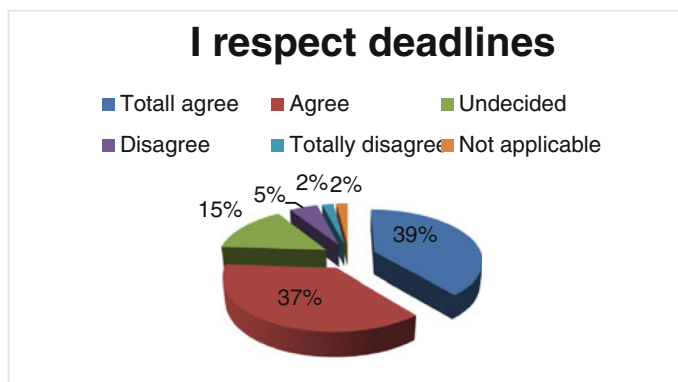
habits consist of six main aspects of student learning. These are ‘*Time*’ aspect which refers to the time students prefer to study and do out-of-class activities as well as their relation with deadlines. The aspect of ‘*Interaction with Peers*’ relates to the opinions of the students in relation to group work, team work and group assignments. The ‘*What to study*’ aspect relates to what interests students to study, the clarity of the courses they have and the teacher’s instructions. The aspect of ‘*Guidance*’ in dealing with assignments and solving problems represents a further aspect worth investigation. The aspect of ‘*Self-reliance*’ relates to the learner’s self-engagement in learning through doing individual search, readings and use of imagination in carrying out any learning task. The aspect of ‘*Relaxation*’ relates to the learners’ need to use self-learning activities and opportunities as occasions for breaks between official learning sessions. These main aspects of learning enable the detection of traces of autonomy and readiness to develop learner autonomy among students.

Findings from the exploration of the styles and habits show that 74.6 % of the surveyed students (41.4 %: ‘Totally agree’ and 33.2 %: ‘Agree’) do not adhere to a strict routine (see Table 2.1). This suggests that these students have a preference for working whenever they find time.

Flexibility in relation to learning time emerges as a vital condition. This is mainly with the understanding that learners have a preference for learning in the time they decide, which undoubtedly implies a certain degree of control over learning. Claiming control over the time when they learn requires learners’ engagement in developing responsibility for their learning, deciding on when to start, when to finish, where to study and the pace to follow. The ability to take this responsibility is indicative of some kind of awareness of the requirements that this flexibility entails. Be it full awareness or partial, be it full control over learning or limited, learners express a clear preference for time flexibility. This can be perceived as an evident trace of readiness to involve in their learning within a more active and responsible role and thus develop autonomy. Teachers and HEIs need to build on this readiness to gradually develop collaborative and autonomous learning skills through proper teacher guidance and support and peer scaffolding. In fact, the sense of responsibility that the control over time implies is further evidenced by learners’ attitude towards time requirement in relation to deadlines. Our research

**Table 2.1** Students’ learning styles and habits (Working time)

| Working time |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|--------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|              |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid        | Totally agree    | 111       | 41.4    | 41.4          | 41.4               |
|              | Agree            | 89        | 33.2    | 33.2          | 74.6               |
|              | Undecided        | 4         | 1.5     | 1.5           | 76.1               |
|              | Disagree         | 36        | 13.4    | 13.4          | 89.6               |
|              | Totally disagree | 27        | 10.1    | 10.1          | 99.6               |
|              | Not applicable   | 1         | .4      | .4            | 100.0              |
|              | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |



**Chart 2.1** Students' learning styles and habits (Deadlines)

shows that there is a strict compliance with time deadlines (Chart 2.1) and that students behave with time with an evident sense of responsibility towards their engagements (37 %: 'Totally agree' and 39 %: 'Agree').

They express their entire engagement to respect deadlines in submitting assignments. This reflects a sound sense of responsibility on their part. It is then the task of the teachers and the HEIs to build on this sense of responsibility, being perceived in the literature as a central aspect of autonomy, and help students develop other aspects of autonomy.

Learning content, another aspect explored in relation to learning styles and habits, is vital to the development of learner autonomy. Guiding learners to acquire the skills to develop responsibility and control over the choice of what to study is a pivotal step towards the development of learner autonomy. It is of paramount importance to decide at the outset whether learners have the required inclination to choose and readiness to assume the responsibility that this entails. In fact, our research proves that there is an evident correlation between learners' readiness and inclination towards responsibility and the degree of support and guidance provided by teachers and HEIs. Support by teachers and HEIs and through peer scaffolding is also extended to the content of learning (see Table 2.2) in terms of what interests students to study. In fact, 60 % of the students claim that they study what interests them (24.3 %: 'Totally agree' and 25.7 %: 'Agree'). Our research proves that Omani students tend to reject dictated learning and strict timetables. Learning what is interesting for them at their own pace and in a friendly and informal environment seems to be what they prefer. This proves the need for teachers and HEIs to work on creating more and more supportive learning environments and learning opportunities that involve students in the design, implementation and control of their learning.

There is a high degree of confusion in relation to what students study in a self-learning venue and this implies the need for support through teacher's guidance and peer scaffolding. It can be understood that learners seem to have an innate

**Table 2.2** Students' learning styles and habits (What to study)

| What to study |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid         | Totally agree    | 65        | 24.3    | 24.3          | 24.3               |
|               | Agree            | 69        | 25.7    | 25.7          | 50.0               |
|               | Undecided        | 60        | 22.4    | 22.4          | 72.4               |
|               | Disagree         | 59        | 22.0    | 22.0          | 94.4               |
|               | Totally disagree | 14        | 5.2     | 5.2           | 99.6               |
|               | Not applicable   | 1         | .4      | .4            | 100.0              |
|               | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

tendency to study what they find interesting. They derive pleasure from learning and gain interesting knowledge about learning. Following from this understanding, learning input and the degree of identification students have with it play an important role in developing autonomy among students. The sense of identification with the learning opportunities enhances learners' involvement and deliberate engagement in learning. This implies the need to take the aspect of identification with learning into account while developing and promoting learner autonomy in the Omani context. The aspect of identification with learning that emerges in the Omani context relates to the clarity of the learning task and the outline they are given. In fact, 89.6 % of the respondents (learners) find it vital for the learners to have a clear outline (see Table 2.3) of the learning task they engage in.

Although this could initially be read as a sign of reliance on the teacher, it does not necessarily exclude the development of autonomy. Awareness of the course requirements, objectives and plan plays an important role in helping learners develop interest in what they study and provides them with the guidance that they will use in designing, implementing and controlling their own learning. Interest in what to learn emerges as a vital factor in the success of learning and is one parameter that guides the gradual development of learner autonomy. It is an important factor in preparing learners for autonomy. This is in keeping with Littlewood's claim (1999) that absolute learner autonomy is almost impossible to achieve. Learner autonomy does not mean teachers should become obsolete. It rather means a change in the perception of teachers' and learners' role in the teaching-learning setting. To develop autonomy teachers should embrace a new

**Table 2.3** Students' learning styles and habits (Having an outline)

| Having an outline |                | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-------------------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid             | Totally agree  | 140       | 52.2    | 52.2          | 52.2               |
|                   | Agree          | 100       | 37.3    | 37.3          | 89.6               |
|                   | Undecided      | 17        | 6.3     | 6.3           | 95.9               |
|                   | Not applicable | 11        | 4.1     | 4.1           | 100.0              |
|                   | Total          | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.4** Students' learning styles and habits (Waiting for an overview from the Teacher)

| Overview from tutor |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|---------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                     |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid               | Totally agree    | 106       | 39.6    | 39.6          | 39.6               |
|                     | Agree            | 64        | 23.9    | 23.9          | 63.4               |
|                     | Undecided        | 54        | 20.1    | 20.1          | 83.6               |
|                     | Disagree         | 33        | 12.3    | 12.3          | 95.9               |
|                     | Totally disagree | 11        | 4.1     | 4.1           | 100.0              |
|                     | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

role, that of the facilitator. As shown in Table 2.4, 93 % of the respondents always wait for the teacher to give an overview of the subject (39.6 %: 'Totally agree' and 23.9 %: 'Agree').

In the same vein, 98.3 % of the teachers think their students wait for the overview the teacher presents. This shows the need for teachers to remain in the learning situation through their interventions. But this does not need to be necessarily in the form of control. The overview that the teacher provides makes learning input meaningful and the process interesting in the eyes of the learners and thus helps them develop autonomy. Evidence from informal chats during interviews with both teachers and students shows that when students are aware of the course or lesson, they feel more secure and then can perform and develop even in the absence of the teacher. They rather develop a tendency to interact and do tasks, availing learning opportunities. The sense of confidence and security students in the MENA region have working in groups is vital in the development of learner autonomy in a collaborative environment. HEIs need to build on this and strive to create a learning environment that supports autonomy in collaboration. Research evidence shows that only 36.2 % (28 %: 'Totally disagree' and 8.2 %: 'Disagree') of the learners do not prefer to sit and work alone in the library or in any SLV study area (see Table 2.5).

Informal evidence, deriving from post-interview chats with students, reveals that the tendency towards individuality among students is closely linked to the learning habit of memorisation. In fact, students often prefer to study alone when they are

**Table 2.5** Students' learning styles and habits (I prefer to work alone)

| Work alone |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|            |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid      | Totally agree    | 78        | 29.1    | 29.1          | 29.1               |
|            | Agree            | 51        | 19.0    | 19.0          | 48.1               |
|            | Undecided        | 36        | 13.4    | 13.4          | 61.6               |
|            | Disagree         | 22        | 8.2     | 8.2           | 69.8               |
|            | Totally disagree | 75        | 28.0    | 28.0          | 97.8               |
|            | Not applicable   | 6         | 2.2     | 2.2           | 100.0              |
|            | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.6** Students' learning styles and habits (I prefer working with peers)

| Working with peers |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                    |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid              | Totally agree    | 134       | 50.0    | 50.0          | 50.0               |
|                    | Agree            | 48        | 17.9    | 17.9          | 67.9               |
|                    | Undecided        | 31        | 11.6    | 11.6          | 79.5               |
|                    | Disagree         | 27        | 10.1    | 10.1          | 89.6               |
|                    | Totally disagree | 28        | 10.4    | 10.4          | 100.0              |
|                    | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

actually not studying but memorising. One student said: "I prefer to work alone in the early morning and this [sic] I do when I learn [sic] definitions and rules for exams". It also shows that Omani students enjoy working with peers since 50 % of the respondents (learners) 'Totally agree' while 17.9 % 'Agree' (see Table 2.6). This shows an inclination towards collaborative learning and shows the need to create an environment that enhances cooperation and collaboration.

The sense of protection and, in some way, the sense of commonality that groups provide is what students look for. Groups make students feel comfortable as they can 'hide' in the group. Making mistakes and getting corrected in group leads students to feel more comfortable. This implies that learning opportunities within groups are important to exploit further. This echoes the CLA's gradual approach to the development of learner autonomy in collaboration and its Individual-Competitive-Collaborative-Autonomous Learning Continuum (ICCALC) our research puts forward.

In the same vein, statistics (see Table 2.7) show that 91.5 % the respondents (54.9 %: 'Totally agree' and 36.6 %: 'Agree') think that being in a group encourages the learners to get rid of their inhibitions and participate in learning through collaboration and peer scaffolding. This generates more ideas through the experiences group members share. Respondents reject the claim that team work is a waste of time and prefer discussing assignments with their peers. This further supports the above claim that groups provide important learning opportunities. Collaborative learning can be seen, as one teacher respondent puts it, "the best manner to pave the way to [sic] learner autonomy". "Our students", he stresses, "fear autonomous learning because they find it threatening. That's [sic] why the stage of collaborative

**Table 2.7** Students' learning styles and habits (I can get more ideas working in group)

| More ideas from group |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-----------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                       |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid                 | Totally agree    | 147       | 54.9    | 54.9          | 54.9               |
|                       | Agree            | 98        | 36.6    | 36.6          | 91.4               |
|                       | Undecided        | 22        | 8.2     | 8.2           | 99.6               |
|                       | Totally disagree | 1         | .4      | .4            | 100.0              |
|                       | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.8** Students' learning styles and habits (Prefer discussing assignments with their peers)

| Prefer discussing assignments |                |           |         |               |                    |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                               |                | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid                         | Totally agree  | 70        | 26.1    | 26.1          | 26.1               |
|                               | Agree          | 152       | 56.7    | 56.7          | 82.8               |
|                               | Undecided      | 34        | 12.7    | 12.7          | 95.5               |
|                               | Disagree       | 5         | 1.9     | 1.9           | 97.4               |
|                               | Not applicable | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 100.0              |
|                               | Total          | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

learning is vital in the direction towards autonomy". As shown in Table 2.8 and in response to whether they prefer discussing assignments with peers, 82.8 % of the respondents (learners) show a clear preference for such discussion with the option 'Agree' at a percentage of 56.7 % and 'Totally agree' at 26.1 %. This further stresses the importance of students' perception of collaborative learning as a stage towards learner autonomy development within a gradual approach that helps learners build self-confidence and self-esteem, which will ultimately enable them to develop learner autonomy. In fact, teachers confirm their students' need for discussion with peers, clarity of instruction and guidance. This implies that learner autonomy and autonomous learning need preliminary adequate ground work. One aspect of this ground work is exploring how students learn and redefine learner autonomy for them in the light of their perceptions and needs. This has to be done in order to prepare students for the acquisition of such learning strategy and learning skills.

Learners' responses to statement 8 "I prefer to be told exactly what I have to do" (see Table 2.9) show that 53 % (23.5 %: 'Totally agree' and 29.5 %: 'Agree') of the learners rely on clear instructions from their teachers (95 % according to teachers). This stresses the great need for guidance, which is wrongly perceived by some practitioners as an illegitimate need, reflecting a lack of autonomy and an inclination towards teacher-centeredness. Discussing this with respondents during the interviews, these claims were strongly criticised. This can indicate a certain degree of uncertainty due to lack of clarity, say misconception and misinterpretation of what guidance means. The existence of guidance aspect and the degree it reaches

**Table 2.9** Students' learning styles and habits (Clear instruction)

| Clear instruction |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                   |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid             | Totally agree    | 63        | 23.5    | 23.5          | 23.5               |
|                   | Agree            | 79        | 29.5    | 29.5          | 53.0               |
|                   | Undecided        | 42        | 15.7    | 15.7          | 68.7               |
|                   | Disagree         | 24        | 9.0     | 9.0           | 77.6               |
|                   | Totally disagree | 60        | 22.4    | 22.4          | 100.0              |
|                   | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.10** Students' learning styles and habits (Preferring assignments)

| Prefer assignments |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid              | Totally agree | 36        | 60.0    | 60.0          | 60.0               |
|                    | Agree         | 12        | 20.0    | 20.0          | 80.0               |
|                    | Undecided     | 6         | 10.0    | 10.0          | 90.0               |
|                    | Disagree      | 6         | 10.0    | 10.0          | 100.0              |
|                    | Total         | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

are essential parameters in the redefining process of learner autonomy in the Omani context. Learner autonomy is not, and should not be understood as a rejection of all types of guidance. The ability of the learner to properly perceive guidance is at the heart of developing autonomy. Understood in its facilitating and orienting role, guidance is helpful. But if viewed as teacher's control, it is counterproductive.

Responding to statement 5 as to whether they prefer to be given clearly instructed assignments or enjoy the freedom of choice, 80 % of the respondents do not want to choose (see Table 2.10). They rather want assignments with clear instructions from the teacher.

This tendency is further supported by both teachers and students in the interviews. In fact, a teacher respondent expresses concern about "students' fear of choice...they often feel undecided and sometimes they waste the time given for the assignment by jumping from one choice to the other...many times students come and request their teacher's approval to change the topic of the assignment". In the same vein, a student respondent makes clear reference to the learning styles, and indirectly to teaching methods when he says "we are used to be [sic] dictated [to] and so we are not used to making [sic] choices" (see Appendix B).

Apart from this aspect of learning habits and tradition, can this fear of choice be understood as a rejection of responsibility, and thus resistance to autonomy? The answer is that it is only indicates a lack of readiness to change given that students are not trained to do that. This is another parameter that is important in the process of redefining learner autonomy.

An investigative study of a large number of assessments, as well as an exploration of assessment strategies and methods in pre-tertiary education, shows that the way students are assessed does not give room for choice and is far from getting students to develop autonomy. Self-learning portfolios, being a highly recommended assessment method that trends with learner-centeredness and the overall move towards learning rather than teaching, are barely present (portfolios are mentioned in only 4 out of 20 courses examined). They do not exist in almost the majority of the assessments investigated. When asked about this during the interviews, students, as well as teachers, show that they do not know about such assessment tools (8 students/2 teachers). This claim finds its support in responses to statement 6 as to whether students prefer to think and make library, online and field searches on topics they are given. Only 16.7 % agree and confirm they search. The

**Table 2.11** Students' learning styles and habits (Searching)

| Searching |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|           |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid     | Agree            | 10        | 16.7    | 16.7          | 16.7               |
|           | Undecided        | 8         | 13.3    | 13.3          | 30.0               |
|           | Disagree         | 35        | 58.3    | 58.3          | 88.3               |
|           | Totally disagree | 7         | 11.7    | 11.7          | 100.0              |
|           | Total            | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

majority of the respondents, 70 % (58.3 disagree and 11.7 % totally disagree) have no preference for searching (see Table 2.11).

The question remains: is this an issue of preference or lack of readiness? It is quite legitimate that students tend to fear choice if they are not familiar with it. It is not wise to change from imposed assignments to choice all of a sudden. There is a need to develop in learners the study and academic skills of searching, critical and analytical skills before putting them in a situation of choice. Choice, no doubt, involves and requires awareness, which is another parameter to be considered in redefining learner autonomy. In the same respect, as much as 96.6 % of the respondents (52.2 %: 'Totally agree' and 44.4 %: 'Agree') prefer to have clear guidance from the tutor (see Table 2.12).

The vital role that guidance appears to have in the mind of the students can be explained by the lack of freedom they have been used to. This lack of freedom developed in them an anxiety with regard to freedom of choice and working alone. This can be understood as a clear gap in preparing students to develop autonomy. Ground work emerges as a shortcoming that needs to be addressed. Guidance and support do not only relate to what teachers provide. They also relate to what learners can get from each other while they work in groups and this is at the heart of the notion of peer scaffolding the CLA advocates as part of the gradual approach to the development of learner autonomy. When asked whether they prefer assignments to include group work, 55 % of the respondents prefer to engage in group assignments (28.3 %: 'Totally agree' and 26.7 %: 'Agree'). The relatively large percentage of the respondents who disagreed (36.7 %) does not necessarily reflect a rejection of group and collaborative work or refutation of guidance from peers (see Table 2.13).

**Table 2.12** Students' learning styles and habits (Teacher guidance)

| Teacher guidance |               |           |         |               |                    |
|------------------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                  |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid            | Totally agree | 140       | 52.2    | 52.2          | 52.2               |
|                  | Agree         | 119       | 44.4    | 44.4          | 96.6               |
|                  | Undecided     | 5         | 1.9     | 1.9           | 98.5               |
|                  | Disagree      | 4         | 1.5     | 1.5           | 100.0              |
|                  | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.13** Students' learning styles and habits (GW assignments)

| GW assignments |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|----------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid          | Totally agree    | 17        | 28.3    | 28.3          | 28.3               |
|                | Agree            | 16        | 26.7    | 26.7          | 55.0               |
|                | Undecided        | 2         | 3.3     | 3.3           | 58.3               |
|                | Disagree         | 18        | 30.0    | 30.0          | 88.3               |
|                | Totally disagree | 4         | 6.7     | 6.7           | 95.0               |
|                | Not applicable   | 3         | 5.0     | 5.0           | 100.0              |
|                | Total            | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

Learners' disagreement might be interpreted as a rejection of assignment as an assessment tool and a preference for other assessment tools, especially as some irregularities and bad habits accompany assignments (reliance of low-achievers on high-achievers, cheating, and other academic misconduct instances). Responses to statement 14 asking students if they prefer to work in groups and read their peers' ideas rather than think and develop their own ideas (32.9 % 'Agree' and 47.4 % 'Disagree') show the confusion students feel. This explains the existence of some uncertainty (15.7 % answered 'Undecided' and 4.1 % 'Not applicable'). Should it be understood that students prefer to work autonomously? In fact, 47 % of the students claim they prefer to develop their own ideas (see Table 2.14). Can this be understood as a sign learner autonomy? The answer can be partly detected in students' response to whether they prefer to think and make searches on topics of interest. 30 % of the respondents search individually, while 13.3 % remain undecided (see Table 2.11). This can show that the degree of self-reliance is low due to confusion. It is necessary then to address this confusion as part of the ground work preparing students for autonomy, proper awareness raising and adequate explanation of what autonomy means. This also involves the creation of a cooperative and collaborative environment that enhances peer scaffolding in the comforting presence of the teacher carrying out a refined role of facilitator and guide.

Informal evidence (see Appendix B), deriving from side chats during the interviews, identifies lack of exposition to library and out-of-class work as a reason

**Table 2.14** Students' learning styles and habits (Read others' ideas)

| Read others |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid       | Totally agree    | 53        | 19.8    | 19.8          | 19.8               |
|             | Agree            | 35        | 13.1    | 13.1          | 32.8               |
|             | Undecided        | 42        | 15.7    | 15.7          | 48.5               |
|             | Disagree         | 49        | 18.3    | 18.3          | 66.8               |
|             | Totally disagree | 78        | 29.1    | 29.1          | 95.9               |
|             | Not applicable   | 11        | 4.1     | 4.1           | 100.0              |
|             | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.15** Students' learning styles and habits (Preferring own reading)

| Own reading |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|             |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid       | Totally agree    | 3         | 5.0     | 5.0           | 5.0                |
|             | Agree            | 9         | 15.0    | 15.0          | 20.0               |
|             | Undecided        | 7         | 11.7    | 11.7          | 31.7               |
|             | Disagree         | 33        | 55.0    | 55.0          | 86.7               |
|             | Totally disagree | 8         | 13.3    | 13.3          | 100.0              |
|             | Total            | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

behind students' refraining from searching individually. One student claims that "[sic] none of my teachers took us to the library or asked us to do some work there...and even when they do it, they only send us without guiding...after all we need to know what to do". This implies that, according to students, their deficient performance in working in LRCs does not necessarily mean that they do not want to do it. It rather means that they are not trained by the teachers to do it.

Training emerges as another parameter that constitutes a pillar in the redefining effort related to learner autonomy. In the same vein, 20 % of the respondents (teachers) claim that their students prefer to develop their own reading lists. This supports the positive impact that providing students with clear instruction and guidance by the teacher (see Table 2.15) plays in developing autonomous learning skills. During the interviews teachers admit that their students want the courses and the assignments to include a list of readings they can refer to. When asked if their students learn more when they read, 81.6 % of the respondents agreed (see Table 2.16). Our research proves that Omani students tend to reject dictated learning and strict timetables.

Learning what is interesting for them at their own pace and in a 'non-threatening' and informal environment seems to be what they prefer. This proves the need for teachers and HEIs to work on creating more and more supportive learning environments and learning opportunities that involve students in the design, implementation and control of their learning. This is a crucial stage in the gradual development of learner autonomy.

This shows that Omani students enjoy readiness and willingness to develop autonomy but their potential for autonomy is still crude and has to be properly

**Table 2.16** Students' learning styles and habits (Learning by reading)

| Learning by reading |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|---------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                     |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid               | Totally agree    | 11        | 18.3    | 18.3          | 18.3               |
|                     | Agree            | 38        | 63.3    | 63.3          | 81.7               |
|                     | Undecided        | 7         | 11.7    | 11.7          | 93.3               |
|                     | Totally disagree | 4         | 6.7     | 6.7           | 100.0              |
|                     | Total            | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.17** Students' learning styles and habits (Imagination)

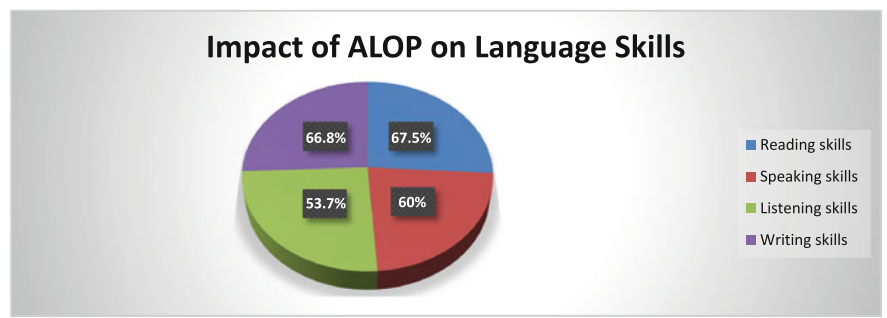
| Imagination |                | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-------------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid       | Totally agree  | 4         | 6.7     | 6.7           | 6.7                |
|             | Agree          | 16        | 26.7    | 26.7          | 33.3               |
|             | Undecided      | 2         | 3.3     | 3.3           | 36.7               |
|             | Disagree       | 35        | 58.3    | 58.3          | 95.0               |
|             | Not applicable | 3         | 5.0     | 5.0           | 100.0              |
|             | Total          | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

tuned. In the same vein, when asked in statement 20 whether their students prefer to do activities that engage imagination, 33.4 % (6.7 %: 'Totally agree' and 26.7 %: 'Agree') of the respondents (teachers) claim their students engage in activities that involve the use of imagination in learning (see Table 2.17). This can be considered as a sign of autonomy. In the same direction of imagination, 98.4 % of the teacher respondents (66.7 %: 'Totally agree' and 31.7 %: 'Agree') think that their students tend to consider autonomous learning activities as opportunities for relaxation and break from formal learning (Table 2.18).

A surface reading of this response may make it understood as a waste of time and shows that no learning can be perceived and achieved in this way. However, when asked about this during the interviews, responses show that students take autonomous learning activities and Self-learning Venues (SLVs), Learning Resources Centre (LRC) in our research, as a different form of learning. For example, one student describes them as "a variety which is good to help us avoid feeling bored because we have nothing to do in class [sic]". A teacher respondent praised the diversification aspect that autonomous learning brings into the teaching-learning scene and stresses the need for training as a fundamental stage in the process of learner autonomy development among learners. SLVs emerge as the learning environment-to-be where training, teacher support and peer scaffolding take place. In fact, an SLV can be said to be effective when it helps students develop learner autonomy and autonomous learning skills. Statistics in Chart 2.2 show that 67.5 % of the respondents think that working at the self-learning venue helped them improve their reading skills (35.8 %: 'Totally agree' and 31.7 %: 'Agree'). 66.8 % of the respondents claim that working in the LRC improved their writing and listening proficiency while 60 % claim that the use of LRC improved

**Table 2.18** Students' learning styles and habits (Opportunity for break)

| Opportunity for breaks |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid                  | Totally agree | 40        | 66.7    | 66.7          | 66.7               |
|                        | Agree         | 19        | 31.7    | 31.7          | 98.3               |
|                        | Disagree      | 1         | 1.7     | 1.7           | 100.0              |
|                        | Total         | 60        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |



**Chart 2.2** Impact of ALOP on language skills

their speaking skills through the interaction opportunities they found while working with their peers in the LRC (see Appendix D for more detailed statistics). There is a fair degree of awareness among Omani students of the merits of SLVs in the improvement of their study skills. Building and capitalising on students’ positive perception of SLVs is vital in the quest of developing learning autonomy. It equally stresses the importance of collaboration, peer-scaffolding, teacher guidance and self-regulation that the gradual development of learner autonomy in collaboration advocates. Learners perceive SLVs to be effective and this probably has a positive influence on students’ motivation and pleasure in learning, and identifying with learning, learning materials, the learning environment. The use of LRC is perceived to have a positive impact on students’ learning habits and language skills. In fact, 54.8 % (‘Totally agree’: 23.1 % and ‘Agree’: 31.7 %) claim that working at the SLVs enabled them to learn how to better use their time (see Table 2.19).

What is more, students believe their time management skills improved and, as a result, they feel they became more responsible. This perception of the SLVs can be exploited as an impetus to the development of responsibility and autonomy in learners. There is need to enhance learners’ responsibility. In fact, 59.7 % of the respondents think they became more responsible thanks to their use of the LRC, 19 % ‘Totally agree’ and 40.7 % ‘Agree’ (see Table 2.20).

A better capacity to work autonomously is believed to be the result of the combination of the three aspects: language learning skills, time management and

**Table 2.19** Students’ evaluation of ALOP (Better use of time)

| Better use of time |               |           |         |               |                    |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                    |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid              | No answer     | 55        | 20.5    | 20.5          | 20.5               |
|                    | Totally agree | 62        | 23.1    | 23.1          | 43.7               |
|                    | Agree         | 85        | 31.7    | 31.7          | 75.4               |
|                    | Undecided     | 48        | 17.9    | 17.9          | 93.3               |
|                    | Disagree      | 18        | 6.7     | 6.7           | 100.0              |
|                    | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.20** Students' evaluation of ALOP (Becoming more responsible)

| More responsible |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                  |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid            | No answer        | 55        | 20.5    | 20.5          | 20.5               |
|                  | Totally agree    | 51        | 19.0    | 19.0          | 39.6               |
|                  | Agree            | 109       | 40.7    | 40.7          | 80.2               |
|                  | Undecided        | 18        | 6.7     | 6.7           | 86.9               |
|                  | Disagree         | 8         | 3.0     | 3.0           | 89.9               |
|                  | Totally disagree | 27        | 10.1    | 10.1          | 100.0              |
|                  | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

responsibility for one's own learning. 49.6 % of the students think that working in the SLVs improved their skills with 27.6 % who answered 'Totally agree' and 22 % who answered 'Agree' (see Table 2.21), which can be interpreted as a sound belief in the merits of SLVs and the great help they can provide in enhancing students' autonomous learning. Confusion arises when students are not clear about what they are supposed to do. There is then need to make sure students are clear about what they should do as this increases their degree of identification with their learning. On the one hand, these statistics show that students have a good perception of the impact of SLVs. On the other hand, confusion is an obstacle to the development of learner autonomy that prevails. Addressing it is an integral part of the redefining process in the Omani context. Around 20 % of the students did not answer the question whether their autonomous learning skills improved or not thanks to the SLVs as 49.6 % (see statistics in Table 2.21: 27.6 % 'Totally agree' and 22 % 'Agree') believed it to be 'Helpful to work autonomously' while a relatively high percentage of 27.2 % answered 'undecided'.

Yet, it is evident that students' perceptions of SLVs and autonomous learning are positive and promising. When asked to show whether the importance of autonomous learning is high to the extent that they would suggest it should be incorporated in a formal course ('Should be compulsory in all courses'), 47 % of the students 'Totally agree' and 29.9 % 'Agree' totalling at 76.9 %, which is a distinctively high percentage (see Table 2.22). The exploration of the rationale behind the use of SLVs is vital in the attempt to develop a sound understanding of Omani

**Table 2.21** Students' evaluation of ALOP (Helpful to work autonomously)

| Helpful to work autonomously |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|------------------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                              |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid                        | No answer        | 55        | 20.5    | 20.5          | 20.5               |
|                              | Totally agree    | 74        | 27.6    | 27.6          | 48.1               |
|                              | Agree            | 59        | 22.0    | 22.0          | 70.1               |
|                              | Undecided        | 73        | 27.2    | 27.2          | 97.4               |
|                              | Totally disagree | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 100.0              |
|                              | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.22** Students' evaluation of ALOP (Should be compulsory in all courses)

| Should be compulsory in all courses |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|                                     |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid                               | No answer        | 8         | 3.0     | 3.0           | 3.0                |
|                                     | Totally agree    | 126       | 47.0    | 47.0          | 50.0               |
|                                     | Agree            | 80        | 29.9    | 29.9          | 79.9               |
|                                     | Undecided        | 35        | 13.1    | 13.1          | 92.9               |
|                                     | Disagree         | 9         | 3.4     | 3.4           | 96.3               |
|                                     | Totally disagree | 2         | .7      | .7            | 97.0               |
|                                     | Not applicable   | 8         | 3.0     | 3.0           | 100.0              |
|                                     | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

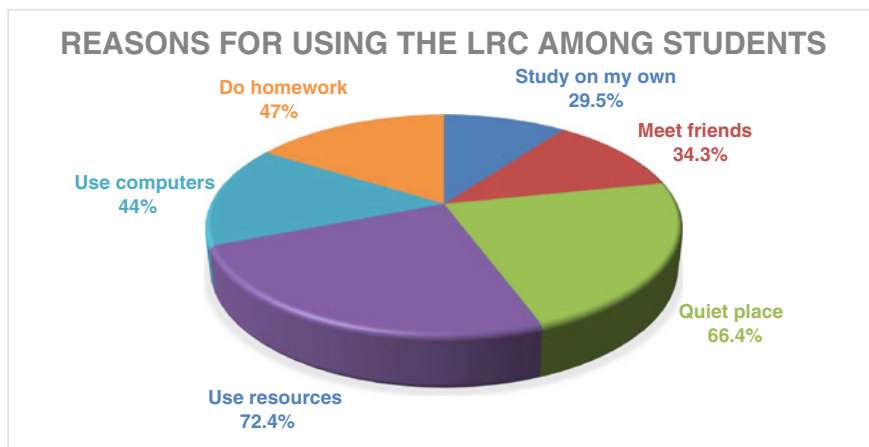
students' perception of autonomous learning opportunities. In view of Omani students' commitment to formal learning and inclination to perceive teachers' presence in the T&L scene as vital, it appears that compulsion is the main motive behind using SLVs. Compulsion means here that teachers should incorporate learning opportunities in SLVs in formal learning in order to ensure that learners engage in self-learning. However, our research proves that compulsion does not appear to be the most important reason that makes students go to the SLV to carry out self-learning tasks. 48.5 % of the respondents (see Table 2.23) claim that they go to the SLV to do autonomous learning tasks only when it is compulsory and required by the teacher.

The SLV is not then the place students prefer to go to when they need to study on their own. 29.5 % of the respondents use the self-learning venue because they 'want to study by themselves' (Chart 2.3). A percentage of 67.2 % of the respondents answered 'No', indicating that they use the self-learning venue for other reasons (see Appendix E). However, it is worth mentioning that data emerging from post-interviews indicate that the term 'learning' is used in the sense of homework tasks or acts of memorisation that require being alone. One of the reasons is 'meeting friends' with 34.3 % of the respondents who answered 'Yes' (see Chart 2.3 and Appendix E).

It remains subject to investigation whether students meet friends in the SLV to study together or as an opportunity to take a break. Observations in different timings of the day conducted in the study areas at the LRC as well as feedback from LRC staff members show that collaborative learning activities are usually carried

**Table 2.23** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Be required)

| Be required |       |           |         |               |                    |
|-------------|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|             |       | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid       | Yes   | 130       | 48.5    | 48.5          | 48.5               |
|             | No    | 127       | 47.4    | 47.4          | 95.9               |
|             | 7     | 11        | 4.1     | 4.1           | 100.0              |
|             | Total | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |



**Chart 2.3** Reasons for using the LRC among students

out during these meetings. This further stresses the importance of creating a non-threatening learning environment where learners work individually, compete with peers, collaborate and work in groups. Another reason worth investigating is the quietness of the atmosphere in the SLV. 66.4 % of the respondents claim they use the SLV because they ‘want a quiet place’ (see Chart 2.3 and Appendix E). This is telling about the learning environment that the SLV provides to students.

Moving from the environment to the resources available at the SLV and whether or not they constitute a reason why students use the venue, 72.4 % of the respondents (see Chart 2.3 and Appendix E) agree and claim that they go there to use resources. Provisions in LRCs for adequate, relevant and sufficient resources and support, are vital for the enhancement of learners’ use of peer scaffolding opportunities. This reiterates the role of HEIs and teachers in building capacity at LRCs by availing trained staff members and resources that make students’ experience in LRCs positive. Apart from these resources, 15 % of the respondents (see Chart 2.3 and Appendix E) go there to use IT facilities, such as computers and IT devices and software as their preferred resources in the SLV. 47 % of the respondents use the SLV as a place where they can do their homework (see Chart 2.3 and Appendix E). One student claims during an interview that in the LRC students find IT facilities and peers to resort to help and support when they need it. They can also use books, dictionaries and other materials when they have an assignment to do.

The interpretation of the reasons why students in the Omani context use SLVs shows that HEIs and teachers need to work on building a learning environment that is non-threatening, resourceful and attractive for students who can resort to it when they need to work alone in peace, with peers, use resources and seek support from peers and teachers also. LRC resourcefulness is vital and it is important to have input from teachers and from students. Students want to see all types of resources

**Table 2.24** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 1)

| Variable 1                | Variable 2                       | Pearson correlation coefficient |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Fair LRC frequency of use | Readiness to do more             | -.181                           |
| Fair LRC frequency of use | LRC helps learning               | .295                            |
| Fair LRC frequency of use | Interesting                      | .170                            |
| Fair LRC frequency of use | Lovely and enjoyable environment | -.017                           |
| Fair LRC frequency of use | Useful LRC                       | .301                            |
| Useful LRC                | Lovely and enjoyable environment | .318                            |
| Useful LRC                | Interesting                      | .518                            |
| Useful LRC                | LRC helps learning               | .724                            |

available for them and they express their readiness to suggest and provide materials and resources. Resources cover a wide and interesting range that includes movies, internet resources, magazines, dictionaries, ELT books, documentaries, videos... etc. Previous students' projects and assignments as well as previous exam packages are also perceived as useful resources often sought by students going to the LRC. Students' involvement in resource provisions indicate their inclination towards engagement and responsibility in their own learning as they have the initiative that HEIs and teachers need to monitor, support and build on.

It is interesting to relate students' use of such materials to the frequency of use in order to assess the degree of correlation that may exist between the type of resources and their frequency of use. The positive correlation between the variable LRC materials and resources and the variable frequency of use indicates that the frequency is connected with the degree of satisfaction with the resources (Tables 2.24 and 2.25). Research statistics (Table 2.24) reveal a positive correlation between the LRC Frequency of Use and the degrees of Helpfulness it provides at a Pearson coefficient of .295. A similarly positive correlation of .301 exists between LRC Frequency of Use and its Helpfulness. The Usefulness of the LRC staff members strongly correlates with the degree of Interest LRC materials and learning opportunities provide as well as with the degree of LRC Helpfulness at Pearson correlations of .518 and .724, respectively. Equally strong are the correlations (Table 2.25) between the variable Supportiveness and Helpfulness of the LRC and the variable LRC Training Sufficiency at .572 and between the variables LRC Usefulness and LRC Training Sufficiency at .793. But it could also mean that the frequency of use influences their perception of the usefulness of the LRCs. In other words, if learners are required to use the SLVs, they might start to value them more. This might find its support in the significant correlation between the variable 'Should be compulsory in all courses' and the variables 'LRC frequency' and 'Fair LRC frequency' at .280 and .196 respectively (see Table 2.26).

It appears valid that the element of compulsion is important in the Omani context as it enhances the use of the LRC and influences students' perceptions of the

**Table 2.25** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 2)

| Variable 1                          | Variable 2                          | Pearson correlation coefficient |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Supportive and helpful LRC helpdesk | Opportunity for exchange            | .607                            |
| LRC Use should be compulsory        | Opportunity for exchange            | -.064                           |
| LRC Use should be compulsory        | Reliable and ease of success        | .229                            |
| LRC Use should be compulsory        | Having sufficient training          | .141                            |
| LRC Use should be compulsory        | Supportive and helpful LRC Helpdesk | .245                            |
| Useful LRC                          | Having sufficient training          | .793                            |
| Supportive and helpful LRC helpdesk | Having sufficient training          | .572                            |

**Table 2.26** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 3)

| Correlations                        |                     | LRC frequency | Fair LRC frequency | Should be compulsory in all courses |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| LRC frequency                       | Pearson correlation | 1.000         | .483**             | .280**                              |
|                                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     | –             | .000               | .000                                |
|                                     | N                   | 268           | 268                | 268                                 |
| Fair LRC frequency                  | Pearson correlation | .483**        | 1.000              | .196**                              |
|                                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000          | –                  | .001                                |
|                                     | N                   | 268           | 268                | 268                                 |
| Should be compulsory in all courses | Pearson correlation | .280**        | .196**             | 1.000                               |
|                                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000          | .001               | –                                   |
|                                     | N                   | 268           | 268                | 268                                 |

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

usefulness of the learning opportunities available at the SLV. Compulsion is perceived by Omani students, and teachers occasionally, as vital in guiding students to work autonomously. It is important to clarify that compulsion refers to the incorporation of self-learning activities in formal learning, not in the sense of dictating learning. The value of any learning opportunity for students is determined by whether it has a formal component. The type of the learning environment that HEIs create in LRCs or any form of SLV plays an important role in enhancing students' use of self-learning opportunities.

**Table 2.27** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 4)

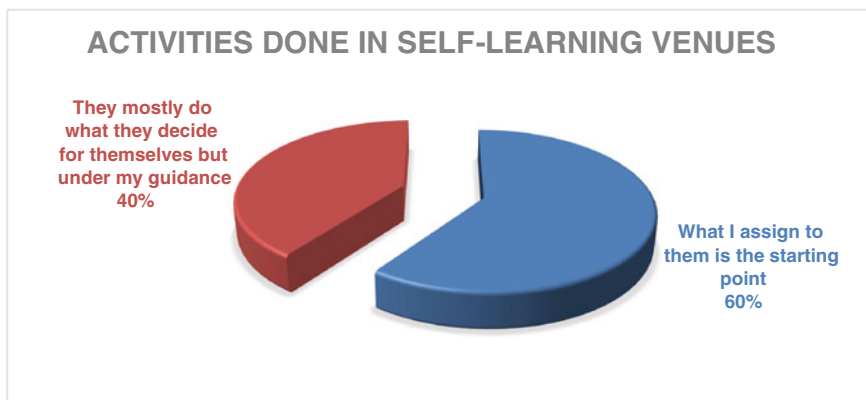
| Correlations                    |                     | LRC frequency | Fair LRC frequency | Materials you refer students to | Other resources? |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| LRC frequency                   | Pearson correlation | 1.000         | .295*              | -.562**                         | -.207            |
|                                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | –             | .022               | .000                            | .113             |
|                                 | N                   | 60            | 60                 | 60                              | 60               |
| Fair LRC frequency              | Pearson correlation | .295*         | 1.000              | -.241                           | -.740**          |
|                                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .022          | –                  | .064                            | .000             |
|                                 | N                   | 60            | 60                 | 60                              | 60               |
| Materials you refer students to | Pearson correlation | -.562**       | -.241              | 1.000                           | .352**           |
|                                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000          | .064               | –                               | .006             |
|                                 | N                   | 60            | 60                 | 60                              | 60               |
| Other resources?                | Pearson correlation | -.207         | -.740**            | .352**                          | 1.000            |
|                                 | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .113          | .000               | .006                            | –                |
|                                 | N                   | 60            | 60                 | 60                              | 60               |

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

With a Pearson negative correlation coefficient of  $-.562$  (see Table 2.27) between the frequency of LRC use and the materials teachers assign to their students, it is clear that Omani students' limited use of the LRC is due to their degree of dissatisfaction with the LRC environment and structure.

In the same vein, the correlation test between the 'Fair LRC frequency' and the use of 'Other resources' by the students is significantly negative at  $-0.740$  (see Table 2.27), indicating that the resources available at the LRC are relatively sufficient and students did not feel the need to use other resources. It appears that it is the LRC environment that plays an important role in the frequency with which it is used. Answering the interview question about whether their students mostly did things they told them to do or things they decided to do when working in the SLV, 60 % of the teachers claim their students did what is assigned to them. However, they add that teachers' assignments are a starting point for the activities that students choose and do by themselves (see Chart 2.4). Most teachers report that the assignments they give to students to do in the LRC usually develop in them the confidence they lack and stimulate their appetite to do things on their own. This is in keeping with the 40 % of the teachers who claim students mostly did what they decided for themselves. But they also insist on the fact that this is done under the guidance of the teacher, which echoes the principal aspect of students' responsible reliance on the teacher for guidance and support that characterises learning among Omani students. Teachers are perceived as facilitators and reliance on their guiding



**Chart 2.4** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Activities done in SLV)

and supportive role does not mean resistance to or rejection of autonomy. The percentage of students who carried out learning tasks of their own choice in the SLV is higher than that of students who did activities decided by their teachers. Compulsion is probably not the best way to make people use the SLV. It is only seen as an enhancement tool required given the dominating cultural impact, having students who require the presence of the teacher as a guide and confidence generator. Students in the MENA region tend to give value and commitment to any kind of learning opportunity only if it is linked with formal learning and with grades. This mirrors the issue of interest and the sense of identification students need to feel with their learning, as a parameter of the development of learner autonomy. Any learning opportunity learners are provided with needs to mean something tangible to them and they need to feel that they can identify with it and see their needs identified by the teachers and the learning opportunity provider. A correlation between students' use of the resources and their perception of its usefulness for learning to learn is expected. Before looking into the correlations, it is useful to explore the features of the LRC as perceived by the students (Appendix A, Section 4). Ease of use is perceived as an important feature to characterise the SLV. In fact, as Table 2.28 shows, 75 % of the respondents (28 % 'Totally agree' and 47 % 'Agree') perceive the venue as 'User-friendly' (Feature 2). Under the umbrella of 'User-friendly', issues like organisation and structure of the venue, ease and convenience of access, support of the venue staff, and other issues emerge as vital to the success of the learning experience there.

Statistics related to Feature 5 (Accessible at convenience) show that 83.6 % of the respondents consider accessibility at convenience as important with 22.8 % who 'Totally agree' and 60.8 % who 'Agree' (see Table 2.29).

Lack of proper orientation, training and guidance is one of the main reasons why students refrain from using the LRC. A Self-learning Venue (SLV) is believed to 'help students develop self-confidence' (Feature 3) and thus be able to work autonomously through guiding them and training them to develop the skills

**Table 2.28** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 2)

| Feature 2 |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid     | No answer     | 17        | 6.3     | 6.3           | 6.3                |
|           | Totally agree | 75        | 28.0    | 28.0          | 34.3               |
|           | Agree         | 126       | 47.0    | 47.0          | 81.3               |
|           | Undecided     | 26        | 9.7     | 9.7           | 91.0               |
|           | Disagree      | 24        | 9.0     | 9.0           | 100.0              |
|           | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.29** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 5)

| Feature 5 |               | Frequency | Percent | valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid     | No answer     | 28        | 10.4    | 10.4          | 10.4               |
|           | Totally agree | 61        | 22.8    | 22.8          | 33.2               |
|           | Agree         | 163       | 60.8    | 60.8          | 94.0               |
|           | Undecided     | 11        | 4.1     | 4.1           | 98.1               |
|           | Disagree      | 5         | 1.9     | 1.9           | 100.0              |
|           | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.30** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 3)

| Feature 3 |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid     | No answer        | 26        | 9.7     | 9.7           | 9.7                |
|           | Totally agree    | 65        | 24.3    | 24.3          | 34.0               |
|           | Agree            | 99        | 36.9    | 36.9          | 70.9               |
|           | Undecided        | 62        | 23.1    | 23.1          | 94.0               |
|           | Disagree         | 1         | .4      | .4            | 94.4               |
|           | Totally disagree | 15        | 5.6     | 5.6           | 100.0              |
|           | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

required for the development of self-learning competencies. In the same vein, in response to Feature 3, a total of 61.2 % of the respondents (24.3 % ‘Totally agree’ and 36.9 % ‘Agree’) claim that their experience at the SLV developed in them some degree of self-confidence (see Table 2.30). Some degree of satisfaction is expressed, appraising the learning opportunities availed to students in SLVs as useful in developing in them the self-confidence they lack in the gradual movement towards developing autonomous learning.

Grading the resources and materials available at the LRC is believed to be an important factor that stipulates its use. In fact, in response to feature 8 (graded materials), and as shown in Table 2.31, 71.6 % of the students (15.7 % ‘Totally agree’ and 54.9 % ‘Agree’) agree that the grading of the learning materials is

**Table 2.31** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 8)

| Feature 8 |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|           |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid     | No answer        | 20        | 7.5     | 7.5           | 7.5                |
|           | Totally agree    | 42        | 15.7    | 15.7          | 23.1               |
|           | Agree            | 147       | 54.9    | 54.9          | 78.0               |
|           | Undecided        | 48        | 17.9    | 17.9          | 95.9               |
|           | Disagree         | 10        | 3.7     | 3.7           | 99.6               |
|           | Totally disagree | 1         | .4      | .4            | 100.0              |
|           | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

important and helpful. The issue of self-confidence needs to be addressed to develop learner autonomy. The combination of accessibility, user-friendliness and grading of the resources is believed to reinforce students' readiness to become autonomous (Feature 6).

This belief finds evident support in students' expressed readiness and willingness to develop autonomy. 76.2 % of the respondents (see Table 2.32) showed readiness and willingness to become autonomous learners (36.6 % who 'Totally agree' and 39.6 % who 'Agree'). Equally important in any SLV is the feature of providing an opportunity for students to use English, interacting with peers, communicating with teachers for enquiries, making requests in English to LRC staff members...etc. In response to feature 7 'Enabling the use of English for Communicative Purposes', a total percentage of 68.6 % of the respondents (24.6 % 'Totally agree' and 44 % 'Agree') claim the venue enables them to use English and exposes them to authentic English (see Table 2.33).

The self-learning venue that provides learners with autonomous learning opportunities is believed to be efficient in exploiting their readiness and willingness to acquire autonomous learning and reflection skills in an environment which is friendly and collaborative.

In fact, in response to feature 9 'Trains students to develop autonomous learning and reflection skills', as Table 2.34 indicates, a total percentage of 73.9 % of the

**Table 2.32** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 6)

| Feature 6 |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|-----------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|           |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid     | No answer        | 28        | 10.4    | 10.4          | 10.4               |
|           | Totally agree    | 98        | 36.6    | 36.6          | 47.0               |
|           | Agree            | 106       | 39.6    | 39.6          | 86.6               |
|           | Undecided        | 18        | 6.7     | 6.7           | 93.3               |
|           | Disagree         | 11        | 4.1     | 4.1           | 97.4               |
|           | Totally disagree | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 100.0              |
|           | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.33** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 7)

| Feature 7 |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid     | No answer     | 28        | 10.4    | 10.4          | 10.4               |
|           | Totally agree | 66        | 24.6    | 24.6          | 35.1               |
|           | Agree         | 118       | 44.0    | 44.0          | 79.1               |
|           | Undecided     | 36        | 13.4    | 13.4          | 92.5               |
|           | Disagree      | 20        | 7.5     | 7.5           | 100.0              |
|           | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.34** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 9)

| Feature 9 |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid     | No answer     | 21        | 7.8     | 7.8           | 7.8                |
|           | Totally agree | 90        | 33.6    | 33.6          | 41.4               |
|           | Agree         | 108       | 40.3    | 40.3          | 81.7               |
|           | Undecided     | 49        | 18.3    | 18.3          | 100.0              |
|           | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

respondents believe the SLV managed to provide such opportunities (33.6 % ‘Totally agree’ and 40.3 % ‘Agree’).

It is also thought that students’ perseverance and continuation of their training endeavours at the SLV would guarantee the success of the learning experience. This experience enhances students’ self-investment in learning. In fact, the better training students get, the more self-investment they show. In confirmation of this claim, statistics related to Feature 10 (Enhances self-investment in learning) show that 62.7 % (24.6 % ‘Totally agree’ and 38.1 % ‘Agree’) support this view in (see Table 2.35).

Similarly, and in the same vein, more investment in self-learning on the part of the students decreases their dependence level on the teacher. Students’ responses to feature 11 ‘Reduces the reliance of the students on the teacher’ show that 30.6 % of

**Table 2.35** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 10)

| Feature 10 |               | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|------------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid      | No answer     | 29        | 10.8    | 10.8          | 10.8               |
|            | Totally agree | 66        | 24.6    | 24.6          | 35.4               |
|            | Agree         | 102       | 38.1    | 38.1          | 73.5               |
|            | Undecided     | 64        | 23.9    | 23.9          | 97.4               |
|            | Disagree      | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 100.0              |
|            | Total         | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.36** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 11)

| Feature 11 |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|            |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid      | No answer        | 21        | 7.8     | 7.8           | 7.8                |
|            | Totally agree    | 82        | 30.6    | 30.6          | 38.4               |
|            | Agree            | 92        | 34.3    | 34.3          | 72.8               |
|            | Undecided        | 59        | 22.0    | 22.0          | 94.8               |
|            | Disagree         | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 97.4               |
|            | Totally disagree | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 100.0              |
|            | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

the respondents ‘Totally agree’ and 34.3 % ‘Agree’, which provides clear support to the above claim (see Table 2.36).

The successful achievement of the above features would enable the students to develop the ability to decide on their own learning outcomes. Statistics related to students’ responses to Feature 12 ‘Help students develop their own learning outcomes’ show that 64.5 % of the respondents are satisfied (34.3 % ‘Totally agree’ and 30.2 % ‘Agree’) with the SLV’s impact on their capacity to create their own learning opportunities and thus achieve some control over their own learning (see Table 2.37). This supports the view that students’ ability to develop the skills of deciding their own learning outcomes is the culmination of the efforts made by students in the SLV to become autonomous.

However, it is important to note that students’ development of autonomy does not mean and should by no means be interpreted as discarding the teachers and peers in class and outside class. Peer scaffolding and responsible reliance on teachers remain core components of learner autonomy in collaboration as perceived in the Omani context. Omani students value the sense of self-confidence, safety and protection they derive from their performance with peers within a group.

In the Omani context, learner autonomy and autonomous learning are closely interlinked with a guiding, orchestrating and supportive role of the teacher and a collaborative role of student peers. The need to redefine learner autonomy within this perspective appears to be vital. Students learn from and with each other under

**Table 2.37** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 12)

| Feature 12 |                  |           |         |               |                    |
|------------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
|            |                  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
| Valid      | No answer        | 21        | 7.8     | 7.8           | 7.8                |
|            | Totally agree    | 92        | 34.3    | 34.3          | 42.2               |
|            | Agree            | 81        | 30.2    | 30.2          | 72.4               |
|            | Undecided        | 29        | 10.8    | 10.8          | 83.2               |
|            | Disagree         | 38        | 14.2    | 14.2          | 97.4               |
|            | Totally disagree | 7         | 2.6     | 2.6           | 100.0              |
|            | Total            | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 2.38** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (LRC feature 13)

| Feature 13 |                | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|------------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid      | No answer      | 36        | 13.4    | 13.4          | 13.4               |
|            | Totally agree  | 51        | 19.0    | 19.0          | 32.5               |
|            | Agree          | 89        | 33.2    | 33.2          | 65.7               |
|            | Undecided      | 74        | 27.6    | 27.6          | 93.3               |
|            | Disagree       | 17        | 6.3     | 6.3           | 99.6               |
|            | Not applicable | 1         | .4      | .4            | 100.0              |
|            | Total          | 268       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

the guidance and the support of the teacher. It is almost only in this frame of protection that students feel comfortable to learn. Omani students are interdependent and prefer collaborative learning which respects individual traits and the desire for competition. They develop autonomy within collaboration and teachers' guidance. In response to feature 13 'Providing opportunities for inter-dependence and collaboration', 52.2 % of the respondents (19 % 'Totally agree' and 33.2 % 'Agree') support the above view (see Table 2.38). Interdependence is not negatively viewed in the Omani context and does not indicate any resistance to autonomy or rejection of learner autonomy development.

Even the relatively high percentage of 'undecided' students, 27.6 % (see Table 2.38), can be read as reluctance from students due to confusion and lack of clarity, guidance, training and support. They are undecided because they are not clear about what learner autonomy means and entails. If they are made clear about learner autonomy, it is believed that their opinion will change and they will appraise the role of SLVs in availing interdependent and collaborative learning opportunities to students. Undecidedness signals some kind of hesitation due to uncertainty, lack of direction and self-confidence. It is believed that undecidedness will disappear once direction is set, support is provided, and guidance is made.

Omani students exhibit a positive perception of the usefulness of the LRC and any form of SLVs, and by extension the merits of autonomous learning and learner self-investment in learning. A correlation between students' use of the resources and their perception of its usefulness for learning to learn is expected to be positive. The correlation test between the 'Fair LRC frequency' and the feature 'User-friendly' (Feature 2) is significantly positive at .327 (Pearson), indicating that the ease of use and the LRC environment and structure are vital in encouraging students to use the LRC more frequently. However, there is a negative correlation between the fair frequency of LRC use and the aspect of self-confidence students develop (Feature 3) at a coefficient of  $-.189$  (see Table 2.39). This indicates a kind of deficiency that needs to be addressed in order to ensure that SLVs help learners develop self-confidence, which would make their self-investment in learning better. It is not only by availing themselves for resources and venues for self-learning that students would use the LRC more and in a better manner. In fact, the correlation test yields a Pearson coefficient of  $-.036$  (see Table 2.39) between the fair frequency of

**Table 2.39** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 6)

| Correlations       |                     | Fair LRC frequency | Feature 2 | Feature 3 | Feature 5 |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Fair LRC frequency | Pearson correlation | 1.000              | .327**    | -.189**   | -.036     |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | –                  | .000      | .002      | .560      |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268       |
| Feature 2          | Pearson correlation | .327**             | 1.000     | -.032     | .207**    |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000               | –         | .598      | .001      |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268       |
| Feature 3          | Pearson correlation | -.189**            | -.032     | 1.000     | .384**    |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .002               | .598      | –         | .000      |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268       |
| Feature 5          | Pearson correlation | -.036              | .207**    | .384**    | 1.000     |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .560               | .001      | .000      | –         |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268       |

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

LRC and the feature of ‘Accessible at convenience’ (Feature 5). Students’ use of SLVs is subject to the degree of satisfaction with the LRC environment and structure. This implies the need for HEIs to work on the improvement of the learning context and provide students with autonomous learning opportunities in a favourable autonomy-enhancing environment. Such environment is what actually lacks in most HEIs in Oman and it is one of the parameters to be taken into account while redefining and promoting learner autonomy in the Omani context. Out-of-class learning environments lack support, training, and self-access learning support, all of which are perceived by Omani students as important and vital in the development of learner autonomy.

Although the use of the LRC does not necessarily ensure the increase in the level of students’ self-confidence, it certainly reinforces their readiness and willingness to become autonomous (Feature 6). Omani students show a low degree of self-confidence and it is necessary in the process of redefining learner autonomy in the Omani context. The correlation is significant between the fair frequency of LRC use and the feature of ‘Readiness’ with a Pearson coefficient of .168 (see Table 2.40). It is even higher and more significant at .219 with the feature of ‘training students to develop autonomous learning and reflection skills’ (Feature 9). In this respect, there is a lower correlation at .045 between the fair frequency of LRC use and the feature of ‘providing opportunities for inter-dependence and collaboration’ (Feature 13). This implies that in the long run, and gradually, students’ self-confidence as autonomous learners is likely to increase (see Table 2.41).

**Table 2.40** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 7)

| Correlations       |                     | Fair LRC frequency | Feature 6 | Feature 9 | Feature 13 |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Fair LRC frequency | Pearson correlation | 1.000              | .168**    | .219**    | .045       |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | –                  | .006      | .000      | .463       |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268        |
| Feature 6          | Pearson correlation | .168**             | 1.000     | .128*     | .408**     |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .006               | –         | .037      | .000       |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268        |
| Feature 9          | Pearson correlation | .219**             | .128*     | 1.000     | .400**     |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000               | .037      | –         | .000       |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268        |
| Feature 13         | Pearson correlation | .045               | .408**    | .400**    | 1.000      |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .463               | .000      | .000      | –          |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268       | 268       | 268        |

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 2.41** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 8)

| Correlations       |                     | Fair LRC frequency | Feature 11 | Feature 12 |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------|------------|
| Fair LRC frequency | Pearson correlation | 1.000              | –.191**    | –.061      |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | –                  | .002       | .316       |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268        | 268        |
| Feature 11         | Pearson correlation | –.191**            | 1.000      | .718**     |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .002               | –          | .000       |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268        | 268        |
| Feature 12         | Pearson correlation | –.061              | .718**     | 1.000      |
|                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .316               | .000       | –          |
|                    | N                   | 268                | 268        | 268        |

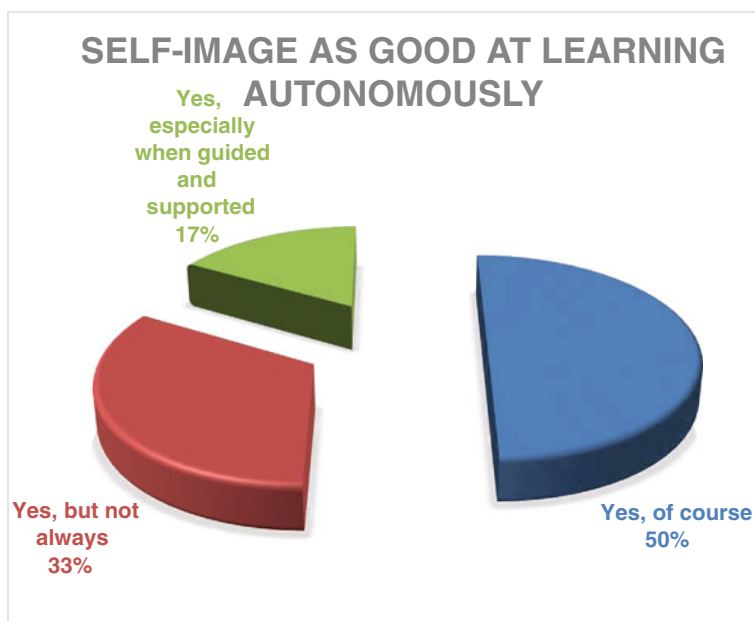
\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

This further proves the validity of the CLA interpretation of autonomy our research proposes for the Omani context and the need to follow the Individual-Competitive-Collaborative-Autonomous Learning (ICCAL) continuum of gradual development of autonomy advocated here.

Feedback from interviews with students (Appendix B) indicates a more optimistic image. When asked to evaluate their degree of confidence about studying

English after being trained to work autonomously, students responded positively. One student answered: “Yes. Confidence is one of the advantages of autonomous learning.” In keeping with this confidence, students stressed the importance of developing learner autonomy in their answer to the question: Do you think it is important for students to develop learner autonomy? One student linked it with knowledge, saying “Yes...in order to increase the level of knowledge.” When asked whether she developed better learning habits and performance through learning autonomously in her courses, one student said in a tone of dissatisfaction: “Yes I have...but in some courses only. We wish to have this practice in all courses.” Another student said: “[sic] we like it when the teacher gives us a task to do in groups in the LRC...this makes us feel we can do things”.

The above sample quotes indicate the readiness of the students to develop learner autonomy, and their developed positive image of themselves as able and eager to learn autonomously. They also show the deficient role of the HEI and the teachers in incorporating the dimension of autonomous learning, Autonomous Learning Orientation Programme (ALOP) and SLVs in formal learning. Students’ perception of themselves as good at learning autonomously show that 50 % of them consider themselves as good and 33 % think they are good but not always whereas 17 % link their image as good autonomous learners with proper guidance and support (see Chart 2.5).

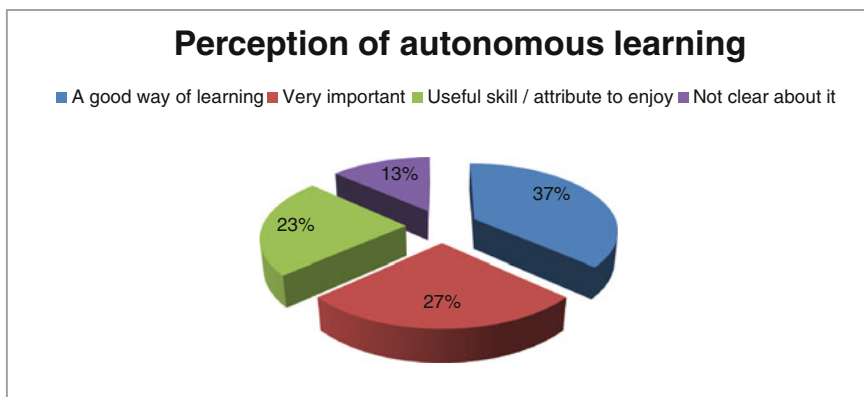


**Chart 2.5** The use of LRC among Omani students at tertiary level (Self-image as good at learning autonomously)

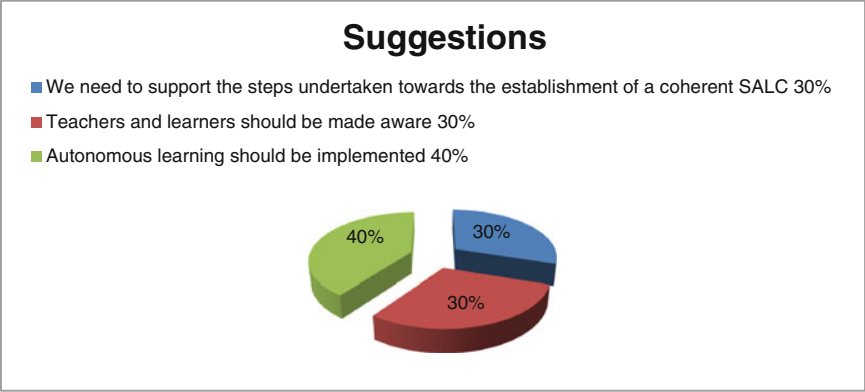
This implies that the environment and the structure of the SLV emerge as vital factors in the frequency with which they are used. The guidance and support students mentioned relate to the teacher and the LRC staff. However, there is a negative correlation between the fair frequency of LRC use and the feature of ‘Reducing the reliance on the teacher’ (Feature 11) at Pearson  $-.191$  (see Table 2.41). There is deficiency that needs to be addressed in terms of the kind of tasks required of the students at the LRC. Students’ use of SLVs is then subject to the approach and the activities teachers provide students with there. In the same negative trend, there is a negative correlation between the fair frequency of LRC use and the feature of ‘Help students develop their own learning outcomes’ (Feature 12) at Pearson  $-.061$  (see Table 2.41).

Overall data emerging from the interviews with the students showed a significant degree of satisfaction among students with self-learning and SLVs. Their perception is positive (see Chart 2.6) since 37 % find autonomous learning a good way of learning, 27 % find it very important, 23 % find it a useful skill and an attribute students should enjoy and finally only 13 % are still unclear about it (see Chart 2.6). This might imply that once students are made aware and are well-trained, they are likely to hold the same positive attitude. In fact, this claim finds its support in teachers’ suggestions at the end of the interviews. 30 % of the teachers interviewed hold the view that teachers and learners should be made aware of autonomous learning and autonomous learning centres. 30 % of the teachers felt the need to support the steps undertaken towards the establishment of a coherent self-access learning centre, a form of self-learning and autonomous learning venue (see Chart 2.7).

There are indeed significant Pearson correlations between the frequency of LRC use and its impact on students’ language learning skills and learning styles (see Table 2.42). Accordingly, students who use the resources more, value as higher the potential SLVs have in helping them to learn how to learn.



**Chart 2.6** Students’ perception of autonomous learning



**Chart 2.7** Suggestions

This could be because of their work in the SLV or because they rate the importance of learning to learn higher and therefore use the resources more as one way of reaching this goal. If this is correct, then raising students’ awareness of the importance of autonomous learning could lead to a higher use of the self-learning resources. This means that the experience students had with self-learning and the LRC plays an important role in helping them become autonomous. Tests made trying to identify any correlations between the dependent variable of ‘Fair LRC Frequency’ and a number of related variables yield significant levels of correlation (see Table 2.42). In fact, with a significant high correlation of .295 (Pearson) between ‘Fair LRC Frequency’ variable and the variable ‘Helps learning’, it is clear that the impact of working at the LRC is significantly positive. The more helpful they find working in the LRC, the higher is the frequency of LRC use. Another significant correlation is between ‘LRC Frequency’ and ‘Usefulness’ at .301 and at .170 (see Table 2.42) with the variable *Interesting*. These correlations indicate that

**Table 2.42** LRC use among Omani students at tertiary level (Correlation test 9)

| Variable 1                | Variable 2                       | Pearson correlation coefficient |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| LRC frequency of use      | Fair LRC frequency of use        | .483                            |
| LRC frequency of use      | Readiness to do more             | .341                            |
| LRC frequency of use      | LRC Helps learning               | -.098                           |
| LRC frequency of use      | Interesting                      | .127                            |
| LRC fair frequency of use | Lovely and enjoyable environment | .170                            |
| LRC fair frequency of use | Useful LRC                       | .301                            |
| Fair LRC Frequency of use | Readiness to do more             | -.181                           |
| Fair LRC frequency of use | LRC Helps learning               | .295                            |

the impact of the self-learning venues and autonomous learning opportunities availed there, resulting from a fair frequency of LRC use, is important but still remains subject to fair use. In other words, the more use, the more guidance, the better results. However, there are negative correlations between the dependent variable of 'Fair LRC Frequency' and the variables 'Ready to do more' at  $-.181$  and  $-.017$  with the variable of '*Lovely and enjoyable*' (see Table 2.42). This implies that the readiness of the students to do more autonomous learning activities and whether their experience at the LRC is lovely and enjoyable do not correlate with the frequency with which they use the LRC.

## 2.5 Summary

The exploration of the students' perceptions of the usefulness of Self-learning Venues (SLVs) shows that Omani students are well aware of the merits of self-learning and SLVs. They are positive about autonomous and self-learning resources for the sense of freedom and the learning experience they gained at the SLV. They praise the sense of ownership that they liked and would work further to reinforce. They perceive self-learning as an important mode of learning because it relates to practical issues in learning. In fact, they do not see that self-learning and work in class are mutually exclusive. Teachers in Omani HEIs claim that their students think these two modes of learning complement each other. In SLVs, students mostly do what they are instructed to do and consider that class work is believed to be the starting point for self-learning. Working in the SLV, according to them, is believed to improve students' study skills as well as the degree of responsibility they show toward learning. In relation to the SLV environment, students are satisfied with the aspects of planning, monitoring progress, and evaluating. They are satisfied with the resources but still need more, especially with regard to training them how to manage these resources. Choice is something Omani students like but fear, so they want it to be with the guidance of the teacher. They argue for the need to identify with their learning tasks, materials and learning environment. However, they think there is still some degree of confusion among students about learning autonomously in SLVs and that this confusion needs to be addressed. One way to do this is to incorporate autonomous learning in all courses.

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