



# Self-directed learning through the eyes of teacher educators

Nurfaradilla Mohamad Nasri

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

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## Abstract

In Malaysia, as in other countries, higher education is expected to focus on active learning rather than a passive learning approach. This requires higher education educators to adopt different roles and responsibilities. As a result, the teacher-centered approach which has always been the primary approach in universities has begun to be criticized. This debate has paved the way for the widespread growth of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. Embracing the idea of self-directed learning (SDL) often appears as a complex educational concept merely because it has been inadequately defined; nevertheless, SDL continues to fascinate educationalists. This study aimed to investigate: (i) how teacher educators view their role as adult educators in the context of SDL; and (ii) how teacher educators empower their students to take responsibility for their learning. To answer these research questions, 30 Malaysian teacher educators, who voluntarily offered to be involved in this study, were interviewed to obtain their views and pedagogical practices in SDL. This study adopted the Charmaz constructivist grounded theory to guide the data collection procedures and the approaches to analyzing the interview data. The findings from this study indicated that not all research participants have accepted their role as facilitators of learning as they were reluctant to abandon the authority position. Interestingly, even though the majority of the research participants remain firmly attached to their traditional roles as knowledge experts, they do not view themselves as the absolute authority as they adopt a mix of conventional and active pedagogical approaches. This study concluded that future research should investigate the reason behind Malaysia teacher educators' hesitation in abandoning the role of authority figures.

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## Introduction

Many studies have been carried out to enhance our understanding of SDL; however, most of these studies have been limited to investigating SDL from the learners' point of view (Abdullah, Koren, Muniapan, Parasuraman, & Rathakrishnan, 2008; Ahmad & Majid, 2014; Ibrahim, 2002) and less attention has been paid to investigate the teacher educators' perception of SDL. This current study thus set out to explore this important but previously under-

researched area. It is reasonable to suggest that by investigating teacher educators' perception of themselves as adult educators in the context of SDL, and how teacher educators empower their students to take responsibility for their learning, this current study offers new insights into the understanding of SDL, particularly from the educators' point of view.

## Literature Review

This literature review section is divided into three separate but closely linked parts. In the first part, it begins with a discussion of the Malaysian higher education framework, before a detailed account of the history of SDL

E-mail address: [nurfaradilla@ukm.edu.my](mailto:nurfaradilla@ukm.edu.my).

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is presented. Finally, a discussion about the roles of higher education educator in SDL environment is presented since higher education educators are the key resources for bringing about the changes in educational reform in universities. Given the complex nature of the literature in the area, each of these headings contains a discussion of key areas which, taken together, are essential for our understanding of how teacher educators' view SDL.

#### *Malaysian Higher Education Framework*

In general, the main purpose of education in Malaysia is to produce a holistic individual who can contribute to national prosperity and national unity; hence significant emphasis is given to developing the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of an individual. In this regard, Malaysian higher education institutions are held responsible for producing fully rounded individuals.

*This transformation plan aims squarely on holistic human capital development, to produce Malaysians who are intellectually active, creative and innovative, ethically and morally upright, adaptable and capable of critical thinking.*

(Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2007, p. 8)

Furthermore, in Malaysia, as in other countries, higher education institutions are expected to produce self-directed learners. In achieving this goal, the Malaysian universities are driven to enhance the quality of teaching by adopting a Western model of higher education to ensure success.

Despite being inspired by the Western educational model, Malaysian university working practices are greatly influenced and molded by the diverse culture of Malaysian society. Hence, a failure to acknowledge local context could lead to deterioration in the process of introducing SDL approaches because, within Malaysia's current context and culture, like many other Asian countries, power and authority are prime considerations (Juhana, 2012). The issues of power and authority are evident in educator–learners relationships, where educators are considered respected role models with responsibilities for transmitting knowledge to learners, while learners are seen as knowledge receivers required to listen attentively to the lecture. This type of relationship may hinder interactive and supportive interaction between all parties – an essential element for effective self-direction. This misalignment of the Malaysian government's aspirations to encourage and engender SDL, along with Malaysian educational belief systems, warrants our attention.

#### *Historical Development of SDL*

In building an understanding of SDL, influential studies conducted by five of the earliest researchers are presented: Cyril Houle; Allen Tough; Malcolm Knowles; Roger Hiemstra; and Lucy M. Guglielmino. One of the earliest pieces of research into SDL was conducted by Cyril Houle (Houle, 1961). Houle was very keen to understand how and why adults continue to learn. Therefore, in 1961, he conducted a qualitative research study among 22 adult learners from

widely diverse backgrounds and at various stages of their lives. Based on his in-depth interviews with his research participants, Houle (1961) reported that adult learners could be classified into three categories: (a) goal-oriented learners – those who have a particular purpose for the learning; (b) activity-oriented learners – those who pursue learning for the sake of the learning activity itself; and (c) learning-oriented learners – those who wish to acquire knowledge for its own sake. Houle's (1961) definition of the learning-oriented learner was used to characterize and define self-directed learners by subsequent researchers.

Allen Tough, a postgraduate student of Cyril Houle, prompted many studies on adult self-direction in learning with his doctoral thesis, which investigated the learning project performed by 66 adult learners who taught themselves (Tough, 1966). In addition to Allen Tough, Malcolm Knowles was another student of Houle who continues to inspire studies on SDL through his influential research projects. A point to note, however, is that although Houle (1961), Tough (1966, 1968, 1971, 1979, 1982) and Knowles (1970, 1973, 1975, 1980, 1989) strongly assert that SDL is an essential educational concept which may boost adult learning, they have considerably contrasting views on the context in which SDL occurs. For example, Houle's (1961) and Tough's (1966, 1968, 1971, 1979, 1982) ideas about SDL are closely related to the learning projects carried out by adult learners for various purposes other than to gain academic credit. On the other hand, Knowles (1970, 1973, 1975, 1980, 1989) associates SDL with a formal educational setting which serves as a fundamental component in his concept of adult education. Knowles (1975) convincingly claims SDL to be a natural tendency for adult learners who increasingly incline towards self-directedness as they develop through childhood to adulthood (Knowles, 1975). Therefore, in his view, facilitating SDL should be the primary goal of adult education. Taking this idea, the current study investigated the practice of SDL among Malaysian teacher educators, where attention was paid to the opportunities that they provided for their learners in developing SDL skills.

Beginning his work on SDL in the late 1970s, Roger Hiemstra has continued to research and publish on SDL until the present day. Hiemstra is well known for his co-development, with Ralph Brockett, of the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991), which has recently been further developed and is now known as the Person-Process-Context (PPC) model (Hiemstra & Brockett, 2012). Also in the late 1970s, attempting to identify the central features of SDL, Guglielmino (1978) conducted a three-round Delphi survey of experts on SDL, involving 14 participants. Based on his Delphi survey results, Guglielmino provided a description of the highly self-directed learner and published a well-known quantitative instrument, the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) (Guglielmino, 1978). While his SDLRS instrument was designed to assess readiness for SDL, it also contributes to the proliferation of SDL research (Long, 1998) and has been extensively used by many researchers as their research instrument. According to Brockett (1985), Guglielmino (1978) has made a significant contribution to the field of SDL with the introduction

of the SDLRS instrument, which has served as a useful diagnostic tool in determining the extent to which learners are self-directed.

Although extensive studies have been carried out to investigate the nature of SDL, nonetheless, the majority of studies do not contribute to a clearer understanding of the concept of SDL mainly because these researchers have not reached consensus on the fundamental constructs of SDL. This literature review section continues by taking this agenda further by discussing the roles of the higher education educator in the SDL environment.

#### *Role of Higher Education Educators: Promoting SDL*

Although the concept of SDL has captured the hearts and minds of many educators, higher education educators, in particular, face the challenge of how to design instructionally appropriate educational programs which promote learner self-direction, while maintaining a level of educator control. According to [Grow \(1991\)](#), to create effective instructional processes, learning activities and facilitating strategies should be devised according to the learners' level of self-direction. [Grow \(1991\)](#) proposes his Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) model in which he highlights the importance of matching learning and teaching activities with the learners' readiness for and ability in self-direction. [Grow's \(1991\)](#) SSDL model to a great extent has shaped my understanding of SDL and served as one of the main references for this study. Two underlying principles of [Grow's \(1991\)](#) model are: (a) instructional design should be intellectually challenging, but within the learner's zone of proximal development; and (b) the educator is responsible for matching the instructional design with the learner's stage of self-direction while preparing the learner to advance to higher levels of self-direction. [Table 1](#) illustrates [Grow's \(1991\)](#) SSDL model.

According to [Grow \(1991\)](#), the educator is responsible for leading learners from their preferred and comfortable learning styles toward greater self-direction styles. He further added that this situation is achievable when educators gradually initiate a challenging and supportive learning context without creating discouragement. Extending his idea of the educator as a facilitator of learning, [Grow](#) suggests three pedagogical strategies to

promote SDL: (a) having diverse teaching and learning resources; (b) maximizing peer learning; and (c) fostering constructive interaction.

In conclusion, it is obvious that SDL requires a transformation from the authoritative role of the educator into the educator as a facilitator of learning because, to promote an active learning approach, educators should acknowledge learners as equal learning partners who have the power to make decisions about their learning. The shift from teaching to facilitating means that learners, rather than educators, are the central figures in the learning and teaching process. Furthermore, this shift requires educators to abandon their more traditional authoritative roles by empowering learners to take responsibility for and control of their learning.

#### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate: (i) how teacher educators view their role as adult educators in the context of SDL; and (ii) how teacher educators empower their students to take responsibility for their learning. In order to gain an insight into important issues pertaining to the research participants' perceptions, understanding of, and practices in SDL, it was decided that a qualitative approach served best for this study. This Methodology section discusses in detail the data collection procedures and the approaches to analyzing the data.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

Although grounded theory informed both the data collection procedures and the approaches to analyzing the interview data, the author does not refer to the original conceptualization of grounded theory used widely by previous researchers, but to [Charmaz's](#) reconceptualization of constructivist grounded theory ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). According to [Charmaz \(2014\)](#), grounded theory strategies should provide flexibility to researchers in answering their research questions rather than imposing a list of strict methodological prescriptions to be followed. Moreover, [Charmaz \(2014\)](#), emphasizes that research findings are the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and research participants. Hence, it is clear that [Charmaz's](#) version of grounded theory ([2014](#)) holds that absolute reality does not exist, rather that reality is constructed through human interpretation of the social world. As the goal of this current study was to explore Malaysian teacher educators' conceptualizations of SDL, it was crucial for author to preserve the original comments of research participants and make them clear to the reader. This transparency helps to ensure that when reporting the outcomes of this current study, the research participants' conceptualizations of SDL are based on their perspectives rather than author's conception of SDL. Therefore, [Charmaz's](#) constructivist grounded theory is indeed the most appropriate qualitative research approach for this current study.

Adopting [Charmaz's](#) constructivist grounded theory position, it was decided that the semi-structured interview would serve as the best approach to gathering data for this current study because, through the format of the semi-

**Table 1**  
Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) model

	Student	Teacher	Examples
Stage 1	Dependent	Authority, coach	Coaching with immediate feedback. Drill. Informational lecture. Overcoming deficiencies and resistance.
Stage 2	Interested	Motivator, guide	Inspiring lecture plus guide discussion. Goal setting and learning strategies.
Stage 3	Involved	Facilitator	Discussion facilitated by teacher who participates as an equal. Seminar. Group projects.
Stage 4	Self-directed	Consultant, delegator	Internship. Dissertation. Individual work on self-directed study group.

Source: [Grow \(1991, p. 130\)](#)

structured interview, not only the research participants would have more space, opportunity, and flexibility to express their views but it also guided me in covering the important areas pertinent to this current study (Doody & Noonan, 2013). As this study explored the teacher educators' perception of their roles and practices in the context of SDL, five interview topics were designed: (i) demographic information of the research participants; (ii) teacher educators' perceptions of themselves as educators; (iii) teacher educators' conceptualizations of learning; (iv) teacher educators' conceptualizations and understandings of SDL; and (v) the opportunities that teacher educators provide for their students to foster their skills in SDL.

**Sampling techniques:** As was delineated earlier, this current study aimed to investigate Malaysian teacher educators' conceptualizations of SDL. Therefore, the selection of the research participants was informed by the main research questions. Snowball sampling was identified as the best method to be used in this current study as it may act both as a method of contacting research participants in a practical sense and as a method of sampling in a more formalized sense. Despite its potential for bias due to the selection of only individuals having a connection with initial research participants, nonetheless, it enables access to 'hard-to-reach' research participants as it takes advantage of the social networks of identified research participants and provides a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential contacts (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Most

importantly, snowball sampling is a cheap, simple, and cost-efficient sampling technique for gathering qualitative data. It is important to note that this study was a small-scale qualitative study and it did not attempt to make any generalizations. Therefore, 30 research participants who were teacher educators was considered more than enough to provide rich and insightful conceptualization of SDL held by Malaysian teacher educators.

**Research participants' profiles:** Using snowball sampling approaches, it is important to note that the 30 teacher educators (17 females and 13 males) who volunteered for this current study were PhD holders. Although the majority of the research participants were teacher educators in universities, their education and teaching experiences were sufficiently diverse to suggest that a range of opinions would be gathered during the interview, and this was indeed the case, as becomes clear in the *Findings* section. Table 2 outlines each research participant's pseudonym, gender, highest education qualification, and teaching experience.

**Process of organizing the interviews:** To gather contact information for the potential research participants, the websites of the Institute of Teacher Education and universities were explored. Next, the potential research participants were contacted via email to obtain their agreement to participate in this study. Then, an appointment was arranged to conduct a 'face-to-face' interview. Prior to the interview session, all research participants were reminded

**Table 2**  
Research participants' pseudonym, gender, highest educational qualification, and teaching experience

Name	Gender	Highest education qualification	Teaching experience			
			School level		University level	
			≤5 years	≥6 years	≤10 years	≥11 years
1. Dr Affandi	M	PhD	X		X	
2. Dr Azwani	F	PhD		X	X	
3. Dr Bakri	M	PhD	X		X	
4. Dr Durratun	F	PhD	—			X
5. Dr Farid	M	PhD	X		X	
6. Dr Faridah	F	PhD		X	X	
7. Dr Fauziah	F	PhD	X			X
8. Dr Fuad	M	PhD	—		X	
9. Dr Ganesh	M	PhD	X			X
10. Dr Gayah	F	PhD	—			X
11. Dr Haris	M	PhD	—		X	
12. Dr Hayati	F	PhD	—		X	
13. Dr Hidayah	F	PhD		X	X	
14. Dr Huda	F	PhD	X			X
15. Dr Husin	M	PhD	—		X	
16. Dr Isa	M	PhD		X	X	
17. Dr Itayra	F	PhD	—		X	
18. Dr Jamila	F	PhD	X		X	
19. Dr Jamal	M	PhD		X		X
20. Dr Juriah	F	PhD	X		X	
21. Dr Katijah	F	PhD	X			X
22. Dr Karim	M	PhD	X		X	
23. Dr Siti	F	PhD		X		X
24. Dr Suraya	F	PhD		X		X
25. Dr Salim	M	PhD	—		X	
26. Dr Salina	F	PhD	—			X
27. Dr Tini	F	PhD	X			X
28. Dr Tajul	M	PhD	X		X	
29. Dr Uyaina	F	PhD	X			X
30. Dr Wafi	M	PhD	X		X	

that their identities would remain anonymous and that they could withdraw from the research process at any stage if they felt uncomfortable. Most interview sessions were about one to one-and-a-half hours and were recorded using two recording devices: the main recording device was an iPhone and the backup was a laptop.

### Approaches to Data Analysis

Taking into account Charmaz's (2014) recommendation concerning the importance of being flexible in using her constructivist grounded theory approach, this current study adopted Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach to analyze the interview data. This hybrid approach of inductive and deductive analysis allowed me to use the existing theories from the literature to shape interview schedules and to link the data to the pre-determined themes (deductive approach), while at the same time allowing for themes grounded in the data to emerge through the adoption of an inductive approach. Furthermore, both the inductive and deductive approaches acted not only to complement each other but they also prevented the author from missing important data. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the 'hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 4) improved the rigor of the thematic analysis and offered a better standpoint for analyzing complex data.

A four-step process was devised to analyze the interview data: (a) Step 1: Familiarizing myself with the data, transcribing the interview recordings. To become familiar with the entire interview set, I opted to listen and re-listen to all interview recordings before manually transcribing the 30 interview recordings in full; (b) Step 2: Organizing the data. All transcripts were reread, open-coded, and organized into clusters of potential themes. The process of coding and categorizing was conducted manually (using a paper and pen strategy) within individual transcripts and across the whole dataset in order to capture the interrelatedness and complexities that existed within the interview dataset; (c) Step 3: Reducing and integrating the coding sheet. In order to build interrelationships between themes, the consistency between each code was carefully reviewed, re-selected, and reorganized. Ambiguous codes and codes unsupported by the data were removed, while codes carrying similar meanings were placed under the same category. This procedure helped to reduce the number of codes and focused the process of coding and categorizing; and (d) Step 4: Constant comparison and identifying emerging themes. In accordance with the tradition of constructivist grounded theory, the data-driven themes were constantly compared in terms of their consistency within individual interviews and across the entire data set.

### Findings

Due to the complexity and interconnectedness of research participants' perceptions of their roles as adult educators, the author decided to provide answers to the research questions in an integrated way. Table 3

**Table 3**  
Summary of findings of interview analysis

Theme	Subtheme	
Learn to be a better individual	Balance of conventional and contemporary teaching approaches	Modesty in learning
Active learning	Educator as role model	Learners as co-partners
	Learning together	
	Educator as a facilitator Collaborative partnership	Empowering learners Shared control

summarizes the themes and subthemes which emerged following a fine-grained analysis of the interview data.

### Theme 1: Learning to be a Better Individual

This section addresses learning as a process of being a well-rounded person. *Learning to be a better individual* which consists of two sub-themes *Educator as role-model* and *Balance of conventional and contemporary approaches*, is regarded as one of the primary contributions of this current study to the understanding of the role of the educator in the SDL environment.

#### Sub-theme 1 – Balance of Conventional and Contemporary Teaching Approaches

A majority of the research participants emphasized that the main purpose of learning was to be a better individual, both physically and spiritually. Furthermore, the research participants suggested that modesty was the best way to approach teaching and learning. They added, despite the fact that Malaysian teacher educators are driven by the compelling 'student-directed' approaches, it is important to recognize the role of educators in the learning process. This was in line with Khan's (2014) suggestion that is, in the pursuit of knowledge, it is important for a learner to seek guidance from a highly qualified educator, as this may prevent the learner from deviating from the actual learning.

*... when we self-directedly try to understand [learn] ... we sometimes get distracted. We tend to digress from the true teaching and this is when you need a 'guru' or educator to come and guide you. (Dr Affandi 379–382)*

Despite offering a relatively limited definition of learning as a process of getting information either formally or informally, their pedagogical practices suggested otherwise, as all of the research participants actively engaged their students in classroom-learning activities through class discussion, role-play, and peer teaching. Furthermore, the ideas of the research participants on balanced learning were evident through their instructional practices, where a majority of them conducted an interactive lecture, which promoted project work, group presentations, and individual presentations and not simply a traditional and passive mode of lecture. The research participants also convincingly asserted that learning is unlikely to happen in the absence of



human interaction. They added that each individual requires a little input to start his or her learning process.

*... for learning to occur, there should be at least a little input, information and skills ... when we learn, we will interact with others and this involves communication skills. (Dr Durratun 15–18)*

#### Sub-theme 2 – Educator as Role Model

In relation to the research participants' assertions on the importance of having a balance of both worlds, one of their crucial views, which is particularly worthy of note, is the need of acknowledging the educator's role in learning. By this the research participants meant that while celebrating 'learner self-direction', we must not challenge the importance of an educator to guide the learning.

*A good system should have the best of both worlds, you have technology, you have your SDL, but you also need to have an educator or a teacher ... So that ... have a comprehensive and a more holistic learning and teaching process ... (Dr Affandi 373–391)*

Interestingly, although one of the research participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of an expert to guide the learning process, she absolutely rejected the need for an authoritarian expert. Being faithful to her principle, she did not feel hesitant or awkward about seeking her learners' opinions. Elucidating her idea of the role of the educator in learning, she stressed that educators are not experts who should know everything and that they are not responsible for teaching and providing the information needed by learners all of the time, rather they need to play the role of a model lifelong learner. She admitted her learners are sometimes more informed than her about certain issues and she was not reluctant to accept their ideas and views; instead, she felt proud of the learners.

One of the research participants also suggested that the role of the educator is not limited to ensuring that their pedagogical approaches are suitable for the creation of a lively and interactive learning environment, but that he or she should be an individual with high morals who is capable of being a good role model for learners to follow. Her views revealed a strong cultural value towards respecting the educator as a knowledgeable and noble individual, and that the act of questioning an educator's actions and opinion is seen as rude and culturally unacceptable:

*... teachers are not only responsible for making sure that they can deliver the curriculum content effectively, but they themselves, should possess good qualities as an individual, morally and ethically. Because you know ... teacher is a role model to be followed, as someone who is respected and looked up to, that teacher should be a well-rounded individual. (Dr Haris 329–336)*

#### Theme 2: Active Learning

Active learning focuses on the need to actively engage the students for meaningful learning experiences and comprises three sub-themes: a) *Learning together*; b) *Educator as a facilitator*; and c) *Collaborative partnership*. Active learning

was suggested by most research participants as an ideal teaching and learning approach that could inspire and motivate learners to embark upon a SDL journey.

#### Sub-theme 1 – Learning together

Dr Siti's 'learning together' concept, which emphasizes the recognition of learners as co-partners in learning who share equal responsibilities in ensuring successful learning, was promoted through peer teaching and class discussion. According to Dr Siti, these sorts of active dual interactions encourage a lively and engaging learning atmosphere which indirectly places the learner in the position of driving his or her own learning activity.

*... I believed, for effective learning, not only the student should be learning, but the educator themselves should learn too ... they must learn together, learning how to learn effectively, learning how to teach effectively. Learning never ends ... (Dr Siti 173–176)*

Her beliefs, as well as her instructional practices, indicate that she is willing to give more freedom and autonomy to her learners, which many writers suggest is one of the most important elements for promoting SDL (Benson, 2013, pp. 75–89). Furthermore, analysis of research participants' interview transcripts acts to reinforce existing views on the importance of freedom and autonomy in ensuring effective implementation of SDL activities.

*I don't see myself as a perfect lecturer that knows everything ... it has been a two-way thing. It is not just me teaching them, but it is also them teaching me. (Dr Haris 132–145)*

#### Sub-theme 2 and 3 – Educator as a Facilitator and Collaborative Partnership

The author decided that the sub-themes *Educator as a facilitator* and *Collaborative partnership* could be presented simultaneously and in an integrated way to capture the complexity and interconnectedness of each sub-theme.

Echoing Saks and Leijen's (2014) idea of empowering learners in the SDL context, Dr Siti suggested that if an educator wants to promote active learning, educators should be willing to accept learners as equal learning partners who are capable of making decisions about their own learning and should empower learners by sharing the power in the learning process. Similarly, Dr Jamal stressed that SDL is achievable only if educators are willing to give up their authoritative positions by acknowledging that learners are equal co-partners in learning which is in line with Woolner and Clark's (2015) calls for a collaborative partnership between learner and educator.

*... how to make sure that your students take responsibility for their learning? Treat them as a partner ... learner partner ... work with them on how they want to learn, where they want to learn, what they want to learn ... facilitate their learning, help them, guide them ... they appreciate you more if you do like that ... not only give instruction to be followed. (Dr Siti 245–248)*

Taking this idea to the next level, Dr Jamal pointed out the potential of extracurricular activities which ranged

from wide subject-based clubs, such as an art club and science club, to interest-based clubs including film and debating clubs, for developing facets of SDL outside of the confines of a very prescribed curriculum. Some of Dr Jamal's responses that the author would like to highlight include making learning interesting, assuming that learners are equal partners in learning and promoting group project work to enhance learners' SDL skills. According to Dr Jamal, 'A good education is important', he explained, 'but what seems even more vital is that students are able to enjoy their school days and grow up as individuals who are beneficial to society rather than being products of education that fail to respond accordingly to the current needs of the nation'. Holding this perspective about learning, he then concluded SDL to be a perfect tool for making learning interesting.

Some important observations made by the majority of the research participants were that despite various efforts by the Malaysian government to promote learner-directed learning at every level in the Malaysian education system, current learning and teaching practices in Malaysian education institutions do not equip learners to be independent and self-initiated learners, let alone to be involved in life-long learning.

Elucidating this issue even further, the research participants suggested that within a centralized educational system, Malaysian school teachers are restricted by the rigid and overloaded curriculum, coupled with a high-stakes assessment system, which causes Malaysian school teachers to adopt teacher-oriented approaches. They added such pedagogical approaches nurture reliance on a teacher, resulting in the production of dependent, incompetent, and less capable learners. According to the research participants, learners who are used to relying on educators to lead their learning are less willing to take responsibility for their own learning and are less prepared for higher learning.

*... students coming to universities are not prepared, they might get straight A's in the national exam, but what happens when they learn in university that requires them to learn independently. They failed. They are not equipped with sufficient skills to excel in university learning.* (Dr Jamal 315–317)

The ideas expressed by my research participants not only provided answers to the research questions but also moved well beyond them to capture the reality and challenges that exist within the Malaysian education system which need to be considered if there is to be successful implementation of any educational changes.

In relation to my first research question: (i) How teacher educators view their roles as adult educators in the context of SDL, my findings suggest that all of the research participants believe they are self-directed learners. Furthermore, analysis of the interview data also indicates that despite the fact that they do not feel the need to participate in any workshops or seminars regarding SDL to widen their knowledge of SDL, they nevertheless emphasized that to be a good educator, one should possess the essential features of a self-directed learner in order to be a good role model and to better guide learners towards becoming self-directed learners.

*... when you do research ... you have to go and find out for yourselves, you have to read up a lot more about the things you are doing ... That is also self-directed learning, you get extra knowledge in your own way ... throughout the teaching that you do, throughout the research that you do, throughout consultation that do, there is some kind of self-directed learning that is being infused in them.* (Dr Fauziah 362–374)

This section, which emphasizes the presence of educators to guide the learners and not to control the learning, does not disregard the role that should be played by the learners. The findings also revealed that learners should be motivated, passionate and have the initiative and desire to learn on their own if they want to venture into SDL. In conclusion, the findings of this study, particularly in relation to the role of the educator in the SDL context suggested that the educator should be regarded as one of the most powerful entities driving learners' self-direction.

## Discussion

This study, which recognized the educator's role in supporting the learner's direction of learning has provided new insights into our understanding of SDL. Having reviewed and critically analyzed the research participants' accounts of their pedagogical practices, it is interesting to note that, while the majority of research participants reported that they provide various learning opportunities to support their learners' SDL skills, nonetheless, almost all research participants were not comfortable abandoning their roles as authority figures in learning. This finding reaffirms existing literature which reported that not all Malaysian educators have accepted their role as facilitators of learning, but they instead remain firmly attached to their traditional roles of knowledge experts, to an extent they are comfortable with one-way knowledge transmission. While recognizing the learner's role in the SDL context, the findings of this study highlight the need to harmoniously blend the conventional mode of teaching with contemporary SDL approaches to ensure successful and meaningful learning experiences for the learners. Most importantly, it is suggested that in fostering SDL: (i) educators should establish a positive and collaborative relationship with the learner; (ii) educators should recognize the available learning resources and restrictions existing within the actual learning context as this would allow for an effective implementation of the SDL; and (iii) the universities should play their part in assisting educators to plan their teaching strategies which facilitate the learners' learning direction by conducting ongoing, in-service, training programs, encouraging self-development, and supporting educators to work alongside colleagues.

This study, which explored Malaysian teacher educators' conceptualizations of SDL, offers a new perspective on SDL by outlining the educators' perspectives and practices of SDL. However, I am completely aware that although this current study has only involved educators from an educational field, more research needs to be done to investigate educators' views of SDL from various disciplines and at all

educational levels, as this may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of SDL.

### Conflict of interest

I have no conflict of interest to declare.

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