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**Language learner autonomy: exploring how
English pre-service teachers understand the
concept, and view opportunities for its
development**

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research investigating the views pre-service teachers (PSTs) hold about language learner autonomy (LA), particularly in non-Western contexts. Consequently, teacher education lacks the essential baseline to efficiently prepare these teachers to promote LA in their future classes. Utilising a mixed methods approach, this study investigated the understanding a cohort of 219 English PSTs, in an Egyptian university, had about LA and opportunities for its development. Data were collected using a questionnaire and a reflective writing task. Findings indicated that these teachers had overall positive orientation towards LA and its development and understood it to promote effective foreign language learning, and to incorporate learners' independence and capacity to take control of one's own learning. However, they seemed to have concerns relating to learners' independence and teachers' redundancy. They were particularly concerned about the tensions and discrepancies they felt towards the appropriateness of incorporating autonomy-supportive practices in conventional education settings where teacher authority was considered a hallmark for professional competence. Despite holding positive orientations towards LA and its development, the uncertainties these teachers felt regarding culturally accepted teachers' and learners' roles seemed more likely to deter these teachers from supporting LA in their future language classrooms. Consequently, it is pertinent for initial teacher education to introduce teachers to the principles and practices of nurturing LA while providing substantial support for development in teachers' cognition and understanding of cultural expectations and context-appropriate methodologies.

Keywords

Learner autonomy, teachers' beliefs, initial teacher education, English language teaching

1. Introduction

Extensive research on learner autonomy (LA) over the last four decades has contributed to our understanding of this complex and multidimensional construct and its fundamental role in foreign language learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Chong & Reinders, 2022). There is a general consensus in the literature that LA means learners' capacity and readiness to take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2006 & 2011; Dang, 2012; Holec, 1981; Nunan, 1996), and that LA and successful language learning are positively correlated (Benson, 2011; Dam, 1995; Deng, 2007; Little, 2022). There is also the recognition that LA is a valuable, yet not a neutral or universal construct. Consequently, to effectively support LA, educators need to utilize context-appropriate practices that take into consideration the possibilities and limitations inherent within their respective educational and cultural context (Kuchah & Smith, 2011; Lamb, 2004; Smith, Kuchah & Lamb, 2018).

The beliefs and understandings teachers hold about LA heavily influence their pedagogical decisions and practices (Bonner, Diehl & Trachtman, 2020), and therefore, opportunities for supporting, or otherwise constraining LA in the language classroom. Despite a wealth of research investigating LA, very few studies attempted to explore the views and understandings English as a foreign language (EFL) pre-service teachers (PSTs) hold about LA and its development (Khotimah, Basthomi & Eliyanah, 2023; Manzano Vázquez, 2018). Sound knowledge about how prospective teachers view LA provides teacher education with the essential baseline to efficiently prepare future teachers to promote LA in their future classrooms. Therefore, this research sets out to explore the perceptions EFL PSTs in Egypt have about LA and opportunities for its development, and how these could empower these teachers to support LA in their future classes. The present exploratory study is guided by this main research question:

How do English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers (PSTs), in a teacher education programme in Egypt, understand learner autonomy (LA) and opportunities for its development in the language classroom?

This main research question has the following two sub-questions:

1. How do EFL PSTs understand LA?
2. How do EFL PSTs understand opportunities for developing LA?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Learner autonomy (LA)

Holec's seminal work on LA (1981) defined it as the 'ability to take charge of one's learning' (Holec, 1981, p.3) in terms of planning, selecting materials, self-assessment and monitoring progress. Furthermore, Dam (1995) emphasized willingness to take responsibility for one's learning and social interdependence as essential aspects of LA. Little (1991, 2007) explained LA as a capacity for 'detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action' (1991, p. 4) that extended beyond the immediate learning situation.

LA has also been conceptualized from technical, psychological, and political perspectives (Benson, 2006 & 2007) and from a sociocultural perspective (Oxford, 2003). Each of these perspectives utilizes different theoretical frameworks to explain LA and thus adds to the complexity and multidimensionality involved in defining LA. For instance, while a technical perspective interprets LA in terms of learner training and learning strategies, a psychological orientation focuses on learners' capacities, attitudes, and behaviours, and while a political perspective is concerned with issues of power and control, a socio-cultural orientation focuses on the role of interaction and social participation.

Furthermore, discussions of LA and pedagogy incorporate diverse views about the nature and goals of autonomous learning. For instance, Smith and Palfreyman (2003) distinguished between weak and strong pedagogies. Weak pedagogies perceived autonomy as a capacity that learners lacked and needed training towards, to fit in the pre-conceived models of the '*ideal autonomous learner*', whereas strong pedagogies assumed that learners had the capacity to be autonomous and therefore focused on creating optimal conditions for supporting LA. There is also the distinction between *pedagogy for autonomy*, in which developing LA is an explicit goal of teaching and learning activities, and *Pedagogy of autonomy*, in which teachers utilize learners' existing autonomy in enhancing learning experience but developing LA is not an explicit goal of teaching (Kuchah & Smith, 2011; Smith, 2003;).

The literature on LA provides substantial theoretical discussion of LA and autonomy-supported pedagogies in the field of foreign language learning. However, the area of teachers' understandings and beliefs about this construct and its promotion in the language classroom remains understudied, and thus a gap between theoretical understandings of LA and teachers' actual beliefs and practices might exist (Borg & AL-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

2.2 Supporting LA in formal education settings

Discussion of LA in formal educational settings, including classrooms, engages with issues surrounding language learning, teacher and learner roles, and principles for promoting LA. Little (1991) has discussed common misunderstandings about LA that may deter teachers from attempting to promote LA. These included: perceiving autonomy as simply working without a teacher; assuming that in order to encourage autonomy, the teacher must relinquish all control in the classroom; viewing LA as a new methodology that can be programmed into a series of lesson plans; and perceiving LA as a single, easily described behaviour or a steady state achieved by certain learners once and for all.

Furthermore, Sinclair's description of key aspects of LA (2000, p. 7-13) provided a useful framework for teachers to better understand how to promote LA in the classroom. For instance, Sinclair (2000) discussed the intersections between learner independence and teacher intervention, learner training and learner's awareness, and the individual and social dimensions of LA. Others discussed LA as a social construct (Benson, 2016; Little, 2007) that acknowledged the role of interaction, as exemplified in pair and group work, in language learning, and the contribution of learners' diverse goals and experiences to the learning situation. Dam's (1995) influential work with learners of English in a Danish middle school provided illustrations of how LA can be effectively promoted in the classroom. Using Dam's work, Little (2007) identified three principles for promoting LA in the classroom; these are: learner involvement, reflection and language use.

The emerging research on culturally appropriate practices and LA (Kuchah & Smith, 2011; Shamim & Kuchah, 2016; Smith, Kuchah & Lamb, 2018) argues for the need to develop context-appropriate methodologies that consider classroom experiences and both learners' and teachers' preferences. For instance, Kuchah & Smith's study (2011) of teaching English in an African school setting has evidenced how pedagogy of autonomy could serve as a valid and pragmatic response to teaching in difficult circumstances.

2.3 Teacher education for LA

In discussing LA and teacher education, Shamim and Kuchah (2016) emphasise the need to incorporate a focus on teachers' agency and creativity and to train teachers on *pedagogies of autonomy* 'that reflect teachers' pragmatic responses to their contextual challenges rather than practices imposed on teachers from powerful outsiders to their classroom realities' (Shamim & Kuchah, 2016, p. 537). Others (Smith, Kuchah &

Lamb, 2018) have emphasised the need for teachers to ground practices for LA development on critical understanding of the teacher/learner variables inherent within their own contexts. They advocate for sharing successful stories of teachers teaching in challenging contexts as a form of teacher professional development.

Furthermore, research has illustrated the value of adopting several innovative approaches in supporting student teachers to promote LA in their future teaching. For instance, research from China, Portugal and Colombia has evidenced the impact of incorporating collaborative action research by teacher educators with their student teachers (Moreira, 2009), learner-centred approaches (Wang & Ma, 2009), and experience analysis and reconstruction (Vieira, 2009), on student teachers' views about teaching and learning, and on their confidence to promote LA in their classes.

Balcikanli (2010) argues that student teachers' success in implementing practices that support LA is associated with the opportunities they have in their teacher education to reflect on and develop good understanding of LA and on opportunities to experience autonomous learning themselves. Manzano Vázquez's review of research (2018) on teacher education initiatives for LA concluded that there was no 'unique' or 'best' approach to teacher education for LA, and that the successful initiatives were the ones that 'adapted to the educational context and the school culture where it is developed' (p. 396).

2.4 Teachers' beliefs about LA

There is a dynamic and interactive relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices, and there are also potential discrepancies between the two due to several factors including existence of multiple beliefs systems, and tensions between the core and peripheral beliefs that teachers hold (Basturkmen, 2012). Research suggests that the beliefs PSTs hold about language teaching and learning impact on the process of learning to teach (e.g., Farrell & Lim 2005), and that teacher education experience can help PSTs become aware of their pedagogical beliefs and how these impact on practice, and thus empower them to implement changes to their approaches to teaching and learning overtime (Farrell & Guz, 2019; Qiu, Xie, Xiong, & Zhou, 2021).

There is a paucity of research investigating student teachers' beliefs about LA. For instance, Balçıklanlı (2010) investigated the beliefs of 112 English PSTs in Turkey about LA. The findings revealed that overall, these PSTs had a positive disposition towards LA and thought that promoting LA was essential for successful language learning. However,

they perceived the teacher-centered and traditional teaching culture prevalent in the Turkish educational system to be constraining for promoting LA.

Another study that investigated PSTs' beliefs about LA (Camilleri Grima, 2007) involved a group of 48 participants who were made up of PSTs and practicing teachers. The findings of this study revealed that the respondents had overall positive views about LA with the student teachers holding more positive views towards different aspects of autonomy such as learners' engagement in making decisions about short term goals, selection of materials, and self-assessment. Research on teachers' beliefs about LA suggests that in theory teachers have positive orientation towards LA, albeit perceiving its promotion to be challenging due to several factors that are mostly related to education setting.

3. Methods

3.1 Research context and design

Situated in non-Western culture, education in Egypt is firmly rooted in collectivism which prioritises community over individuals and focuses on group goals and uniformity (Hofstede, 1991). Within such cultures, unified single curriculum, teacher-centered approaches, spoon feeding, high-stakes examinations are all common practices (Ho et al., 2004). In collectivist classrooms, students tend to see teachers as figures of authority and main sources of knowledge and validation and tend to associate learning with obedience and conformity to authority rather than independence and creativity. Alexander (2020) described how in India, where similar to Egypt collectivist culture prevails, classroom discourse tended to be formal and dominated by the teacher, and whole class interactions tend to be more common than collaborative pair and group work interactions. He contrasted this with more individualistic cultures where more informal conversations occurred between students, and between students and teachers assuming more autonomy than in formal whole class interactions that prevailed in collectivist classrooms, which consequently assumed less learner autonomy. However, there is growing evidence that embracing LA supportive practices that are culturally appropriate could create exceptional opportunities for LA development within collectivist cultures (Kuchah & Smith, 2011; Lamb, 2004; Smith, Kuchah & Lamb, 2018).

Formal school education in Egypt emphasises the hierarchical perspective in which teacher' authority is a key determinant of professional competence, and decisions about the curriculum and assessment are made by the central authority of the Ministry of education.

Classrooms tend to be dominated by teacher discourse with limited opportunities for students' collaboration, engagement in dialogue with the teacher and peers, and use of self and peer assessment.

However, in 2018, Egypt launched Education 2.0 (EDU 2.0) national reform plan. EDU 2.0 focused on transitioning the education system away from rote learning, and more towards an education system that promotes learner-centred pedagogies, critical thinking, and inquiry-based and lifelong learning (Moustafa et al., 2022), which are all in alignment with the fundamental principles of LA development. The implementation of EDU 2.0 is assumed to have had transformative impacts on different levels related to teachers, curriculum and students (Marey & Maged, 2022). Framed as an exploratory study, this research aims to understand how English as a foreign language PSTs perceive LA and opportunities for its development within formal education system in Egypt, and consequently, gain insights into how teacher education could better prepare these teachers to support LA in their future classrooms. Perceptions of LA and opportunities for its development address questions about how PSTs define LA, and what associations they make between LA and key interconnected factors that include culture, learner's characteristics, effective language learning, learners' and teachers' roles, and power relationships.

This study employed a mixed method approach as the most suitable approach to explore the main features and multi-faceted meanings of participants' perceptions about LA and its development. Mixed method approaches, 'in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study' (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4), allow researchers to gain better understanding of complex issues and settings (Dörnyei, 2007). In doing so, this research enriches and complements the related studies on teachers' beliefs about LA that were mainly quantitative in nature (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

3.2 Research Questions

The present exploratory study is guided by this main research question: How do English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers (PSTs), in a teacher education programme in Egypt, understand learner autonomy (LA) and opportunities for its development in the language classroom?

This main research question has the following two sub-questions:

1. How do EFL PSTs understand LA?
2. How do EFL PSTs understand opportunities for developing LA?

3.3 Participants

The participants for this study were 219 English PSTs enrolled in their final year of study in the English department at the faculty of Education in a public university in Egypt. These English PSTs had completed relevant teaching-learning theory and teaching practice courses and had teaching practicum experience that was facilitated and organised by the university in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE). During their practicum experience, these English PSTs had the opportunity to observe and teach classes on weekly basis at a public high school. They had their lessons observed by peers and supervisors from the university and the Ministry of Education. These supervisors mentored PSTs and assessed their work and progress at schools.

The researcher contacted a university instructor, who taught these PSTs and served as a gatekeeper, to invite these PSTs to participate in the research. The university instructor provided an overall view of the research aims and data collection activities and shared the link to the research questionnaire (the questionnaire was made available via Google forms) with those who consented to participate in the research. Out of the 330 PSTs who were enrolled in their final year, 219 PSTs consented to take the questionnaire. Participants were also invited to complete a reflective writing task as part of data collection activities. To ensure ethical research practices, the researcher included an introduction page to the online questionnaire that provided comprehensive information about the research's aims, nature and benefits, and the voluntary participation and confidentiality of the participants. The introductory page had the researcher's contact information for the participants to use in case they needed to ask any questions or seek clarifications before taking the questionnaire. By responding to the questions in the questionnaire, the participants gave formal consent to their participation.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The current study adapted the questionnaire that was developed by Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012). This questionnaire was selected as it, as Benson noted, was grounded in a thorough review of the academic literature on autonomy, which means that it is well suited for international use' (2016). The questionnaire had been trialed extensively and was well-validated. The original questionnaire has four main sections: the first section has 37 statements about the meaning of learner autonomy and includes statements that ask about orientation to LA, characteristics of autonomous learners, relevance of LA in diverse cultures and the contribution of LA to L2 learning. The second section has two sets of

seven statements that ask about the feasibility and desirability of promoting LA. The third section has two open-ended questions that ask about the extent to which respondents think that their learners are autonomous and that they promote LA and why they think so. The fourth section has six questions that collect demographic information about the questionnaire respondents (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). For this research, and as exploring PSTs' practices was beyond its scope, the researcher used the first two sections of the original questionnaire to investigate PSTs' understandings of LA and opportunities for its development.

Hence, the adapted questionnaire used in this study had two sections. Section one used a five-point Likert scale with 37 statements that investigated the meaning of learner autonomy, orientation to LA, characteristics of autonomous learners, relevance of LA in diverse cultures and the contribution of LA to L2 learning. Section two had two sets of seven statements each that inquired about opportunities for development of LA by investigating the participants' views about the feasibility and desirability of promoting LA. It was divided into two parts that addressed teachers' views about the desirability and feasibility of 1) involving learners in decisions about their courses, and 2) developing LA supportive abilities. Each part had seven items that were repeated on both the desirability and feasibility scale.

To gain more insights into PSTs' understandings of LA and its development, the research asked the participants to write a reflective essay in which they responded to prompt questions that acted as a guide to the writing task. These questions asked the respondents to reflect on how they understood LA, the characteristics of autonomous learners, the relationship between LA and English language learning, and factors that either supported or constrained the development of LA. The writing task had clear instructions that emphasized the importance of respondents expressing their opinions openly and honestly. The instructions also emphasised that there were no expected correct or favourable answers to any of the prompt questions. The participants were invited to write these reflective essays and email them to the researcher; however, only sixty-six participants completed the writing task and sent back to the researcher. This could be due to several factors. Participants may have struggled with time constraints issues, they may have felt that the writing task was demanding, they may have also felt reluctant to write openly about their beliefs and feelings, and they may have also faced logistical issues with using the internet.

As this exploratory study aimed to delve deeply into participants' understandings and perceptions about LA rather than claiming generalizability of findings, depth of data collected was more important than its breadth. Despite this attrition, the data collected (i.e. the sixty-six written essays) was rich, relevant, robust and sufficient for the purpose of the study. During the final stage of the analysis of the written essays, no new themes emerged from the data, indicating that the data collected was sufficient for gaining an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of PSTs' views of LA.

For section one of the questionnaire, analysis quantified the PSTs' responses, the percentage of teachers who selected the different options of the Likert scale. The responses were analysed using SPSS 20.0 and descriptive statistics for each question (e.g. frequency counts and percentages) were calculated.

The responses to the writing task were analysed qualitatively to gain more insights into PSTs' understandings of LA and its development. Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive and interpretative process during which the researcher did not attempt to fit the analysis into a pre-existing coding frame but aimed to let the themes emerge, and to examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used the thematic content analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2016). First, the researcher conducted multiple readings of the qualitative data to become familiar with the data, then the researcher identified codes and categorise which were later made into themes based on key patterns in the data. The themes were reviewed several times to ensure credibility of the content analysis. This was a careful and iterative process during which the researcher ensured that the themes emerged from the data, and consulted the literature cited in this research to enhance data analysis and interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. RQ1: How do EFL pre-service teachers (PSTs) understand LA?

The descriptive statistics of section one of the questionnaire, ranked according to the percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement, are presented in Appendix A. Analysis of PSTs' responses to the questionnaire items revealed that these teachers expressed a high degree of agreement with all the statements that confirmed the positive correlation between LA and effective language learning, and the ability of learners from all age groups and different cultures to develop LA. This high level of agreement suggests that these

PSTs, comparable to prospective and in-service teachers in other educational contexts, had an overall positive orientation towards LA and its development (e.g. Balçıkanlı, 2010; Borg & Alshumaimeri's, 2019; Camilleri Grima, 2007).

Further analysis of questionnaire statements that received the highest percentage of agreement (83.6%- 70%) highlighted that these teachers associated LA with six key factors; these are: learners' characteristics (metacognition, confidence and motivation), effective language learning, independent student work, teachers' intervention, learners' freedom and choice, and cooperative learning. Table 1 below provides details about the PSTs' responses to all the statements in the questionnaire related to each of these factors.

Table 1
Key LA-related factors

Factors	Statements	Agree %	Unsure %	Disagree %
1. Learner characteristic s: metacognition	29. Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.	83.6	11.9	4.6
	37. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.	80.8	14.2	5.0
	32. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.	47.0	37.0	16.0
Learners' characteristic s: confidence and motivation	11. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.	76.7	15.5	7.8
	33. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.	75.8	16.9	7.3
	36. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.	83.1	12.3	4.6
2. Effective language learning	12. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.	75.3	16.9	7.8
	2. Independent study in the library is an activity which	83.1	11.9	5.0
3. Independent				

student work	develops learner autonomy.	78.5	16.4	5.0
	31. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.	70.3	22.4	7.3
	21. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access centre.	73.5	16.0	10.5
	6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	29.2	18.3	52.5
	24. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.			
4. Teachers' role	35. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.	74.4	16.4	9.1
	18. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.	45.5	28.8	26.0
	8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.	43.8	17.8	38.4
5. Learners' freedom and choice	7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.	81.3	11.9	6.8
	14. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.	80.8	13.2	5.9
	4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	80.8	12.8	6.4
	27. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.	74.4	16.9	8.7
	22. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.	71.7	20.1	8.2
6. Co-operative learning	16. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities	78.5	12.3	9.1

to learn from each other.	70.3	18.3	11.4
25. Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.	70.3	17.4	12.3
19. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.			

Analysis of the statements in table 1 suggests the following about PSTs' collective beliefs and understandings about LA:

- PSTs expressed high levels of agreement with statements that focused on learners' metacognition and psychological attributes suggesting that these teachers strongly associated LA with learners' characteristics. PSTs expressed high levels of agreement that the metacognition skills of learning how to learn (83.6%) and evaluating one's learning (80.8%) correlated positively with LA. It was interesting to note that monitoring one's learning, also indicating an ability to reflect on one's learning, did not receive similar levels of agreement as only 47% of PSTs thought that the ability to monitor one's learning was essential for developing autonomous learning. This may suggest that these teachers placed higher value on the skills of learning to learn and evaluating one's learning, and less value on the role of monitoring. It may also suggest that teachers were not aware of the role that monitoring and reflection played in the development of autonomous learning. Furthermore, PSTs perceived learners' confidence (76.7%) and motivation (75.8%) to play key roles in developing LA, reflecting the role learners' individual characteristics played in promoting autonomous learning.
- Most PSTs expressed high levels of agreement (83.1% & 75.3%) in response to the statements that emphasized the positive contribution of LA to success in foreign language learning.
- They also expressed high levels of agreement that independent students' work supports the development of LA, particularly work that involves studying in the library (83.1%), using the internet (78.5%), completing work outside the classroom (73.5%) and in a self-access center (70.3%). Furthermore, only 29.2% of PSTs thought that working independently of teachers could support LA,

suggesting that these teachers, while valuing the importance of students' independence, were aware that teachers played a central role in promoting LA. However, further analysis of how these PSTs perceived the relationship between learner independence and teachers' intervention suggested that some of these PSTs may have had mixed views or misconceptions about this relationship. While a high percentage of PSTs (74.4%) believed that teachers had an important role in promoting LA, more than half of these teachers (61.1%) either agreed with or were unsure about the statement: *LA means learning without a teacher*. These teachers may have equated learners' independence with teachers' redundancy, reflecting a common misconception about the role of the teacher in promoting LA (Aoki & Smith, 1999; Carson, 2010; Little, 1991).

- PSTs also seemed to believe that learners' freedom and choice as exemplified in involving learners in a wide range of decisions about their learning promoted LA. PSTs' responses showed a high degree of consensus that engaging learners in making decisions about the content of learning (81.1%), the learning activities (80.8%), the learning methods (80.8%), the learning materials (74.4%), and assessment methods (71.7%), promoted LA.
- PSTs' responses reflected a strong recognition that co-operative learning contributed to learner autonomy. The questionnaire statements about the positive correlation between learners working together and learning from each other, and LA received high levels of consensus that ranged from 78.5%- 70.3%. It seems that PSTs associated the adoption of learner-centered approaches and the rejection of traditional and teacher-led approaches with prominent conditions for developing learner autonomy. This suggests that these teachers identified the role of teacher as a facilitator as key for supporting the development of learner autonomy.

To summarise, the quantitative analysis of section one of the questionnaire suggests that the PSTs in this study had an overall positive orientation towards LA and its impact on successful foreign language learning. Furthermore, they recognized metacognition in the sense of learning how to learn and self-evaluation, confidence and motivation to learn, independent study, freedom to choose what and how to learn, collaborative learning, and teachers' support, to be key factors that supported and promoted LA. This suggests, in terms of perspectives on LA discussed in the literature (Oxford, 2003 & 2015), that these PSTs'

conceptualization of LA embraced different orientations to autonomy including psychological, political, and sociocultural ones.

The qualitative analysis of PSTs' responses to the writing task revealed three main recurrent themes with regard to conceptions about LA. These were: learner independence, learner capacity to take control of their learning, and LA and effective language learning.

Learner independence

The PSTs in this study strongly associated learner autonomy with *learner independence* which they conceptualised as a form of 'self-learning', 'self-instruction' and 'self-direction'. As illustrated in the PSTs' comments below, autonomous learners were able to access knowledge and manage their language learning inside and outside the classroom independently with either some initial and temporary help from the teacher or with no help from the teacher.

'Autonomy in language learning means that a language learner ... does not rely on the teacher to teach him and exchange some information with him or her. The learner looks for the information himself and teaches himself without any help from the teacher.'

'Teachers can be guiders at the beginning of learning, but after a while, students must be independent and try to figure things out by themselves.'

Furthermore, it seems that these PSTs viewed *learner independence* (i.e. self-instruction) as evidence of promoting autonomous learning in their teaching. One PST explained that:

'I was able to promote learner autonomy. I let students do all the job themselves: reading the chapter, giving a summary of it, coming up with the new words and looking up their meaning and answering questions related to the chapter.'

However, this view of learner independence as a form of self-learning, suggesting that teachers were redundant, was problematic for many of these PSTs. Analysis of their responses indicated that they may have felt that LA threatened their authority as 'a source of knowledge', and that LA supportive practices were incompatible with what they perceived as practices underlying 'effective teaching'. These competing views about LA on one hand, and teacher roles on the other caused many of these PSTs to feel 'torn' and 'confused'. The following extracts illustrate these ideas.

'I prefer learner autonomy but not all the time because I must have an effective role in teaching students and providing them with knowledge.'

'I just ... worry that they [learners] might be wondering what my job is... sometimes I just worry that giving them a bit more autonomy would make them think that I'm useless. I know I'm a little bit torn on this subject. I'm confused about it.'

Capacity to take control of one's learning

LA as a capacity to take control of one's learning in terms of planning, making decisions about what and how to learn, and assessing learning was another recurrent theme in the PSTs' responses. For many of these PSTs, LA meant that:

'the students are responsible for their learning process, what they learn and how they learn it. It includes students who can recognize their learning needs, choose appropriate materials, activities, or instruction to help them improve their performance and apply a range of learning strategies flexibly in different contexts.'

PSTs understood this capacity to incorporate ability (i.e. knowledge and skills), desire (i.e. motivation) and freedom (i.e. in the learning process and situation) (Huang & Benson, 2013). There were several mentions of autonomous learners' ability in terms of, for instance, identifying learning needs, managing the learning process, and using learning strategies. Teachers and the educational context were perceived to play a critical role in granting learners the freedom to control their learning. For instance, a flexible curriculum that incorporated learners' diverse needs, learning goals and experiences, and had a broader focus on creativity and learning English for real life purposes rather than on passing high stake exams promoted learners' sense of freedom. Teachers were perceived to support learners' sense of freedom when they *relinquished* control and involved learners in making decisions about their learning and using the language to communicate thoughts and feelings rather than to provide predetermined answers to questions. The following extracts illustrate some of these ideas:

'... the curriculum ... and the exams should include questions asking about the learners' experiences and opinions, like the critical thinking questions, so that the learners could feel the sense of freedom to answer in the way they see best.'

'... Teachers should be prepared to relinquish control and give students responsibility. The simple way to do this is adjusting the way in which we teach, moving from a deductive to a more inductive approach ... give students the choice, so they can feel that they are responsible for a great thing.'

LA and effective language learning

The strong positive relationship between LA and English language learning was another recurrent theme in the qualitative data. LA was perceived to result in successful foreign language learning for several reasons. Firstly, LA entailed a shift from traditional teaching approaches that prioritized teacher's control over subject knowledge and the learning process, and constrained learner's capacity for independence and control. Autonomous learners had the capacity to act independently from the teacher and to manage their learning in a way that matches their learning preferences and satisfies their individual needs. Secondly, LA was perceived to increase learner motivation and confidence which correlated positively with better language learning and the likelihood of learners to engage in lifelong learning and develop the language and communication skills required in global world. Thirdly, autonomous learners were more likely to be proficient language learners as they could find resources and opportunities for language learning and practice beyond the constraints of traditional classroom settings where teachers' dominance and limited language exposure and practice challenged opportunities for developing language communicative skills.

The following illustrative comments exemplify some of these ideas.

'Learning autonomy is an effective way of learning. It differs from the traditional way of learning in which teachers are the one who manage the process of learning.'

'There is a supportive relationship between learner autonomy and English language learning. ...learner autonomy enhances the learner's motivation and leads to more effective learning, provides learners with more opportunities for English communication in a non-native environment, caters to the individual needs of learners at all levels, and has a lasting influence as it helps the learner to learn effectively and have a life-long learning.'

'Autonomy in learning fosters proficiency in learning as the level of language skills needed for achieving language fluency could not be fulfilled by only lecturing or tutoring but also by the students' independent practices and the chance to use the target language by themselves.'

The qualitative analysis of PSTs' writings showed that these teachers strongly associated LA with learner's independence and capacity to take control of their learning and were quite aware of the positive impact of LA on effective language learning. However, analysis also illustrated that these PSTs held competing views about learner independence and

teacher's intervention, leading to feeling of confusion and sometimes frustration.

4.2. RQ2: How do English PSTs understand opportunities for developing LA?

Section 2 of the questionnaire addressed teachers' views about two issues. The first one was about the desirability and feasibility of involving learners in decisions about their course of study. This included making decisions about learning objectives, materials, activities, assessment, teaching methods and classroom management. This section had seven items that were repeated on both the desirability (internal reliability using Cronbach's $\alpha=.875$) and feasibility scale (internal reliability using Cronbach's $\alpha=.865$).

Figure one summarizes teachers' responses and shows that for each item the teachers were more positive about the involvement of learners in making decisions about the course of their learning than they were about its feasibility. When the two scales were compared using a paired item *t*-test, the overall difference between the desirability ($M=19.30$) and feasibility ($M=18.21$) scores were statistically significant ($n=219$, $t=3.220$, $p=.001$).

As illustrated in figure 1, PSTs were also less positive about the desirability of involving learners in decisions about classroom management ($M=2.2$) compared to the other items in the scale which had mean values that ranged from 2.7 -3.0. It seems that PSTs were more positively disposed towards involving learners in making decisions about activities, topics, objectives, materials, teaching methods and assessment and less positively disposed towards involving learners in making decisions about classroom management.

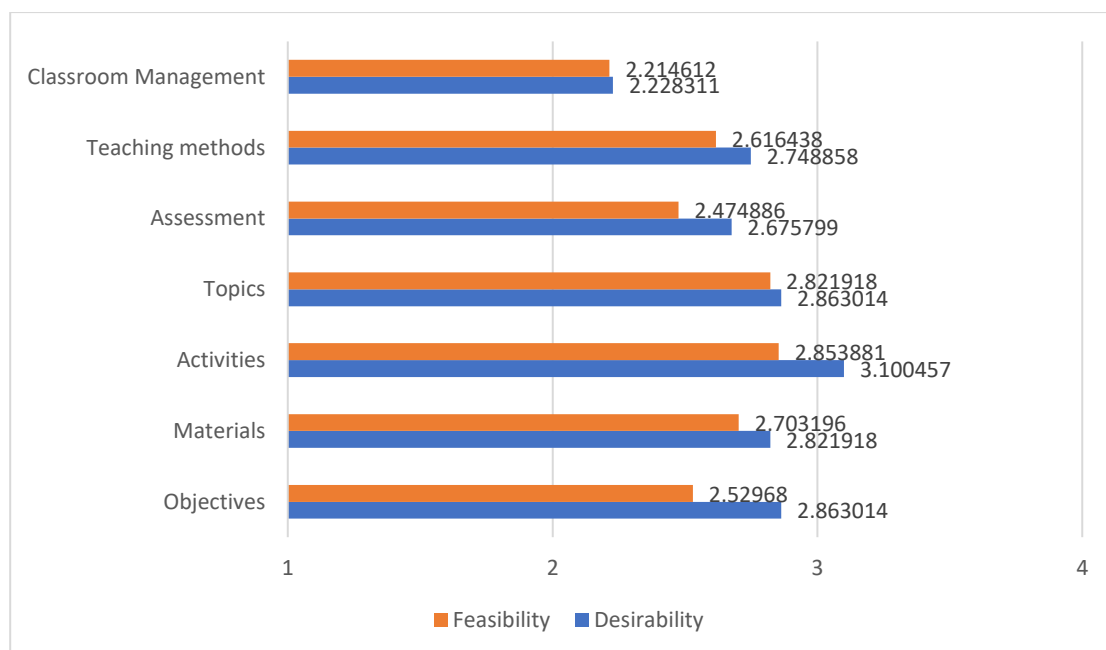


Figure 1. Desirability and feasibility of learner involvement in decision-making

Notes. 1= undesirable/unfeasible; 4= very desirable/feasible.

The second part of the scale was about the desirability and feasibility of developing learners' abilities to identify their needs, identify their strengths, identify their weaknesses, monitor their progress, evaluate their own learning, learn co-operatively and learn independently. These abilities were seen as indicators of LA and were repeated on both the desirability (internal reliability using Cronbach's $\alpha=.916$) and feasibility scale (internal reliability using Cronbach's $\alpha=.894$).

Figure 2 summarizes teachers' responses and shows that for each item the teachers were more positive about the development of learners' abilities that supports autonomy than they were about its feasibility. When the two scales were compared using a paired item t -test, the overall difference between the desirability ($M=21.39$) and feasibility ($M=20.25$) scores were statistically significant ($n=219$, $t=3.807$, $p=.000$).

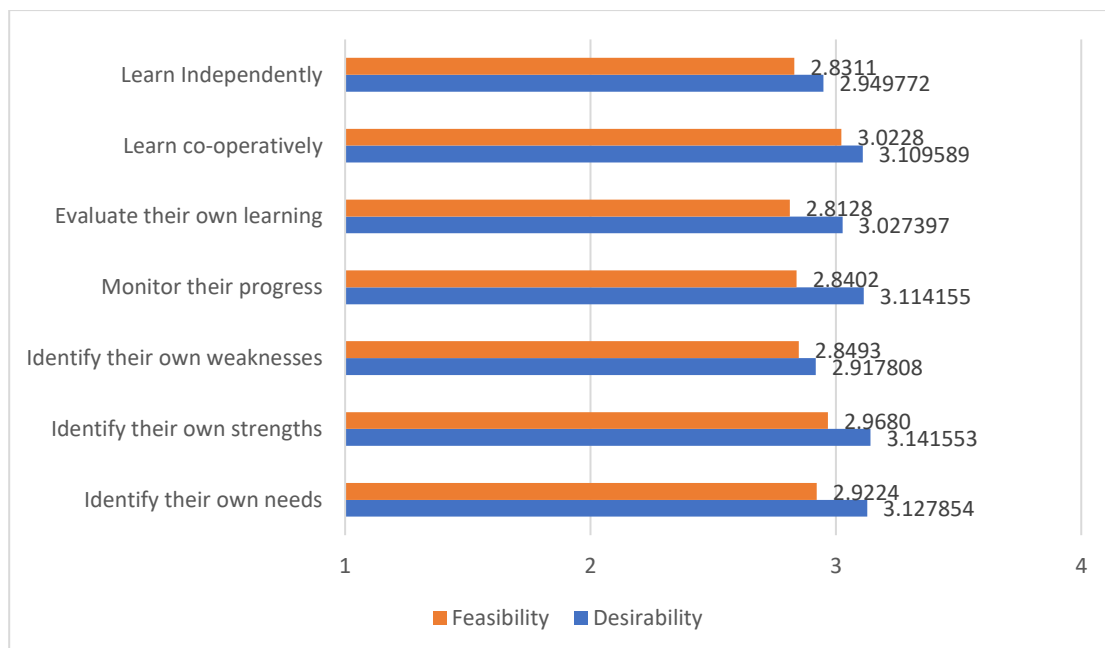


Figure 2. Desirability and feasibility of developing learners' abilities

Notes. 1= undesirable/unfeasible; 4= very desirable/feasible.

Findings from this section highlighted a more positive orientation towards the desirability of involving learners in decisions about the course of their study and developing learners' abilities that are seen to be supportive of autonomy development, than its feasibility. This gap indicates that these teachers might have felt that in practice it was challenging to engage learners in autonomy supportive practices.

Further analysis of PSTs' responses to the writing task identified factors related to learners, teachers and context that played a critical role in creating opportunities for promoting LA or otherwise constraining it. Learner-related factors included aiming to learn English for relevant real-life purposes rather than to pass exams, and displaying autonomy-supported characteristics such as independence, motivation, creativity, confidence, discipline, and cognitive and meta-cognitive skills. Lack of these factors, which in many cases were perceived to be enforced by the educational context, were likely to constrain autonomy development. For example, the extracts below illustrate how learners' lack of independence was induced by the pre-prescribed curriculum and teacher-centered approaches that undermined learners' choice and active participation.

'They [learners] do not enjoy any degree of independence because the curricula are imposed on them, and they only have to study them in a compulsory way.'

'Autonomy can be constrained if the class is teacher– centred, so the students will be dependent, have no opportunities to interact, collaborate or participate.'

In agreement with views in the literature about teachers' roles and LA (e.g. Han, 2014), PSTs identified a variety of teachers' roles including the role of a facilitator, consultant, resource, manager and encourager that they perceived to promote LA. Furthermore, PSTs highlighted several teaching practices that created opportunities for supporting LA, of which providing choices and encouraging learner independence were the most recurrent in their writings. Other practices included engaging learners in self-assessment, boosting learners' confidence, and building classroom environment that valued freedom, tolerance of mistakes, and learners' involvement. The following comments illustrate some of these ideas.

'to support an autonomous learner, freedom must be given to learners ... They should have the freedom of choosing the nature of the activity they will practice at class, and they should be given constructive feedback.'

'All must be actively involved, the teacher and the learners, in everything that happens in the classroom. The teacher should provide students with a range of learners' options and resources and offer them choices rather than directing them, and encouraging reflection is important.'

The curriculum and prevalent teaching methods were highlighted as critical context related factors that impacted on LA development. For example, exam-driven curricula, dense and rigid content, lack of activities that supported LA, and teacher-centered methods were seen to promote a focus on grades over a focus on setting personal learning goals, and learners' choice and collaborative construction of knowledge. Consequently, opportunities for developing motivation and autonomy for learning were constrained. Pressures on the teacher to cover pre-determined syllabus and teach to the test also were seen to constrain teachers' efforts to promote learners' active participation and control over their learning. The following PSTs' comments illustrate these points.

'I think that the educational environment ... determines whether autonomous learning is effective or not. Students may be encouraged by the teacher to depend on themselves to learn ... However, the pressure on teacher from school administration, inspectors and personal circumstances might not be by the teacher's side. If the teacher gives students more interesting information

beyond the compulsory curriculum just to raise his students' interest in the subject, he may be punished.'

Given the gap between the desirability and feasibility of promoting LA, it could be concluded that the PSTs in this study may have felt that in practice it was challenging to engage learners in autonomy supportive practices. Albeit PSTs showing awareness of opportunities within their context for promoting LA, they were also concerned that limitations inherent within their context could constrain learners' and teachers' attempts to engage in autonomous learning.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the literature by investigating the views a large sample of 219 English language PSTs, compared to previous studies, (see for example: Balçıkanlı, 2010; Camileri Grima, 2007) have about LA and opportunities for its development. The use of a mixed methods approach allowed deeper qualitative analyses and hence overcame limitations of other studies that were primarily quantitative (Borg, & Alshumaimeri, 2019). The current study provides meaningful insights into PSTs' understandings of LA and its development and thus fills a gap that exists in the literature due to the lack of research investigating pre-service teachers' perceptions about LA, particularly in non-Western and collectivist contexts (Khotimah, Basthomi & Eliyanah, 2023; Manzano Vázquez, 2018).

The PSTs in this study had a wide range of beliefs about what LA means, including capacity for independent action and taking control of one's learning, which were in alignment with how LA is defined and described in the literature (e.g., Benson, 2006 & 2011; Dam, 1995; Dang, 2012; Holec, 1981; Nunan, 1996). Responses receiving the highest percentages of agreement from across the questionnaire evidenced that PSTs had an overall positive orientation towards LA and successful language learning which echoes findings from other studies (e.g. Ahmadianzadeh, Seifoori & Tamjid, 2020; Balçıkanlı, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). These responses have also illustrated that these PSTs understood learners' characteristics, issues of power and control, and social aspects of learning to be core aspects of LA. In terms of perspectives (e.g., Benson, 1997 & 2001; Oxford, 2003), this suggests that PSTs' understandings of LA incorporated the psychological, political and socio-cultural perspectives. Furthermore, findings gave insights into how issues of learner independence and control were predominant for understanding LA and its development, and

into the tensions and discrepancies these PSTs held towards opportunities for developing LA in traditional formal education settings.

The PSTs in this study had an overall positive orientation towards LA and effective language learning. They perceived autonomous learners to be more likely to become effective language learners as they had the motivation and confidence to seek language learning and practice opportunities beyond the constraints of traditional classroom setting. However, findings evidenced that these PSTs felt a gap between the desirability of promoting LA than its feasibility; this resonates with findings from other studies (e.g. Balçıkanlı, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016). Findings suggested that these PSTs were mostly concerned that context related factors, particularly the prevalence of teacher-centered approaches and top-down, exam driven curricula, may challenge attempts to engage learners in autonomous learning.

Learner independence emerged as a key issue for understanding LA and its promotion. Findings indicated that these PSTs understood learner independence as situations where learners worked alone particularly outside the classroom (i.e. in the library or in a self-access center) and where teachers' control was limited. Albeit general agreement that teachers played an important role in supporting LA, and unlike the in-service teachers in Borg and Alshumaimeri's study (2019), the PSTs in this study associated LA with learning with little or no help from the teacher which could be interpreted a misconception about LA and teacher intervention (Sinclair, 2000).

These contradictions regarding teacher's role in supporting LA, and the gap between PSTs' views about the desirability and feasibility of promoting LA suggest that these PSTs may have felt tensions among competing beliefs (e.g. beliefs about learner independence as a form of self-learning vs. beliefs about teacher's control as a hallmark of effective teaching, and beliefs about the value of LA vs. beliefs about the ideal/expected teacher's image) (Basturkmen, 2012). These PSTs have clearly expressed feelings of concern, confusion and doubt about the possibility of incorporating autonomy-supportive practices in a culturally appropriate manner that did not pose a threat to their authority or identity as competent teachers. It was striking to note that some PSTs viewed engaging in autonomy supportive practices in their classes to be a supplementary practice to be used on occasional basis so as not to interfere with teacher's 'real job' of teaching.

In discussing the meaning of LA, PSTs discussed the capacity to take control of one's learning as a prominent aspect of LA that involved ability (i.e., knowledge and skills), desire and intention to take control, and freedom to take control (Huang & Benson, 2013). Control denotes having the power and freedom to make decisions and choices and act upon them and includes control over learning management (i.e. planning and monitoring learning), cognitive processes (i.e. noticing and attending to language input) and learning content (i.e. what and how much language to learn) (Benson, 2011; Huang & Benson, 2013). While these PSTs perceived this capacity to incorporate ability and desire on the part of the learner to make choices and decisions about different aspects of their learning, they viewed the freedom to do so to be primarily an attribute of the learning context itself, including teachers and the curriculum. These PSTs were aware that the degree to which teachers were willing to engage learners in all decisions about the course of their learning, and to which the curriculum was flexible and responsive to learners' needs impacted on opportunities for supporting or otherwise constraining learners' freedom to take control of their learning.

It seems that, with the appropriate institutional support, these PSTs would be willing to share control and engage learners in the different aspects of their learning course. Unlike other research that has argued that teachers working in traditional education settings may perceive control sharing as unrealistic and undesirable (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019), this study suggests that, on the theoretical level, these PSTs appreciated the value of teachers engaging learners in making decisions about different aspects of their learning. On a similar vein, Wang and Ryan's (2023) empirical study of the feasibility of fostering LA in traditional Chinese school setting has evidenced that, with institutional support in place, a key determinant of successful promotion of LA was the alignment between teachers' beliefs surrounding autonomy, pedagogy and context and their practices. The study found that teachers who believed in learners' capacity for autonomy and its related pedagogy, and had professional confidence were the ones who offered genuine and abundant opportunities for student control over all aspects of their language learning.

The present findings suggest wider implications within the context of teacher education. Obviously indicated, these PSTs need to resolve issues they hold surrounding LA and its development within their respective formal education setting. They need to engage deeply with their understandings around LA and effective language teaching and

teachers, identity, teacher and learner empowerment, and context. In line with other studies that focused on in-service teachers in traditional settings (Wang & Ryan, 2023) and recommendations in the literature for teacher education (e.g., Vieira, 2009), this study calls for the need of teacher education to provide substantial support for development in PSTs cognition. Furthermore, while it is useful for PSTs to learn about principles and practices for supporting LA, the current study has underscored the necessity for teacher education to intensively expose PSTs to the literature around context-appropriate methodology and LA (e.g. Aoki & Smith, 1999; Lamb, 2004; Kuchah & Smith, 2011; Shamim & Kuchah, 2016; Smith, & Palfreyman, 2003; Smith, Kuchah & Lamb, 2018; Wang, Ryan, 2023), and provide opportunities for PSTs to reflect on context appropriate forms of LA and opportunities and challenges inherent within their respective context for promoting LA.

Research Limitations

The researcher is aware that several factors may have formed limitations in this exploratory research. These factors include the self-selection bias and single-site scope as the participants in this study were mainly volunteers who chose to respond to the survey and complete the writing task, and they all came from the same initial teacher education institute. These factors may have impacts on the extent to which research findings are transferable to other contexts and settings. However, as the primary goal of this exploratory research study was to provide insights and understandings, rather than confirm or produce generalizable findings, these limitations served the specific goals of preliminarily exploring the under-researched area of PSTs' views and understandings about LA. For future follow-up research, the researcher recommends that more robust sampling methods and larger and multi-site scales could be used to ensure that generalizability of findings.

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