



The Impact of In-service Teacher Training Course on Iranian EFL Teachers' Practices and Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

The learner autonomy is a concept that is increasingly becoming popular in English Language Teaching. This quasi-experimental mixed-method study sought to explore the effect of in-service teacher training on Iranian EFL teachers' practices and perceptions of learner autonomy. Selected through convenience sampling, 20 EFL teachers took part in the study by enrolling in a 30-hour in-service teacher training focusing on promoting teachers' practices and perceptions of learner autonomy. To this end, three instruments were used to collect the data: Learner Autonomy Questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), classroom observation, and semi-structured interview. Two repeated-measures ANOVAs were separately run by SPSS v26 to analyze the collected quantitative data, the results of which showed the significant effects of in-service teacher training on teachers' practices ($F = 237.52, p = .00, \eta^2 = .92$) and perceptions ($F = 93.57, p = .00, \eta^2 = .83$) of learner autonomy. Furthermore, a theme analysis was conducted to analyze the qualitative data collected through interview, the results of which indicated that teachers' beliefs with regard to learner autonomy grow to be comprehensive and multi-faceted resulting in greater use of reflective practices, goal-setting, and collaborative problem solving. These findings corroborate the existing literature, including, but not limited to Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Farahani (2013), while also emphasizing the need to incorporate practical training as a component in teacher development programs (TDP) in a bid to transform knowledge into practices within the classroom. These findings are relevant to curriculum development, teacher training, and future learner autonomy research in EFL contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a shift towards fostering autonomy among students in English language teaching which is a marked departure from older traditional styles of teaching. This modern advance in learning is closely related to other large socio-educational phenomena. In doing so, it responds to and also creates highly effective paradigms for teaching and changes many societal norms.

Holec (1981) stated "Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning." This is a definition which is broadly acceptable. This notion of autonomy reshapes the role of learners and educators within the educational paradigm. Autonomy helps the learners to get actively involved in the learning processes that motivate them intrinsically and deepen their language learning outcomes.

Because of the new understanding of learners and teaching strategies with a focus on independence, autonomy has evolved to be more than just a pedagogical modification, Benson (2011). This encompasses realignment philosophically which sees education as a social case that can produce a soundly competent learner who can effectively participate and contribute to his community. Such educational philosophies instill the need to adopt methods such as teaching self-regulation, critical thinking, analysis, and a true commitment for personal and career advancement.

In the past decade, there has been a major shift in the field of TEFL that makes it crucial for practitioners to follow a model of continuing professional development. These mentors can be teachers and trainers ranging in scope of continuing professional development (CPD) in relation to TEFL, from fully fledged teaching training courses, through focused workshops, to informal mentoring. All of these aim at empowering teachers in teaching. For Richards and Farrell (2005), such activities in particular focus on improving teacher professionalism, and aiding teachers to move from a teacher-dominated learning process to active, learner-centered, self-governing, participatory pedagogy.

While the educational institutions have sought to understand the importance of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), literature suggests that there isn't enough systematic research conducted on the impacts of CPD approaches like mentorship and in-service training on self-directed learning in the Iranian context.

This is equally true regarding the influence of mentorship and training on the teachers' achievement of self-directed learning in their practices. Such a vague understanding and lack of actual application has an overarching imperative for research that evaluates the efficiency of these interventions and investigates the device for triggering a pedagogical shift in teachers' practices

and thoughts.

To fill this research gap, the current study investigates the impact of in-service training on practices and perceptions of learner autonomy in Iranian EFL teachers. The study seeks to identify the most effective strategies for fostering educational practices that are consistent with the principles of learner autonomy. The study aims to effectively implement these changes in two ways, which stems from theoretical and practical evidence in order to significantly contribute towards the already seen discussion on effective approaches to teacher training in EFL settings.

Additionally, it aims to provide relevant and useful information to teachers, course developers, and even policymakers. This could be achieved by improving the quality of language teaching through effective and professional teacher training programs.

Review of Related Literature

The majority of the research done in the domain of learner autonomy towards the ELT teachers' practices and perceptions can be divided into three broad types: 1) research concentrating on teachers' beliefs with regard to learner autonomy (Bashiri, Hadidi, and Seifoori 2014; Bullock 2011), 2) research concentrating on both teachers' beliefs and practices oriented towards learner autonomy in learning a language (Al Asmari 2013; Borg and Al-Busaidi 2011; Borg and Al-Busaidi 2012; Dogan 2015), and 3) research done on beliefs and practices of both teachers and learners about learner autonomy (Anderson 2015; Farahani 2013).

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) are among the most famous scholars who analyzed how the teachers' beliefs and their practices of learner autonomy interfaced. They employed a mixed-method approach in which questionnaires evaluated the teachers' beliefs, and interviews assessed their autonomy-developing techniques in the classroom. Their findings showed that teachers assisted the learners in the decision-making process, and this had very good effects on the learners' motivation and autonomy. Nonetheless, the study was limited in breadth because it did not incorporate classroom observations for assessing how the teachers' declared beliefs correlate with their practices in the classroom.

Farahani (2013) claimed to analyze the gap between the teachers' practices and perceptions and those of the learners from the perspective of the Iranian context. His findings demonstrated that teachers perceived learners as unmotivated to take up any autonomous learning, whereas learners, on the contrary, believed that teachers do not use sufficient autonomy-facilitating strategies. This gap identifies the need for custom designed professional development which integrates TTC in order to bridge teachers' perceptions and practices of learner

autonomy in the classroom.

Professional development has been shown to enhance teachers' beliefs and practices related to learner autonomy, which is not contested (Richards and Farrell 2005; Borg 2018). Training teachers is one of the effective ways of professional development, which enables teachers to abandon traditional teaching styles that have been described as "teacher-centered" to more learner-centered practices.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011) for instance, noted that PD programs increased the effectiveness with which teachers implemented learner autonomy strategies. They did, however, emphasize the need for context specific PD, which meets the requirements of the learners and the teachers.

Outside of traditional training programs, in-service training as a form of PD has also been viewed as an important aspect in the growing autonomy of teachers' beliefs and practices. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) and others have maintained that training enhances teachers' professional practices and also their classroom teaching. Training can assist teachers in understanding and executing autonomy-facilitating practices by providing them with sustained and active interaction with head teachers and other senior colleagues.

According to Mann and Walsh (2017), other researchers advanced the assertion that the focus of PD practices is reflective teachers who would be able to effectively integrate their perceptions of self with their autonomy supporting strategies.

It is evident that there is extensive literature about the role of learner autonomy within PD. However, there is still insufficient understanding of how PD practices like Teacher Training Courses (TTCs) impact teachers' attitudes towards learner autonomy. Boris and Al-Busaidi (2012) emphasized the need for more empirical investigations on how particular forms of PD assist teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards learner autonomy. Other scholars have tried to shed more light to this aspect. For example, Yuzulia (2020) studied the perceptions of EFL teachers regarding autonomous learners and the strategies they employed in learner independence, finding out that both, experienced and novice teachers, understand the need for student-centered learning but seem to possess different levels of optimism and willingness to promote student autonomy. Likewise, Mouni (2024) researched the practices and believes of English language teacher educators regarding independence in learning and noted some of the barriers such as psychological, institutional, and socio-cultural factors that inhibit English language teaching from advancing autonomous learning. All of these studies point out the gap that exists in the effectiveness of these PD programs in changing teachers' attitudes and approaches towards learner autonomy.

Considering this gap, the current study tries to explore how teacher training courses impacts Iranian EFL teachers' practices and perceptions of learner autonomy. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the in-service teacher training program significantly affect Iranian EFL teachers' practices of learner autonomy?
2. To what extent does the in-service teacher training program significantly affect Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy?

The present study contributes to the current discourse on learner autonomy and the role of professional development in EFL contexts. It intends to provide practical ideas for practitioners, curriculum designers, and policymakers trying to promote teacher development and enhance autonomous learning in the Iranian EFL context.

METHOD

Participants

This language institute from Iran has twenty English teachers. For training needs analysis, the R&D Department chose them based on the criteria that head teachers and supervisors set by observing the teachers. All of them attended some professional development training as it was provided by the institute. Participants included male and female teachers aged 25 to 45 years regardless of their years of teaching. Although these factors were noted, they were not analyzed in the study because the main focus was solely on the influence of in-service training on teachers' views and practices concerning learner autonomy.

The teachers participated in a 30-hour in-service training course. The training focused on enhancing the teachers' understanding of learner autonomy and empowering them with practical strategies to foster learners' autonomy through implementing autonomy-supporting teaching practices in the classroom.

In the selection of the teachers, the R&D department considered three essential instructional competencies: planning, presentation and goal achievement. These criteria showed the degree of the teachers' familiarity with teaching methodologies.

Instruments

In the present study, three instruments were used to collect data: Learner Autonomy Questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), observation checklist and a semi-structured interview which were specifically designed and developed for this study. This questionnaire is a 37-item scale which was designed to measure teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. The reliability of

the original questionnaire was .83 according to Borg and Al-Busaidi, (2012). This reliability is acceptable based on Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007). Its reliability was again checked related to the present context and showed an index of .089. In the present research the participants completed the questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale. The possible score ranged from 30 to 185. Higher scores showed stronger beliefs and more autonomy-supportive practices.

The second instrument was an observation checklist specifically designed and utilized to analyze the teachers' practical implementation of autonomy fostering tasks and practices. The checklist covered items categorized into key factors ensuring the practices of learner-autonomy strategies and activities. They were tasks which could engage learners in curriculum planning, foster learning-how-to-learn strategies, encourage out-of-class activities, increase learner participation, and implementing (self-)evaluation techniques. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always) to display the approximate number of the autonomy-promoting practices that the teacher uses in each lesson.

The validity of the checklist's content was evaluated by a team of experienced head teachers who were all certified trainers with more than 10 years' experience in teaching and training teachers who worked as mentors and headteachers in the institute. To further increase the reliability of the checklists' contents, they were piloted across three classes and detailed feedback was provided by the headteachers. The items in the checklist were all aligned with the corresponding constructs in the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ).

To collect data, observers used the checklist to record the teachers' behaviors indicating autonomy developing strategies. They included practices such as involving students in lesson planning, integrating reflective self-assessment activities, and reducing teacher talk time to encourage learner agency. Each teacher was scored based on each item and an overall score to measure their implementation of autonomy-supporting practices. This could help the researcher to ensure a comprehensive and standardized evaluation of the teachers' practices and the possibility of analyzing the data quantitatively.

The third instrument was a semi-structured interview which was designed to study the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy more deeply and meticulously. It was also performed to identify challenges the teachers could encounter in fostering learner autonomy. The interview had four main questions with follow-ups specifically designed to elicit detailed answers. The first question dealt with how teachers conceptualize learner autonomy. The second question focused on the teachers' perceptions of autonomy's importance and the third

one considered the instructional practices they use to develop autonomy. The fourth question focused on the challenges they face in encouraging autonomy among the learners. The interviews were either conducted face-to-face or through video calls, which took an average of 20 minutes for each. They were all transcribed for analysis.

These instruments together provided quantitative and qualitative insights into teachers' practices, perceptions, and challenges related to learner autonomy.

Procedure

This study, which consisted of three phases, was conducted over a period of 60 days. The phases were pre-training assessment, teacher training intervention, and post-training assessment. The aim of the research was to evaluate the impact of in-service teacher training on EFL teachers' practices and perceptions in relation with learner autonomy.

In the first phase, all the 20 teachers received a validated Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ). This questionnaire which was designed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) included 37 Likert-scale items to assess teachers' initial perceptions of learner autonomy. The items focused on key aspects of autonomy-supportive beliefs and practices such as developing independent learning and encouraging self-regulating students. The participants were required to rate their agreement with the items separately on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). At this stage the research provided baseline data on the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy before they receive any training. Furthermore, the teachers' classroom practices were observed and evaluated using an observation check list which was completed during each observation by a head teacher.

Every teacher was evaluated in regard to their performance in four sessions of teaching, whereby each session was marked against a set criterion by a teacher with higher authority. The checklist had items on the frequency and quality of defining practices where autonomy was granted, like participation of students into the making of curriculum, highlighting learning-to-learn approaches, and sponsoring out-of-class activities. The aim was to gain an overall understanding of the teachers' performance prior to the training intervention.

The second section was a course of 30 hours of in-service training, which was meant to bring a change on how teachers understand the concept of learner autonomy and how they promote autonomy-supportive teaching practices. The training was divided into three parts: Covering Theoretical Foundations, Practical Strategies, and Hands-on Practice. The Theoretical Foundations offered an overview on the concept of learner autonomy and its relevance to contemporary English language

teaching. On the other hand, the Practical Strategies trained the teachers on self-directed learning, lesson delivery with minimal talk time, and students working actively in all the lessons. The last part, hands-on-practice, enabled teachers to plan, present and evaluate model lessons focused on the strategies. The focus was on producing independent learners through self-assessment tasks, reflective exercises, and group work. Since these sessions were participatory, each participant was able to practice the techniques and to get comments from other participants or the trainer, which helped them master the concept of autonomy-supportive teaching better.

In the third phase, the same Learner Autonomy Questionnaire was given to the same group of participants in order to assess the changes in their perceptions after undergoing the training. This step allowed for direct matching of pre-training and post-training shifts in teachers' responses concerning a learner's autonomy.

After the training, the observation checklist from the pre-training phase was used to evaluate the teachers' classroom practices in terms of the newly acquired skills on four other occasions. This served the purpose of ensuring that the same standards set during the pre-training phase were maintained so that there would be a basis for comparison of the practices before and after the training events.

Despite the quantitative methods previously described, such as the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) and classroom observations with checklists, a more comprehensive method was incorporated to better understand the teachers' view of learner autonomy which was in-depth qualitative interviews with some selected participants.

The aim of this project was to interview ten teachers that were drawn at random from the participating teachers in the training. Every teacher chosen was interviewed on two different occasions, once prior to their training course and again after they completed their training. The primary reason for this two-stage interview format was to more accurately examine the shift in the participants' views regarding learner autonomy.

Interview Design and Questions

The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide with four overarching questions designed to elicit intelligent and elaborate responses from the interviewees. These overarching questions addressed the four components of learner autonomy as follows: Conceptualization of Learner Autonomy (Q1) "What does learner autonomy mean to you? This aims at understanding and defining learner autonomy by teachers. The second one deals with

the significance of Learner Autonomy (Q2): "Is it important (desirable) for you to have autonomous learners?" This question is posed for ascertaining the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in regard to the English language teaching practices. The third question deals with learner-autonomy-enhancing techniques (Q3): "How is it possible for you to develop independent learners (techniques)?" This question seeks the approaches and methods that teachers thought would be helpful in enhancing learner autonomy. Finally, the fourth question is about the Problem of Promoting Autonomy (Q4): "What problems do you face in developing learner autonomy in your classrooms?" This question examines the problems and obstacles the teachers encounter while trying to foster autonomy in learners.

The interviews were either face-to-face or conducted through video calls depending on the participant's schedules. Each of the interviews lasted roughly 20-30 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the participants. The recordings were transcribed word for word to capture the teachers' statements accurately.

The quantitative and qualitative data collected through learner autonomy questionnaire (LAQ), the classroom observation checklist, and interview were combined to meet the research objectives in a comprehensive manner.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the classroom observation checklist and the learner autonomy questionnaire were analyzed running repeated-measures ANOVAs in SPSS v26 to examine the changes in teachers' practices and perceptions of learner autonomy before and after the in-service teacher training. Also, the semi-structured interviews were subjected to qualitative analysis through the thematic analysis procedures outlined by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007). The coded transcribed responses were thematically analyzed, focusing on how often the participants' ideas concerning comprehension, implementation, and difficulties faced with learner autonomy emerged.

RESULTS

Assumptions

First, the data were probed for missing cases, outliers, and influential observations, and no violations were detected. To test the data for normal distribution, a Shapiro-Wilk test was run, the results of which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Shapiro-Wilk Normality Tests

Variable	Statistic	Sig.
Practice Pretest	.97	.76
Practice Posttest	.90	.05
Perception Pretest	.95	.42
Perception Posttest	.97	.78

As presented in Table 1, the scores given to teachers for their classroom practice in fostering learner autonomy were normally distributed in the pretest stage ($p > .05$); however, the results of normality test were marginally significant for the posttest scores as the p-value of which was found to be the cut-off point of statistical significance ($p = .05$). Even if it is considered that the posttest scores did not follow a normal distribution, ANOVA can

still be run as it is quite robust to violations of normality (e.g., Field, 2009). Furthermore, the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy was found to be normally distributed both in the pretest and posttest stages ($p > .05$). The results of running Mauchly's test of sphericity, as another assumption of repeated-measures ANOVA, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

Within-Subject Effect	W	X^2	df	Sig.	Epsilon		
					Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-Bound
Practice	1.00	.00	0	.	1.00	1.00	1.00
Perception	1.00	.00	0	.	1.00	1.00	1.00

As shown in Table 2, the results of Mauchly's test indicated the assumption of sphericity is violated for both EFL teachers' classroom practice in fostering learner autonomy ($W = 1.00$, $X^2 = .00$, $p < .05$) and their perceptions of learner autonomy ($W = 1.00$, $X^2 = .00$, $p < .05$). The Greenhouse-Geisser correction was thus applied.

Descriptive Statistics

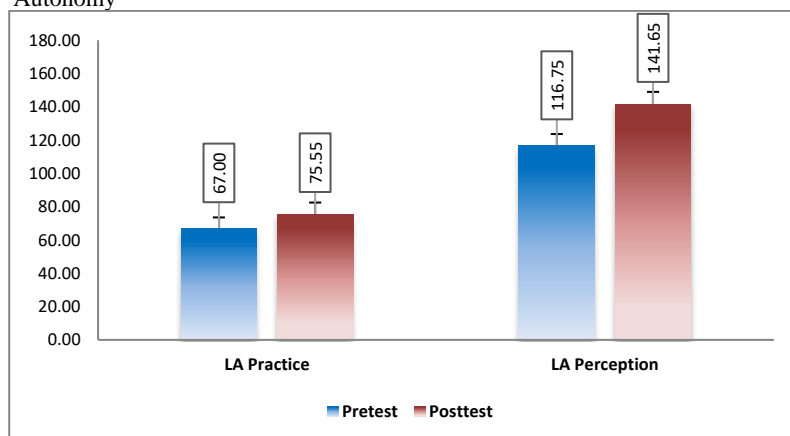
The descriptive statistics of EFL teachers' classroom practice in fostering learner autonomy and their perceptions of learner autonomy in the pretest and posttest stages are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy

Variable	Stage	Mean	SD	N
Practice	Pretest	67.00	6.56	20
	Posttest	75.55	6.92	20
Perception	Pretest	116.75	6.88	20
	Posttest	141.65	7.32	20

Figure 1

Mean Scores and Std. Deviations of Teachers' Practices and Perceptions of Learner Autonomy



As presented in Table 3 and Figure 1, the mean scores and standard deviations of learner autonomy practices in the pretest and posttest stages were found to be 67.00 ± 6.56 and 75.55 ± 6.92 , respectively, indicating an increase in the scores of EFL teachers' classroom practices in fostering learner autonomy. Similarly, those of learner autonomy perceptions were found to be 116.75 ± 6.88 and 141.65 ± 7.32 , respectively, showing a rise in the scores of EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. To see whether these changes in the scores from the pretest to

posttest stages are statistically significant, repeated-measures ANOVA was used, the results of which are as presented below.

Effect of In-Service Teacher Training on Teachers' Practices of Learner Autonomy

To answer the first research question and to see whether and to what extent the in-service teacher training significantly affects the EFL teachers' classroom practices in fostering learner autonomy, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted, the results of which are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4
Multivariate Tests for Teachers' Practices of Learner Autonomy

Effect	Value	F	H. df	E. df	Sig.	P. Eta Squared
Time	Pillai's Trace	.92	237.52	1.00	19.00	.00
	Wilks' Lambda	.07	237.52	1.00	19.00	.00
	Hotelling's Trace	12.50	237.52	1.00	19.00	.00
	Roy's Largest Root	12.50	237.52	1.00	19.00	.00

As presented in Table 4, the main effect of time on the EFL teachers' practices of learner autonomy is significant ($F = 237.52$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .92$), and the partial eta squared values shows a very large effect

size, indicating that the changes over time in the teachers' practices of learner autonomy are statistically significant.

Table 5
Tests of Within-Subjects Effects for Teachers' Practices of Learner Autonomy

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	P. Eta Squared
Time	Sphericity Assumed	731.02	1	731.02	237.52	.00
	Greenhouse-Geisser	731.02	1.00	731.02	237.52	.00
	Huynh-Feldt	731.02	1.00	731.02	237.52	.00
	Lower-bound	731.02	1.00	731.02	237.52	.00
Error	Sphericity Assumed	58.47	19	3.07		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	58.47	19.00	3.07		
	Huynh-Feldt	58.47	19.00	3.07		
	Lower-bound	58.47	19.00	3.07		

As presented in Table 5 above, since the assumption of sphericity is violated, the values in the row of Greenhouse-Geisser are taken into consideration. The results showed that the main effect of time ($F = 237.52, p < .05, \eta^2 = .92$) on the EFL teachers' practices of learner autonomy is significant. Also, the partial eta squared value indicates a very large effect size. Therefore, the scores given to the EFL teachers' practice of learner autonomy significantly increased from pretest to posttest; and it is thus concluded that the in-service

teacher training significantly promoted their classroom practice in fostering learner autonomy.

Effect of In-Service Teacher Training on EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

To answer the second research question and to see whether and to what extent the in-service teacher training significantly affects the EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy, a repeated-measures ANOVA was run again, whose results are as shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
Multivariate Tests for Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

Multivariate Tests for Perceptions of Learner Autonomy							
Effect		Value	F	H. df	E. df	Sig.	P. Eta Squared
Time	Pillai's Trace	.83	93.57	1.00	19.00	.00	.83
	Wilks' Lambda	.16	93.57	1.00	19.00	.00	.83
	Hotelling's Trace	4.92	93.57	1.00	19.00	.00	.83
	Roy's Largest Root	4.92	93.57	1.00	19.00	.00	.83

As presented in Table 6, the main effect of time on the EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy is significant ($F = 93.57, p < .05, \eta^2 = .83$), and the partial eta squared values shows a large

effect size, indicating that the changes over time in the teachers' scores of learner autonomy perceptions are statistically significant.

Table 7
Tests of Within-Subjects Effects for Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects for Perceptions of Learner Autonomy							
Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	P. Eta Squared
Time	Sphericity Assumed	6200.10	1	6200.10	93.57	.00	.83
	Greenhouse-Geisser	6200.10	1.00	6200.10	93.57	.00	.83
	Huynh-Feldt	6200.10	1.00	6200.10	93.57	.00	.83
	Lower-bound	6200.10	1.00	6200.10	93.57	.00	.83
Error	Sphericity Assumed	1258.90	19	66.25			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1258.90	19.00	66.25			
	Huynh-Feldt	1258.90	19.00	66.25			
	Lower-bound	1258.90	19.00	66.25			

As presented in Table 7, as the assumption of sphericity is violated, the values in the row of Greenhouse-Geisser are taken into consideration. The results showed the main effect of time ($F = 93.57, p < .05, \eta^2 = .83$) on the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy is significant. The partial eta squared value indicates a large effect size. Therefore, the scores of learner autonomy perceptions obtained by the teachers significantly increased from pretest to posttest, and the in-service teacher training significantly contributed to their perceptions of learner autonomy.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Cohen, Manion and Morrison's data collection and collection data from LAQ, classroom observations, and interviews were conducted using

a mixed-methods approach. Diverse quantitative analyses were conducted combining descriptive statistics and repeated measures for ANOVA in understanding the breakdown of the participants' beliefs and practices towards learner autonomy pre- and post-in-service training. The qualitative part of the analysis was drawn on thematic analysis as described by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007). Responses were grouped into themes related to participants' self-reports of their understanding, using, and facing difficulties in learner autonomy. Their claims were supported by the claimed statistically significant changes in practices ($F = 237.52, p = .00, \eta^2 = .92$) and in perceptions ($F = 93.57, p = .00, \eta^2 = .83$) which suggests that the in-service training has considerably improved the teachers' autonomy-supportive teaching beliefs and

activities.

Qualitative Interpretation of the Interview Data

In addition to the questionnaires analyzed, the qualitative aspect of this study captures interviews conducted with a sample of 10 teachers before and after the teacher training course. Thematic coding was used to group teachers' responses into themes with respect to all four questions asked during the interview.

Q1: Definition of Learner Autonomy

Pre-Training: In this phase, teachers referred to learner autonomy as 'self-study' or 'learning without a teacher', which implied limited understanding.

Post-Training: Autonomy was defined in the first place by emphasizing the responsibility, choices, and self-regulation of the learner in detail. This understanding was much deeper.

Q2: Importance of Learner Autonomy

Table 8

Summary of the Key Themes Used by the Teachers Before and After the Training

Theme	Pre-Training (%)	Post-Training (%)
Learner responsibility and decision-making	20	75
Self-regulation and reflective practices	15	65
Emphasis on lifelong learning	10	60
Specific strategies for fostering autonomy	25	80
Awareness of institutional and learner challenges	30	85

These findings point towards a wide positive change in teachers' views and practices after the training, in comparison with Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). These also highlight that professional development does improve learner autonomy in EFL settings.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicated that the in-service training for teachers remarkably improved their practices and perceptions of learner autonomy among Iranian EFL teachers. The results showed significant gains in both dimensions of practices and perceptions with large effect sizes ($F = 237.52$, $p = .00$, $\eta^2 = .92$ for practices; $F = 93.57$, $p = .00$, $\eta^2 = .83$ for perceptions) after the course. These findings corroborate existing studies concerning the impact of professional development on learner autonomy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Richards & Farrell, 2005) regarding the positive effects of teacher education on language teachers' practices and perceptions of learner autonomy.

Pre-Training: Teachers accepted it as important but made vague remarks like 'it leads to better learning outcomes'.

Post-Training: Recognized its importance for sustaining learned concepts, applying critical thinking, and real-world situations.

Q3: Strategies to Promote Learner Autonomy

Pre-Training: Mentioned some strategies like giving homework as a soft attempt to promote autonomy, but no clear attempts were made.

Post-Training: Teachers defined plans which comprised self-reflective assessment, group activities, and online learning tools, as measures to promote autonomy.

Q4: Challenges in Promoting Learner Autonomy

Pre-Training: Teachers mentioned lack of interest as a challenge which is too general in my opinion.

Post-Training: Teachers offered two key findings out of which one is an institutional barrier and the other one focuses on the devised solutions to the problems and obstacles set on the students.

Shifts in teachers' conceptual understanding of learner autonomy upholds Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy as the learners' ability to self-direct their learning. Teachers had commonly synthesized autonomy in learners to mean self-study and very little teacher assistance, a misconception Agustina (2017) pointed out. Responses after the training depicted an enhanced level of complexity, where teachers highlighted goal setting, decision-making, and reflective practices as essential elements of autonomy. This conceptual change is in line with the work of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), who found such attainments following their teacher training interventions. Similarly, it is in line with Ahmadianzadeh et al. (2021), which was conducted in the Iranian context, showing the positive effects of educating teachers in learner autonomy on their perceptions and practices.

There are similarities and differences between this study's findings and those of previous research. An example is the work from Farahani (2013) who found gaps between a teacher's principles and

practices in the classroom regarding learner autonomy. In comparison, the current research suggested that teachers' perceptions and their reporting of autonomy-supportive strategy use after the training was much more consistent with the trained strategy usage. This consistency means that the practice-oriented and structured nature of the training provided the solution to a problem which had been highlighted in one of the pieces of research earlier on.

Improvement in the teachers' practices resonates with findings from Ingersoll and Strong (2011), who highlighted the rigor of mentoring in improving the teaching learning process. The teachers in this study claimed to have increased the employment of collaborative exercises, journals, and discussions with the students as activities that promote a self-directed learning culture. These findings support the premise that comprehensive teacher training programs should include sufficient elements of practice to enable participants to translate theory into practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Notwithstanding these results, the study noted that certain issues exist in fostering learner autonomy, which is consistent with prior studies in regard to English teachers' beliefs (Karimi & Nazari, 2017; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Interviews conducted prior to training raised ambiguous matters such as 'low levels of engagement from learners', which later transformed into much more defined problems such as institutional barriers and students' lack of knowledge about the principles of autonomy. This change signifies a more intricate thoughtful understanding of the context of teachers' challenges, which is line with those reported in Ahmadianzadeh et al. (2021).

These challenges occurred following the training, as is corroborated by Mann and Walsh (2017), who claimed that practices where reflection is used are necessary for autonomous learning environments. Interestingly, participants reported having higher levels of confidence in their ability to solve such issues by using gradual release of responsibility, student-initiated work, and dialogue on how to learn.

The study corroborates Nunan's (2003) statement regarding the necessity of shifting control away from teachers if learner autonomy is to be achieved. The qualitative analysis showed some increased willingness among teachers towards this form of distributed control, as post-training interviews demonstrated self-reported enhanced ability to facilitate the students' active goal setting, task

identifying, and self-evaluation.

The study also uncovered issues parallel to those presented in earlier inquiries. For example, teachers pointed out institutional limitations such as inflexible curricula and insufficient funding as obstacles to engaging in autonomy-enhancing behaviors. These difficulties have also been noted by Karimi and Nazari (2017), who underscore the conflict that exists between highly centralized educational systems and effective autonomous learning in a more relaxed setting. It was suggested by teachers of the current study that these obstacles can be lessened by appropriate context-driven training and more support from the learners' institutions. This issue could be a helpful implication for institutional policymakers to create change by drawing on teachers' professional suggestions and practical alternatives.

Moreover, the study found learner-related challenges, particularly passive learners' reluctance towards autonomy in learning because of excessive prior exposure to traditional methods of teaching. This is in accordance with Benson (2011) where it has been suggested that fostering greater learner independence does not come automatically and has to be carefully implemented. The participants' accounts of utilizing reflective journals, engaging in peer interaction, and inquiry-based instruction to facilitate learning revealed how these strategies can be used in practice, findings that add novel insights to those mentioned by Benson (2011).

The findings of this study furthermore enrich the debates regarding the effectiveness of teacher training programs in relation to teachers' beliefs and practices. The improvements noted in both areas suggest the effectiveness of training programs that seek to blend practical work with theoretical knowledge. These findings support Richards and Farrell's (2005) conclusions that asserted the importance of tackling both mental and physical aspects of teaching during professional development to bring about effective changes in the teaching practice.

Nonetheless, some of what this study uncovered contradicted the beliefs teachers seemed to hold in the interviews. In post-training interviews, respondents expressed strong support for strategies that promote autonomy, but in classroom observations, some teachers were still using more traditional, teacher-dominated approaches. That divergence seems to be also the case as presented by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), where teachers' beliefs

and practices do not correspond within their working environments. While contextual issues may be the major source of such an incongruity, these discrepancies reveal the importance of follow-up activities that are practice-oriented to strengthen supportive autonomy behaviors.

These results have important practical implications. Language institutes and educational administrators have to plan the incorporation of autonomy components into the content of teacher training. Teachers can be trained to use autonomy-enhancing techniques through practice in training sessions that allow for verbal reflection. In this way, teachers can become prepared and willing to address learner autonomy in the classroom. Additionally, these institutions need to be more accepting of rigid curricular structures that make it difficult for students' needs to be met.

To summarize, this article substantiates the notion that EFL teachers' practices and perceptions of learner autonomy are positively influenced by in-service teacher training. The notable gains recorded in both areas of focus tend to suggest that the training was successful in correcting conceptual errors in learners, providing practices, and encouraging reflection. With these findings, this research adds to the conversation about teacher learning and learner autonomy in EFL with Andragogic Pedagogy. Such Sustainable Development Goals can be assisted through research on the long-lasting effects of teacher training.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate how useful in-service teacher training positively affects practices and perceptions of learner autonomy among Iranian EFL teachers. Even though the sample was limited to only 20 participants from a single institution, the results showed high levels of development in the understanding of autonomy and in the implementation of supportive strategies in the actual classroom. These findings corroborate earlier studies that noted the impact of training and professional development in learning driven by autonomy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Richards & Farrell, 2005). On the other hand, findings also suggest that just having theoretical knowledge is not enough; there needs to be an integration of actual experience in the use of autonomy, as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory dictates.

One of the more striking contributions of this research is the need to rectify inaccurate notions

regarding learner autonomy, such as total freedom from the teacher's influence, which is unfounded. Interviews conducted before the training exposed surface definitions of autonomy, which were later replaced in the post-training interviews with more mature notions of responsibility, decision making, and reflections on learning. These new concepts are quite similar to what Agustina (2017) reported as a result of strategically focused training programs.

The research showed that challenges remain to be addressed regarding sustaining autonomy-supportive practices. Respondents frequently cited institutional constraints, such as inflexible curricula and scarce funding. This supports Karimi and Nazari's (2017) claim that centralized educational policies stifle creativity in teaching. Furthermore, the teachers mentioned that one of the barriers was students' lack of understanding of the autonomy principles, a problem raised by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) too. Participants were trained on how to solve these problems through self-reflection, self-evaluation, group work, and gradual fading of adult control.

The practical implications of these findings suggest the necessity for sustained practice-based training programs. As Ingersoll and Strong (2011) state, these mentoring programs can assist teachers with feedback and help further integrate autonomy-supportive strategies into the curriculum. Such programs should be incorporated into teacher training programs alongside policies that allow for greater adaptability to the needs of different learners.

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