



Challenges of Learner Autonomy in the Iranian EFL Context: Teachers and Learners' Perceptions

Ahmad Nasiri¹Abbas Ali Zarei^{2*} Rajab Esfandiari³ 

Abstract

The study of EFL in Iran reveals complex challenges faced by both teachers and learners, particularly in fostering learner autonomy. This qualitative study explored the challenges to learner autonomy in the Iranian EFL context through semi-structured interviews with 17 teachers and 13 learners selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation from various educational settings. Thematic analysis using MAXQDA was employed to identify recurrent themes related to the challenges. Findings revealed that both groups face significant obstacles, primarily stemming from curriculum rigidity, which includes prescriptive syllabi, an overemphasis on standardized testing, rote memorization, and severe time constraints. Teachers also reported barriers related to their adherence to traditional teacher-centered approaches, limited understanding of innovative methods, and insufficient professional development, alongside perceiving learners' lack of motivation and passive learning styles as hindrances. Learners, conversely, highlighted the focus of curriculum on memorization, assessment methods prioritizing grammar over practical language use, and a lack of personalized guidance from instructors, compounded by personal struggles with initiative, time management, and cultural influences. The study concludes that comprehensive educational reform is essential, advocating for more flexible curricula, diversified assessment methods, continuous teacher professional development, supportive learning environments, and a cultural shift towards valuing autonomy to enhance student engagement, language proficiency, and lifelong learning.

Keywords: Autonomy, Challenges, Curriculum Rigidity, Educational Reform, Lifelong Learning, Prescriptive Syllabi, Professional Development.

The notion of learner autonomy has emerged as a crucial area of inquiry within language education, drawing increasing attention for its role in enhancing educational outcomes (Mynard, 2024). Broadly defined as the capacity of learners to take control of their own learning processes (Loeng, 2020), learner autonomy is recognized as a fundamental principle that

* Review History:

Received: 06/06/2025

Revised: 19/10/2025

Accepted: 15/11/2025

¹ PhD., Candidate, Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran; ahmadnasiri2005@yahoo.com

^{2*} Professor, Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran. (Corresponding author) a.zarei@hum.ikiu.ac.ir

³ Professor, Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran; esfandiari@hum.ikiu.ac.ir

How to cite this article:

Nasiri, A., Zarei, A. Ali and Esfandiari, R. (2026). Challenges of Learner Autonomy in the Iranian EFL Context: Teachers and Learners' Perceptions. *Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly*, 45(2), 121-146.
<https://doi.org/10.22099/tesl.2025.53432.3421>

underpins effective educational experiences. However, the promotion of learner autonomy is not without its difficulties, as learners may lack experience and require substantial support from teachers to develop the necessary skills ([Alibakhshi, 2015](#)). Additionally, in certain contexts where there are pressures to cover specific content or prepare students for standardized tests, it can be challenging to provide learners with the time and resources needed to explore topics independently ([Xie, 2015](#)). Despite these challenges, research has shown that promoting learner autonomy in language classrooms can lead to higher levels of language proficiency, motivation, and engagement ([Karagöl, 2008](#)).

Due to the highly significant nature of learner autonomy in education, substantial research has been done worldwide in general and in the Iranian context in particular, each highlighting one aspect of learner autonomy. Supportive learning environments promoting collaboration, teacher scaffolding, and authentic communication, for instance, are shown to enhance learner autonomy significantly ([Han, 2021](#)). Additionally, the integration of technology, such as learning management systems, provides valuable tools for personalized learning and self-regulation which are fundamental for autonomy promotion ([Abdolhosseinzadeh et al., 2024](#); [Asyari, 2024](#)). Rigid structures in educational contexts have also been proved to hinder learner autonomy due to standardized curricula and high-stakes exams ([Au, 2022](#)), compounded by insufficient teacher training in learner-centered approaches ([An & Mindrila, 2020](#)). Addressing these contextual factors requires comprehensive strategies, including curriculum reform ([Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2015](#); [Riahipour et al., 2020](#)), professional development for teachers ([Aliakbari & Sadeghi, 2022](#); [Alrabai, 2021](#); [Barabadi et al., 2024](#); [Saeb et al., 2021](#)), and creating nurturing environments that encourage collaboration, risk-taking, and self-reflection ([Salimi & Najjarpour, 2023](#)).

The significance of this research lies in its identification of the gaps and challenges inherent in the current educational practices surrounding learner autonomy in Iran. While educational organizations have made efforts to reform language education, many educators remain entrenched in traditional, teacher-centered approaches that inhibit the development of autonomous learners ([Beiki et al., 2020](#)), so the research strives to delve deeply into the challenges which are the common concern of both teachers and learners so as to make researchers eager to investigate about the possible strategies that would pave the way for amendment in autonomy development. Furthermore, the significance of this research extends to its potential contributions toward the practical implementation of learner autonomy in the context under investigation. By adopting a collective approach to exploring learner autonomy, focusing on both teachers and learners' perceptions, the study offers a detailed understanding of the critical conditions and areas associated with challenges regarding promoting learner autonomy effectively. The findings have the potential to influence policy development and the design of teacher training programs aimed at enhancing language instruction in Iran. Given these considerations, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What challenges do EFL teachers encounter on the course of exercising autonomy in Iranian educational settings?

RQ2: What challenges do EFL learners encounter on the course of exercising autonomy in Iranian educational settings?

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a notable surge of interest in cultivating learner autonomy within EFL classrooms. Broadly defined, learner autonomy refers to students' capacity to manage their own learning journey (Loeng, 2020), make informed choices regarding their learning objectives and strategies (Gupta & Gupta, 2023; Kencana, 2025), and critically evaluate their own progress (Benson, 2011). Research consistently demonstrates that fostering autonomy can significantly boost learners' motivation, engagement, and overall language proficiency (Ahmed & Hossain, 2024), while also equipping them with essential skills for lifelong learning and personal growth throughout their lives. Nevertheless, the advancement of learner autonomy is not without its obstacles. A primary challenge often arises from students' limited prior experience with self-directed learning, necessitating substantial guidance and assistance from educators (Alibakhshi, 2015). Alibakhshi's (2015) study specifically identified key impediments related to learners, educational institutions, and teachers. He observed that institutes frequently exclude both teachers and learners from decisions concerning material selection, curriculum objectives, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices. This exclusion is largely due to the Ministry of Education's centralized control over various curriculum elements, including learning materials and evaluation systems (Alibakhshi & Rezaei, 2013).

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) identify several reasons why learner autonomy is often overlooked in institutional settings, including a focus on measurable outcomes and rigid educational frameworks. They categorize challenges into learner-related factors (e.g., motivation), institutional issues (e.g., overcrowded curricula), and teacher-related challenges (e.g., low expectations). Moreover, EFL teachers frequently hesitate to promote autonomy despite recognizing its importance, primarily due to students' insufficient motivation and skills. Continuous negotiations between educators and students about goals and methodologies can facilitate self-directed learning (Han, 2021; Little, 2007).

Nanbedeh's (2025) investigation into Iranian high school classrooms revealed that strategy-based instruction holds promise for promoting learner autonomy, demonstrating its feasibility and benefits within this educational setting. Nevertheless, she also identified several significant barriers, including pressure to meet academic standards, ambiguous learning objectives, a reliance on conventional teaching approaches, and insufficient professional development opportunities for educators that could impact on fostering learner autonomy. Similarly, a study by Nasri et al. (2015) highlighted various impediments to learner autonomy, distinguishing between the perspectives of teachers and students. Teachers in their study pointed to

predetermined curricula, rigid schedules, standardized tests, inadequate facilities, the influence of university entrance exams, students' tendency to depend on instructors, and learners' low English proficiency as major obstacles. Conversely, students primarily cited time constraints, their own proficiency levels, teachers' lack of specialized training, and their prior schooling experiences as the main factors hindering the development of learner autonomy.

According to [Wertsch and Rupert \(1993\)](#) learner autonomy is similarly conceptualized as a capacity for action that is both socially constructed and negotiated. This means that a learner's ability to take control of their own learning is profoundly influenced by the specific social, cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which they operate. Therefore, learner autonomy is not solely a product of individual will; it also encompasses the opportunities, support structures, and constraints presented by the learning environment, pedagogical practices, and broader societal norms ([Yanay, 1994](#)). Thus, the sociocultural context is also proved to play a crucial role in shaping learner autonomy, extending beyond individual characteristics to include institutional structures and pedagogical practices ([Toohey & Norton, 2003](#)). Further, rigid curricula and standardized assessments, as the main constraints in Iranian educational context, limit teacher creativity and restrict opportunities for student-directed learning ([Safari & Rashidi, 2015](#)).

To explore challenges Iranian EFL teachers faced when implementing Communicative Language Teaching, [Barabadi and Razmjoo \(2015\)](#) employed Activity Theory. A total of 83 participants, including teachers, directors, students, and parents, were involved. Data collection methods comprised interviews, observations, and document analysis. Results showed that teachers' enthusiasm for CLT was hindered by unresolved contradictions stemming from teachers themselves, students, their parents, school staff and educational system. The findings highlighted the need for curriculum adjustments, teacher support, and stakeholder collaboration to effectively integrate CLT in Iranian language education.

To find out more about the difficulties and challenges encountered during CLT adoption in EFL settings, [Barabadi and Razmjoo \(2016\)](#) further investigated the implementation of CLT-based curriculum. Participants included teachers, directors, students, and parents. Through interviews, classroom observations, and document scrutiny, key obstacles were uncovered to hinder CLT implementation. Analysis revealed contradictions at multiple levels within Iran's EFL context, underscoring the need for constructive collaboration among educators, administrators, and stakeholders to address these challenges effectively.

Another qualitative study, which was done recently by [Barabadi et al. \(2024\)](#), investigated the complexities of CLT implementation in Iranian senior high schools, utilizing a human activity system model and gathering insights from teachers, students, teacher directors, and parents through interviews and observations. The research identified significant obstacles to effective CLT integration, including teachers' persistent reliance on traditional methods despite acknowledging communicative benefits, inadequate professional development, and insufficient familiarity with CLT principles. Student-related challenges encompassed demotivation,

overdependence on teachers, and limited opportunities for English engagement outside the classroom. Furthermore, logistical impediments such as overcrowded classrooms, a scarcity of appropriate materials, non-communicative assessments, a lack of educator cooperation, and restricted teacher autonomy collectively hindered the effectiveness of CLT. Based on these comprehensive findings, [Barabadi et al. \(2024\)](#) proposed various solutions and pedagogical implications to facilitate successful curriculum reform in similar educational settings.

Even with the existing research, there remains a need for additional studies to thoroughly explore the unique challenges and enabling factors for learner autonomy across diverse educational settings. As [Morris \(2019\)](#) put forward, such investigations would empower educators to refine their teaching strategies and foster more conducive environments for self-directed learning.

Method

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically employing semi-structured or interviews. By these interviews, according to Mackey and Guss, “the researcher uses a written list of questions as a guide, while still having the freedom to digress and probe for more information” (p. 225). This methodological decision was considered appropriate because the research questions sought to investigate the intricate and subtle aspects of learner autonomy within the domain of EFL teaching and learning. As [Mackey and Guss \(2016, p. 225\)](#) highlight, exploring such a phenomenon often involves examining elements that are “not directly observable, such as learners' self-reported perceptions or attitudes”. The inherent richness of qualitative data, particularly its capacity to capture the multifaceted nature of learner autonomy and its interaction with various contextual factors, makes this approach particularly well-suited to uncovering the intricate dynamics at play within the EFL educational contexts. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding than would be possible through more generalized quantitative methods.

Participants

The sample comprised 13 EFL learners and 17 EFL teachers from both public schools and private language institutes in Iran. We used purposive sampling to select our participants. This type of sampling as [Ary et al. \(2014, p. 456\)](#) state is “sufficient to provide insight and understanding about that which they are studying.” The teachers who participated in our study were from both public high schools and private language institutes having more than 5 years of teaching experience based on the criterion presented by [Tsui \(2003\)](#) and they all had Persian as their first language. The learners partaking in the study were all senior high school students, categorized as intermediate language learners based on the results taken from Oxford Quick Placement Test. They were chosen as participants due to their greater need for autonomy in

learning compared to elementary and pre-intermediate learners, and their higher prevalence in school environments relative to advanced learners.

Instruments

After a comprehensive literature review, researchers developed two interview instruments tailored for teachers and learners, with similar structures but distinct wording. The teachers' interview comprised four sections and eight questions, starting with two demographic questions about their teaching experience, age, and gender. The next four questions addressed challenges in developing learner autonomy. We also used two open-ended questions to obtain ELT teachers' perspectives. [Ary et al. \(2014\)](#) believe that when researchers are probing to tap upon the deep understandings of participants to find out about unpredictable possible responses, they can use open-ended questions. With respect to that, two concluding questions allowed participants to highlight significant factors in promoting learner autonomy. A parallel approach was taken for learners, using nearly identical questions to gather insights on their experiences. The instruments were then piloted with eight expert teachers having more than ten years of teaching experience and eight students from private language institutes who were considered intermediate-level learners according to language institute criteria respectively. This led to some revisions based on feedback taken from the participants. Finally, to ensure content validity, the questions were evaluated by two experts in the field.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving a sample of 13 learners and 17 teachers. To conduct these interviews effectively, the stages proposed by [Mackey and Gass \(2016\)](#) were followed, beginning with the definition of clear objectives: to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' personal experiences and challenges in promoting learner autonomy in language education. This initial step helped clarify the specific insights the researcher hoped to gather from the discussions. Next, an interview guide was created, comprising open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive responses. This guide also included two open follow-up questions at the end to capture any additional thoughts from participants. Careful consideration was given to selecting participants who could offer valuable insights relevant to the research focus. A comfortable and quiet setting was chosen for the interviews at a private language institute called Pardis Language School to ensure a relaxed atmosphere. The researchers coordinated with participants to schedule convenient interview times, confirming their availability and preparing necessary recording devices, including a mobile phone, along with note-taking materials to accurately capture the conversation. Efforts were made during the interviews to build rapport through small talk, helping participants feel at ease. The purpose of the interview was clearly communicated, explaining how their insights would be utilized. During the interviews, the researcher adhered to the interview guide while practicing active listening, demonstrating genuine interest through body language, eye contact,

and verbal affirmations. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 25 minutes during which the researchers deliberately encouraged participants to provide comprehensive answers to open-ended questions. This strategy was employed with the specific methodological goal of achieving data saturation, which, as defined by [Dörnyei \(2007\)](#), occurs when the collection and analysis of additional data no longer yield new information or insights, thereby ensuring data saturation in qualitative findings. Learner interviews were conducted in either Persian or English, depending on participants' preferences, while teachers' interviews were predominantly in English. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher summarized key points discussed, and expressed gratitude for the participants' time, encouraging them to share any final thoughts. In the post-interview phase, recordings were transcribed into written format, with translations of interviews conducted in Persian carefully performed to preserve subtlety. The data were then analyzed to identify common themes and patterns. Feedback was also sought from experts in the field to evaluate the effectiveness of the questions and the overall approach, allowing for identification of areas for improvement.

As Iranian EFL researchers, we acknowledge our insider perspective which may influence our interpretation of the data, given our shared cultural background and experience in the Iranian EFL context. However, we strived to actively engage in reflexive practices, such as peer debriefing and member checking, to recognize and manage potential biases, ensuring the credibility and authenticity of our findings. Recognizing the critical importance of establishing rapport in qualitative research, a process that cultivates trust and mutual respect vital for the depth of the study, the researchers actively demonstrated genuine interest and attentiveness. This approach was designed to ensure participants felt both heard and valued. To facilitate this, active listening techniques were employed, which, as [Rubin and Rubin \(2012\)](#) explain, include maintaining eye contact, nodding, and summarizing key points to confirm understanding. Additionally, clear and transparent communication was maintained regarding the purpose of the research, expectations, and the participants' roles, a strategy that [Merriam and Tisdell \(2016\)](#) affirm is essential for building trust and a shared understanding between researchers and participants. Lastly, to uphold confidentiality, participants were given the option to choose an assumed name for themselves and were assured that their personal information would be protected and analyzed with honesty, consistent with ethical guidelines highlighted by [Hammersley and Traianou \(2011\)](#).

To ensure the rigorousness of this qualitative study on learner autonomy in Iranian EFL context, several measures were implemented. Dependability was emphasized by maintaining a rigorous and transparent research process. The use of a clear interview guide, which was pilot-tested and refined based on expert feedback, aimed to achieve consistency while allowing exploration of participants' unique experiences. Transferability was facilitated by applying purposive sampling with stratification to capture a diverse range of participants from both state schools and private language institutes. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study was further strengthened using established qualitative methods and the incorporation of participant

feedback throughout the process. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and translated with care. An in-vivo coding approach in which codes are created using the exact words or phrases from the text itself was employed for data analysis, and peer debriefing sessions with field experts helped to refine themes and ensure credibility.

Finally, according to [Krippendorff \(2018\)](#), the main threat to the reliability of content analysis is coder subjectivity, which refers to the potential for different coders to interpret and code the same content differently due to their individual perspectives, biases, or varying levels of expertise. This can lead to inconsistencies in coding, affecting the overall reliability of the analysis. To address this issue, the researchers utilized MAXQDA's inter-coder agreement feature. They had a second coder independently apply the established codes to half of the dataset, resulting in a high agreement correlation of 88%, which affirmed the reliability of their coding process.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis process, the researchers began by collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, which served as the basis for subsequent analysis. The research employed MAXQDA 2020 as a critical tool to manage and analyze qualitative data. Once the data were collected, the researchers transcribed the recorded interviews into written format, ensuring that the subtleties of the conversation were accurately captured. After thoroughly reading the transcripts to become acquainted with the content, the researchers developed initial codes by identifying relevant text segments related to the research questions and labeling each segment with descriptive phrases to encapsulate their meaning. After establishing these initial codes, the researchers reviewed and organized them into categories, potentially merging similar codes or splitting more complex ones to pinpoint core themes. The categorized codes were then further analyzed to derive broader themes, which underwent refinement for precision. MAXQDA further helped the researchers create visual representations (code maps) to depict the relationships among codes and themes. Through an iterative review process, the researcher continuously evaluated and validated themes against the transcripts, making necessary adjustments.

Results

In modern educational settings, promoting learner autonomy has become an essential objective for both educators and educational institutions. Nevertheless, various challenges impede this progress, significantly affecting both teachers and students. A thorough thematic analysis of insights from different educators has revealed several main categories of challenges, primarily related to curriculum, teacher practices, and student behaviors. The following sections outline the specific difficulties faced by students and teachers, as well as the strategies proposed to tackle these issues in more depth.

Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers

The analysis conducted using MAXQDA uncovered several challenges that teachers encounter. These challenges are organized according to the figures derived from the data, with each one discussed in detail in the following sections. By systematically presenting these findings, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles teachers face in their educational environments to answer the first question of the study. Each challenge is elaborated on to highlight its significance and implications for teaching practices.

Figure 1.

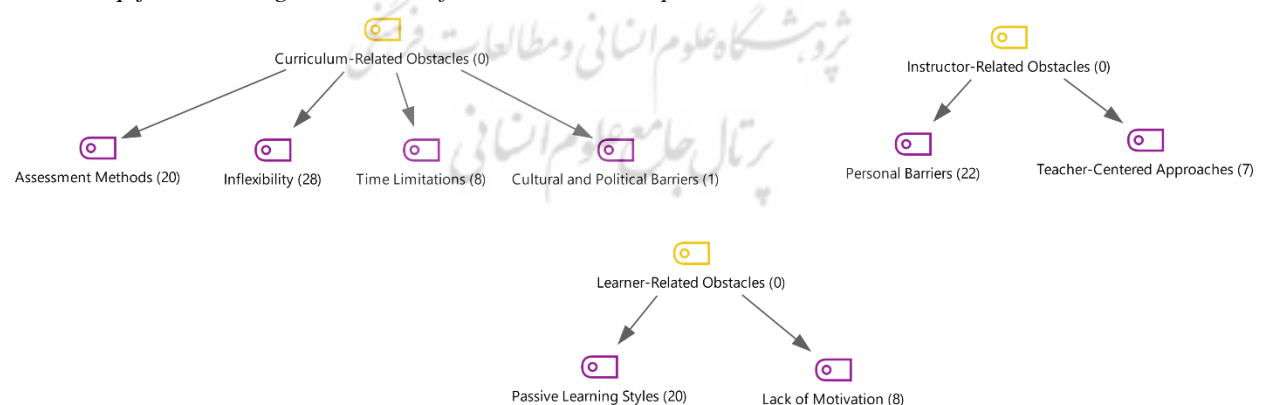
Code Matrix Browser for Teacher Challenges

Code System	Aza...	Farh...	Gole...	Hos...	Ibra...	Iraj	M. Ali	Mahdi	mah...	Moh...	Navid	Reza	Seta...	Vahid	Zahra	Ali	Ahm...	SUM
Curriculum-Related Obstacles																		0
Assessment Methods	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			■	■				■		■	20
Cultural and Political Barriers							■											1
Inflexibility	■		■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	28
Time Limitations					■		■						■					8
Instructor-Related Obstacles																		0
Personal Barriers	■	■		■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■		■	■		■	22
Teacher-Centered Approaches					■	■		■		■	■					■		7
Learner-Related Obstacles																		0
Lack of Motivation			■							■	■	■	■	■	■	■		8
Passive Learning Styles	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	20
SUM	11	5	6	7	11	3	7	1	6	11	11	5	2	8	8	4	8	114

As indicated in Figure 2 below, there are four main themes each having its own codes and frequencies which can be used as a guide to explain challenges and obstacles teachers face.

Figure 2.

Code Map for Challenges Extracted from Teacher Perspectives



Curriculum-Related Obstacles

The rigidity of the curriculum is a major concern for teachers, who feel constrained by strict syllabi that prioritize standardized testing and rote memorization. This inflexibility prevents the use of diverse teaching methods and hinders the ability to adapt lessons to meet students' needs. Predominantly summative assessment methods, like multiple-choice tests, reinforce a culture of memorization at the expense of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers often

express frustration over the lack of opportunities for innovative, exploratory activities in such a prescriptive curriculum, which discourages both teaching and learning. The pressure to cover all materials within limited timeframes usually results in superficial understanding and neglect of deeper learning.

Curriculum Inflexibility

Almost all the participants (82%) reported the rigidity of the curriculum as one of the main challenges they encounter in the Iranian educational system. They believe that an inflexible curriculum restricts teachers from tailoring lessons to accommodate varied learning styles and interests. One instance of curriculum inflexibility is the reliance on prescribed texts (35.2%), which often confines educators to specific content and formats.

The curriculum may be too prescriptive in terms of the skills and knowledge that students are expected to learn, which can make it difficult for me to offer students the autonomy they need to take charge of their learning. (Ali)

Additionally, strict learning objectives impose limitations on fostering learner autonomy by specifying a set of skills or knowledge that students must acquire within a given timeframe. Navid notes that these rigid objectives can stifle innovation in teaching methodologies.

The first point refers to the limitations that rigid learning objectives within an institutional curriculum can impose on fostering learner autonomy (Navid).

According to Zahra, another significant challenge within curriculum implementation arises from the pressure to cover a specific content within restricted timeframes. She contends that when teachers are compelled by the demands of the curriculum to cover a particular content, they tend to alter their instructional approach. This often leads them to prioritize the efficient transmission of content, thereby compromising students' deep understanding and leaving little room for fostering innovation or genuine interest in the subject matter.

I have to cover specific content within a strict time, which leaves no space for exploring student interests or adapting to their learning needs. (Zahra)

Assessment Methods

The pressure surrounding examinations has become a significant concern for educators and students. Most of the teachers (53%) note that assessment methods rely heavily on traditional, summative approaches, particularly high-stakes standardized tests that emphasize multiple-choice formats and vocabulary translations. This focus, as Mohammad says, limits opportunities for critical thinking and creativity in the classroom, fostering a culture that prioritizes rote memorization over meaningful learning experiences.

The pressure to prepare students for these exams often necessitates a more teacher-directed approach, focusing on rote learning and test-taking strategies. This leaves less time for activities that promote critical thinking and problem-solving. (Mohammad)

As an experienced instructor, Iraj believed that educators express the need for more flexible curricula and innovative assessment methods that evaluate knowledge while also nurturing learner autonomy and problem-solving skills in a supportive environment.

The institutional curriculum can provide a framework for learning; its limitations can hinder efforts to foster learner autonomy. To mitigate these challenges, educators may need to advocate for more flexible curricula, incorporate diverse assessment methods, and create supportive environments that encourage student initiative and exploration. (Iraq)

The emphasis on standardized testing, as Zahra claimed, creates significant barriers to effective teaching and the development of learner autonomy. As schools prioritize test scores, educators feel pressured to narrow their curricula to match assessment content, which discourages creative and self-directed learning. Ibrahim further highlights that this often leads to a 'teaching to the test' mentality, emphasizing rote memorization at the expense of critical thinking and genuine engagement with material.

Close to twenty five percent of the participants including Farhad, also noted that the focus on high test scores can overshadow authentic learning experiences, fostering superficial mastery of content and hindering the growth of autonomous learners.

The pressure to achieve high scores on standardized tests, like final exams or the entrance exam, can sometimes affect the way autonomous learning skills are to be developed. There must be a balance. (Farhad)

Time Constrains

Almost fifty percent of the teachers considered time limitation and management as a significant barrier across various facets of the educational experience. Teachers reported feeling constrained by institutional schedules, leaving little opportunity to design lessons that promote learner autonomy. As educators navigate these various challenges, the collective impact of time constraints and institutional rigidity becomes increasingly evident, suggesting a critical need for reform in both curriculum design and teaching philosophy to foster an environment that truly supports learner autonomy.

Time-related challenges, according to most of the participants, like Ahmad, Ibrahim, Mohammad Ali and Navid have a profound effect on teachers' capacity to adopt and implement effective teaching practices that encourage learner autonomy.

The main barrier I face is the students' insufficient time management (Ahmad)..... Honestly, some Personal barriers can include limited time within the curriculum for student-led activities, time management.....(Ibrahim).... One of the primary institutional limitations I face is the lack of time in my class. With only one session each week, I often find it challenging to incorporate a variety of activities (M. Ali)

With the increasing demands of curriculum standards, administrative tasks, and other responsibilities, educators often find themselves pressed for time. This lack of sufficient time, as highlighted by Ahmad, can hinder the students' efforts to develop personalized learning experiences that foster autonomy among learners.

Whenever I recommend my students to do their homework and prepare themselves for some class projects and presentations which are usually beneficial for their personalized learning experiences, they complain about time shortage. (Ahmad)

Finally, the cultural and political barriers (11%) that exist within the educational system of Iran can further complicate the implementation of more flexible, learner-centered approaches.

Instructor-Related Obstacles

Teachers encounter significant personal barriers that hinder the promotion of learner autonomy. Many educators have a limited understanding of effective methods for encouraging learner autonomy, often due to their adherence to traditional teaching habits. Consequently, they tend to adopt a teacher-centered approach, focusing on comprehensive coverage of curricula and assessment standards instead of allowing for exploratory or student-led activities. This reflects both their reliance on conventional methods and the struggle to balance student expectations for direct guidance with the need to foster autonomy. Additionally, some teachers lack opportunities for professional development, which is crucial for acquiring skills to support learner independence.

One of the significant obstacles in promoting learner autonomy is the persistence of traditional teacher-centered approaches. Less than half of the educators (42%), such as Hossein and Ibrahim, find it challenging to break their habits of delivering content rather than facilitating autonomy. They note that students accustomed to teacher-centered methods often expect step-by-step guidance, which leaves them lacking the self-discipline necessary for self-directed study.

I find it challenging to break my own habits of traditional teaching, as I've been trained to deliver content rather than to facilitate autonomy (Hossein)..... Many students are used to teacher-centered approaches and expect to be guided step by step (Ibrahim).....

Nearly half of the participants believe that these conventional methods create passive learning environments where teachers act primarily as knowledge dispensers, leading to an emphasis on memorization over critical thinking. This situation also hinders student engagement and ownership of learning.

Furthermore, teachers face various personal barriers that inhibit their ability to foster learner autonomy. Almost fifty percent of the participants express a limited understanding of innovative teaching methods and rely on traditional styles that prioritize direct control, exacerbated by fears of failure and pressure to meet curricular standards. These constraints, coupled with a lack of confidence, according to Mahtab, make it difficult to promote autonomous learners. Additionally, entrenched teaching habits developed over years can impede change.

Personally, I sometimes struggle with confidence in implementing autonomous learning strategies. I worry about how my students will respond to a shift in teaching style, and I am forced to rely on traditional methods that might not support learner independence. (Mahtab)

Navid emphasized the critical significance of high-quality resources for the successful implementation of student-directed learning approaches. He contended that a scarcity of diverse materials and resources could result in uninspired lesson plans and impede creativity. This, in

turn, would further restrict educators' ability to craft engaging, student-centered learning experiences.

Teachers may have limited access to materials and resources that promote and support the development of learner autonomy. This dissuades teachers from applying innovative ways and nurturing creativity (Navid).

Approximately 35% of the educators, including Azadeh, reported feeling ill-equipped to foster student autonomy. This sentiment stemmed from insufficient training in appropriate pedagogical methods. Furthermore, these teachers indicated little or no interest in pursuing additional professional development to acquire the fundamental skills necessary for guiding students towards taking ownership of their learning. Consequently, a limited understanding of effective strategies for cultivating autonomy can significantly impede its successful implementation in the classroom.

One issue is the limited understanding I have regarding effective methods for promoting autonomy in the classroom. Many teachers, including myself, often don't pursue further education or training to stay informed about the best practices surrounding autonomy.....Another challenge lies with teachers who may lack the skills to encourage learner autonomy. (Azadeh)

Learner-Related Obstacles

A significant obstacle to promoting learner autonomy stems from students' passive learning disposition, characterized by lack of motivation, laziness, and procrastination. Many students are shy and hesitant to take responsibility for their education, leading to disengagement. This reliance on direct instruction reflects a broader trend where learners expect guidance rather than initiative. Additionally, performance pressures from examinations and fear of failure create an environment that discourages independent learning. Cultural factors that dissuade risk-taking further compound this lack of motivation, stifling individual initiative and self-directed learning.

Close to forty one percent of the teachers considered lack of motivation to be one of the most significant learner-related obstacles which leads to disengagement from the material and hinders their ability to embrace autonomy in their educational processes, as highlighted by Mahtab and Golezar.

One specific challenge I face in promoting learner autonomy is the lack of motivation in my students. (Mahtab)..... There is a noticeable lack of motivation and self-confidence among the students (Golezar).

Another challenge is the prevalence of a passive learning style (17%), reinforced by a focus on standardized exams. Students often wait for explicit instructions (17%) from teachers before engaging with the material, which stifles their initiative and independent exploration.

Focus on standardized exams reinforces a passive learning approach among students. (Hossein).....The biggest challenge I face is the students' heavy dependence on direct instruction. (Mohammad).

Fear of being judged by peers when making mistakes (5%) also significantly impacts student engagement. Additionally, many students feel uncomfortable taking the initiative or asking questions (11%).

Many students are uncomfortable with taking the initiative or asking questions. (Hossein).... Many of the students seem disengaged and hesitant to take the initiative in their learning (Mahtab)

Shyness (5%), laziness, procrastination and a general reluctance to engage (5%), according to Azadeh, can further inhibit open expression and independent thought, limiting learning opportunities and negatively affecting the classroom dynamic.

The primary obstacle seems to be the learner's own disposition, particularly her tendency towards laziness and procrastination, which prevents her from taking responsibility and acting independently..... Another hurdle is the learners' shyness, which inhibits their ability to express themselves openly and independently (Azadeh)

Challenges Faced by EFL Learners

EFL learners in Iran face a multitude of challenges that hinder their ability to engage in self-directed language learning. The following, perspectives of learners, according to the code matrix (Figure 3) and code map (Figure 4), highlight various challenges and obstacles they face in their English learning, categorized into institutional or cultural factors, teacher-related issues, assessment-related challenges, and personal obstacles. Understanding these factors is crucial to addressing barriers to learner autonomy and engagement and will help us answer the second question of the study.

Figure 3.

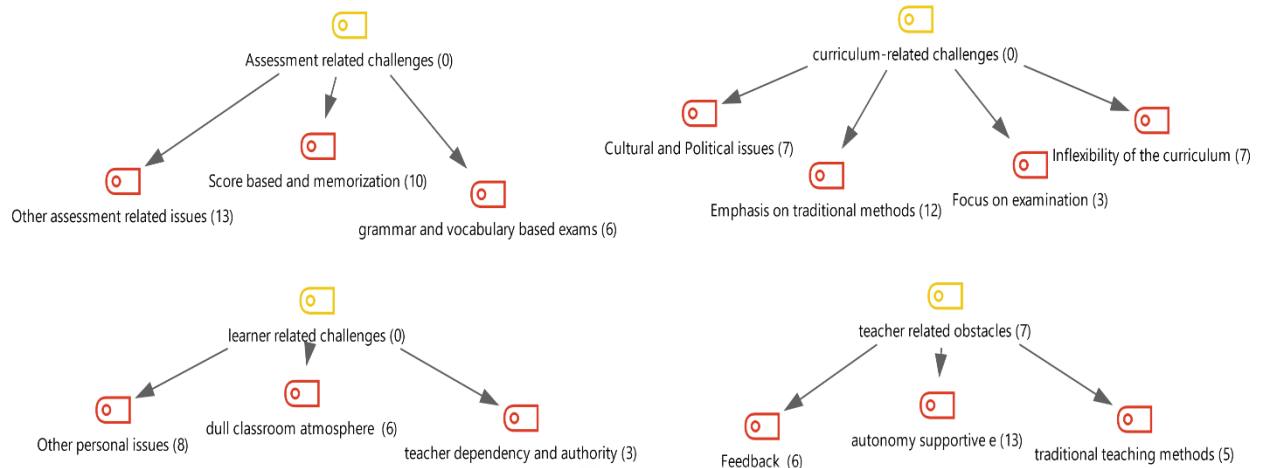
Code Matrix Browser for Learner Challenges

Code System	Java...	Res...	Zahr...	Soh...	Sina...	Sara...	Roo...	reyh...	Ida, ...	Ha...	Had...	ARA...	Anit...	SUM
Assessment related challenges														0
Other assessment related issues														13
Score based and memorization														10
grammar and vocabulary based exams														6
curriculum-related challenges														0
Cultural and Political issues														7
Emphasis on traditional methods														12
Focus on examination														3
Inflexibility of the curriculum														7
learner related challenges														0
Other personal issues														8
dull classroom atmosphere														6
teacher dependency and authority														3
teacher related obstacles														7
Feedback														6
autonomy supportive e														13
traditional teaching methods														5
Σ SUM	12	5	5	9	9	7	5	15	12	9	7	4	7	106

Figure 4 shows four primary themes, each with their own extracted codes and frequencies. These can serve as a roadmap for pinpointing the specific areas where learners face challenges and obstacles.

Figure 4.

Code Map for Challenges Extracted from Learner Perspectives



Curriculum-related Challenges

A prevalent issue among learners is the strong emphasis on standardized testing and memorization. Seventy-six percent of the participants claimed that their educational institutes prioritize rote learning over the development of independent thinking. For instance, Javad mentioned the tendency of schools to emphasize memorization-based exams, which promotes short-term recall rather than a deep understanding of the material. Similarly, Rosita observed how the education system often favors memorization for grades over fostering analytical skills. This environment discourages students from engaging with the curriculum outside of test preparation, resulting in a reliance on teachers for information and support. Zahra noted that institutes create a narrative where students feel incomplete without their programs, limiting their ability to explore educational resources independently. Additionally, Soheila pointed out that the prevailing mindset within families and society can further impede students' independence, as they may receive excessive assistance or pressure to conform to traditional learning methodologies. Below the findings will be explained and clarified in detail.

Curriculum rigidity and limitations

More than half of the students (54%), including Hamed and Hadiseh, highlighted the constraints of rigid curriculums and standardized syllabi, which limit their ability to explore advanced topics and develop language skills autonomously.

One of the main challenges I've faced is that many classes follow a strict, textbook-centered curriculum, so there's not much room to explore personal interests or learning styles (Hadiseh)

This strict focus on memorization, as noted by Anita and Ida, hinders creative thinking and exploration, both essential for autonomous learning. They believe that a more flexible curriculum that promotes critical thinking, collaboration, and individual exploration could empower students and enhance their engagement with the material. Additionally, the rigid structures of the institutes often discourage independent exploration, as Soheila and Zahra

mentioned, with little encouragement for students to delve into topics outside the prescribed curriculum.

Assessment-Related Challenges

Assessment methods are the other significant challenge for learners aiming for autonomy. Close to half of the students (46%) expressed frustration with exams that focus primarily on grammar and rote memorization rather than actual language usage. Javad's comments reflect a common sentiment expressing that tests often prioritize passing grades over a genuine understanding of content. Students like Hamed advocated for assessments that allow greater freedom, such as presentations or research projects, rather than traditional paper-and-pencil tests. The pressure to achieve high scores often drives students to adopt a mindset that values grades over learning, as highlighted by ARAZ, who noted that students primarily study for grades rather than true understanding.

One of the instances of assessment-related obstacles was found to be the emphasis on standardized testing and memorization in schools (30%), which discourages independent learning. Javad noted that students face memorization-based exams prioritizing short-term recall over deep understanding in which the goal becomes passing tests rather than truly comprehending the material.

My school emphasizes standardized testing and memorization. This institutional focus tends to discourage independent learning (Javad).

Another significant issue is the narrow focus on scores and testing norms, as highlighted by Reyhaneh, who pointed out that assessments mainly test grammar and vocabulary (23%) rather than actual language use or understanding.

The assessments mostly focus on grammar and vocabulary tests. They don't really reflect my actual ability to use the language or my understanding of the material. (Reyhaneh)

This concentration on scores can undermine the value of learning itself, diminishing student motivation and creativity, as Rosita explained. Additionally, Soheila and Reyhaneh noted that such assessments often frustrate students, as their authentic skills may not be evaluated accurately.

Instructor-Related Challenges

Support and guidance from teachers (23%) are critical to fostering a conducive learning environment; however, many learners express a desire for more personalized engagement (23%). Students like Javad appreciated it when teachers provided resources for independent study and encourage exploration of personal interests. On the other hand, some learners feel that teachers should guide them without controlling every aspect of their learning, as Rosita aptly stated. However, learners often find themselves in environments that emphasize discipline and structure over flexibility, as noted by Hadiseh. This rigidity, she believes, can stifle

creativity and discourage students from collaborating or exploring topics that genuinely interest them.

Many students, such as Javad and Sarah, express a heavy reliance on their teachers (23%) for guidance and support, indicating a lack of confidence in navigating their own learning paths.

I might get perplexed while studying and become doubtful whether the way I'm using is correct or not, between choosing the best sources for studying. That said, I really feel in need of a professor to help me (Sarah).

A substantial majority of students, specifically 53%, highlighted the importance of teachers cultivating an environment that actively supports learner autonomy. Their feedback indicated a common perception that most of their prior educational experiences lacked an autonomy-friendly atmosphere. Consequently, these students felt they did not receive the necessary encouragement to assume greater responsibility for their individual learning processes. Furthermore, 38% of the students underscored the critical importance of receiving positive and constructive feedback. They believed this type of feedback could significantly aid them in their journey towards becoming self-directed and autonomous learners.

Learner-Related Obstacles

Individually, learners face several challenges that hinder their ability to take initiative and pursue autonomous learning. Javad expressed a struggle to take the initiative in his studies, often relying heavily on teachers. This dependency was echoed across the responses of younger students like Soheila and Sina, who also acknowledged their difficulty in self-directed learning. Moreover, they confessed, anxiety regarding performance and the tendency to cram for exams diminished their engagement and intrinsic motivation. Students such as Hamed and Anita emphasized the need for access to varied resources and practical applications of their learning, which are often lacking in rigid curricula.

One of the instances of personal learner-related obstacles is the lack of engagement and motivation among students (31%). Sina and Araz noted that many students find English classes boring and exhausting, which hampers their interest in learning.

In our school most of the students are uninterested in learning English and they find the class boring and exhausting (Sina).

Another significant challenge is effective time management and study habits. Students like Ida and Javad struggled with this aspect, often resorting to cramming for exams instead of adopting steady, organized study approaches.

.....most of my challenges are personal, like managing my time effectively (Ida)....

This reliance on last-minute preparation, they believed, undermined their learning and prevented them from taking charge of their study habits.

Parental and cultural influences also significantly impacted student autonomy. Soheila highlighted how some families might interfere with students' independence by offering

unnecessary assistance, reinforcing the idea that learning should occur solely under a teacher's guidance.

.... some families may impede students' independence by interfering or offering unnecessary assistance. (Soheila)

Discussion

Fostering learner autonomy in contemporary education is essential; however, it poses numerous challenges for both teachers and students. A primary barrier is the rigidity of curricula, which restricts teachers' ability to adapt lessons to diverse student needs and interests. Many educators have expressed concerns that strict adherence to prescribed syllabi hinders their capacity to create engaging learning experiences tailored to individual student needs. According to [Bauml \(2016\)](#), a rigid curriculum implies a one-size-fits-all approach that does not support differentiated instruction, which is crucial for fostering learner autonomy. When teachers cannot adjust the curriculum based on student feedback or emerging interests, they struggle to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences ([Bauml, 2016](#)).

Reconsidering Bloom's theoretical framework, [Radmehr and Drake \(2019\)](#) emphasize that effective learning encompasses cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, suggesting that flexibility in objectives can lead to better educational outcomes. When bound by rigid objectives, they believe, teachers may struggle to facilitate collaborative learning or promote higher-order thinking skills essential for learner autonomy ([Radmehr & Drake, 2019](#)).

Furthermore, a prescribed syllabus, which is the byproduct of a rigid curriculum, may not align with all students' backgrounds or learning preferences, making it difficult to offer the autonomy needed for student ownership of learning. [Zepke and Leach \(2010\)](#) believe that the prescriptive nature of syllabi can discourage creativity in teaching and limit opportunities for critical engagement with the material and teachers who are accustomed to such syllabi may become mere providers of content delivery, reducing students' opportunities to develop independence.

The findings of the also study indicated that time limitations pose a substantial obstacle for learners in Iranian schools. Students articulated a belief that achieving genuine autonomy requires significant time investment to thoroughly grasp a comprehensive volume of educational content. However, within the Iranian educational context, the time allotted for English language learning in schools is notably limited. This scarcity stands in stark contrast to the extensive comprehensible input and exposure deemed necessary for learners to advance towards personalized learning approaches. This observation aligns with research by [Emmer and Sabornie \(2015\)](#), who illustrate how time pressures often force teachers to sacrifice valuable opportunities for exploratory learning, consequently diminishing the overall quality of education. They further contend that prioritizing the completion of curriculum over nurturing student curiosity and engagement inadvertently fosters a culture of compliance rather than promoting learner autonomy ([Emmer & Sabornie, 2015](#)). Additionally, [McTighe and Wiggins](#)

(2013) underscored that meaningful learning experiences are contingent upon sufficient time for exploration, critical reflection, and adaptation. However, they warn that the relentless pace of many curricula can erode these crucial elements, ultimately stifling both creativity and independent learning.

A notable impediment to fostering learner autonomy was identified as a widespread lack of information among teachers regarding its foundational principles. This challenge was exacerbated by their reluctance to engage in professional development meetings with colleagues, which subsequently limited their capacity to effectively guide students toward autonomous learning. This finding is supported by [Garet et al. \(2001\)](#) and [Barabadi et al. \(2024\)](#), who emphasize that professional development is crucial for expanding teachers' knowledge of contemporary instructional approaches. They argue that by deepening their comprehension of strategies such as scaffolding and inquiry-based learning, educators can more effectively create classroom environments that are conducive to the development of autonomy. Moreover, [Celebi et al. \(2014\)](#) point out that a deficit in motivation or opportunities for continuous learning can hinder teachers' adaptability to evolving educational paradigms. They conclude that fostering a culture of lifelong learning among educators is essential for enhancing their overall effectiveness and their ability to respond adequately to student needs.

Additionally, standardized testing creates further obstacles by driving teachers to align their strategies with assessment requirements, prioritizing short-term recall over critical thinking. This 'teaching to the test' mentality fosters passive learning behaviors and diminishes students' intrinsic motivation to engage meaningfully with the material ([Au, 2007](#)). Implementing more meaningful assessments like project-based learning is crucial for promoting exploration and student ownership.

Fear of being judged by peers when making mistakes was also found to significantly impact student engagement and stop him from shouldering responsibility for his own learning. This apprehension, as cited by [Rodgers \(2016\)](#), can create a culture of silence, discouraging exploration and experimentation which are critical components of autonomous learning. By providing a supportive environment, which is hardly found in Iranian schools, educators must foster a safe classroom atmosphere where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities, promoting greater engagement and autonomy ([Ferretti et al., 2019](#)).

Students' fear of being judged by their peers for making mistakes significantly affects their engagement and willingness to shoulder responsibility for their learning. This concern, as mentioned by [Rodgers \(2016\)](#), can create a culture of silence, hindering exploration and experimentation which are essential elements of autonomous learning. To foster a more supportive environment, educators need to establish a safe classroom atmosphere, which is often lacking in Iranian schools. By doing so, mistakes can be seen as opportunities for growth rather than reasons for judgment. This shift in perspective, as supported by [Ferretti et al. \(2019\)](#), promotes greater engagement and autonomy among students.

Lastly, external cultural influences and parental expectations can stifle students' initiative, as many families encourage compliance over exploration. Creating a cultural shift that values independence and actively involves parents can enhance students' self-motivation and control over their education. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial for cultivating an educational environment where learner autonomy can thrive, benefiting both educators and students alike.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fostering learner autonomy in contemporary education faces considerable challenges for both teachers and students. A major obstacle is the rigidity of curricula, which limits educators' ability to customize instruction for diverse needs, hindering meaningful learning experiences ([Bauml, 2016](#)). Time constraints further exacerbate this issue, leading educators to prioritize content coverage, resulting in rote memorization that undermines critical thinking ([Emmer & Sabornie, 2015](#); [McTighe & Wiggins, 2013](#)). Additionally, reliance on standardized testing often leads to a 'teaching to the test' approach, which emphasizes short-term recall over genuine understanding ([Au, 2007](#)). This focus on grades can diminish intrinsic motivation, making it essential to adopt assessment methods like project-based learning that encourage exploration and ownership of the learning process.

Traditional teacher-centered methods also contribute to students' overdependence on teachers and their direct guidance ([Barabadi et al., 2024](#)), stifling their initiative ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)). Thus, transitioning to interactive practices that foster inquiry and collaboration is vital but can be challenging due to entrenched habits and limited professional development ([Fullan, 2016](#)). Continuous support for educators is also crucial for creating environments that promote learner autonomy. External factors, such as cultural norms and parental expectations, further influence students' willingness to engage in self-directed learning. Promoting a cultural shift that values independence and encourages parental involvement can help nurture self-motivated learners.

Considering these challenges, there seems to be an urgent need for educational reform and curriculum adjustments ([Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2015](#); [Barabadi et al., 2024](#)) in Iran that promotes a more flexible and responsive learning environment. By investing in resources that enhance teaching practices and supporting learners, educational systems can cultivate an atmosphere where both educators and students thrive. This shift will not only enhance student engagement and autonomy but also prepare learners for the complexities of a globalized world. Finally, stakeholders must collaborate ([Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2016](#)) to reform curricula and assessment practices, fostering a culture prioritizing learner autonomy, which will enhance the overall educational experience and prepare students for lifelong learning.

The present study has certain limitations and boundaries that demand consideration. Due to the prevailing political circumstances, the researcher was compelled to avoid discussing politically-sensitive issues that were deemed relevant to comprehending learner autonomy.

Moreover, since the research took place in Iran, the applicability of the findings to other countries or cultural milieus may be restricted due to disparities in educational systems, language policies, and socio-cultural factors. Consequently, caution must be exercised when interpreting the results, as they cannot be universally applied to other settings without taking into account these contextual discrepancies.

To further advance research in this domain, it would be beneficial for researchers to undertake longitudinal studies that examine the lasting effects of challenges hindering learner autonomy development. Exploring the ways in which diverse cultural contexts influence the application and comprehension of learner autonomy challenges could yield valuable insights to enhance our understanding of this intricate concept. Future studies could also assess the impact of teacher and learner challenges within specific teaching and learning environments, particularly in relation to how these challenges impede learner autonomy, as well as investigating how these obstacles manifest or differ across various educational settings in Iran, such as state schools and private language institutes.

In conclusion, the pedagogical implications derived from this study suggest a multidimensional approach to deal with learner autonomy obstacles, emphasizing curriculum reform, supportive learning environments, implementation of learner-centered approaches, and constructive feedback. By addressing these areas, educators can create a richer educational experience that not only cultivates learner autonomy but also prepares students for lifelong learning and success in an increasingly dynamic world.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editorial team of TESL Quarterly for granting us the opportunity to submit and publish the current synthesis. We would also like to express our appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for their careful, detailed reading of our manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions. We also acknowledge all the participants who took part in this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

References

- Abdolhosseinzadeh Amini, M., Kruger, C. G., & Nel, C. (2024). Self-regulated EFL learning through productive feedback in Iranian private language institutes: a case for sustainable lifelong learning outcomes. *Discover Education*, 3(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00374-6>
- Ahmed, M. K., & Hossain, K. I. H. (2024). Nurturing Learner Autonomy to Enhance Motivation and Academic Achievement for the L2 Learners in ESL Contexts. *IUBAT Review*, 7(2), 176-196. <https://doi.org/10.3329/iubatr.v7i2.78809>
- Aliakbari, M., & Sadeghi, S. (2022). The professional identity of the Iranian teachers: A case of professional practices. *Teacher Development*, 26(3), 411-431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2022.2076729>
- Alibakhshi, G. (2015). Challenges in promoting EFL learners' autonomy: Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives. *Issues in Language Teaching*, 4(1), 98-79. <https://doi.org/10.22054/ilt.2015.3464>
- Alibakhshi, G., & Rezaei, S. (2013). On the consequences of the violation of critical pedagogy principles from Iranian EFL teacher trainers' perspectives. *Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 5(2), 1-28.
- Alrabai, F. (2021). The influence of autonomy-supportive teaching on EFL students' classroom autonomy: An experimental intervention. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 728657. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.728657>
- An, Y., & Mindrila, D. (2020). Strategies and tools used for learner-centered instruction. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science*, 4(2), 133-143.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Sorensen, C. K., & Walker, D. (2014). *Introduction to research in education* (9th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Asyari, A. (2024). Students' perceptions and attitudes toward learning based on learning management system: A future recommendation on blended learning design. *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction*, 14(2), 78-85. <https://doi.org/10.47750/pegegog.14.02.09>
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational researcher*, 36(5), 258-267. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07306523>
- Au, W. (2022). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality*. Routledge.
- Barabadi, E., & Razmjoo, S. A. (2015). An activity theory analysis of ELT reform in Iranian public schools. *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 18(1), 127-166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18869/acadpub.ijal.18.1.127>
- Barabadi, E., & Razmjoo, S. A. (2016). The emergence of various contradictions in Iranian high school English education under the new CLT-based curriculum. *Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly*, 35(3), 41-64.
- Barabadi, E., Vahdani Asadi, M., Arghavan, A., & Razmjoo, S. A. (2024). Investigating the ELT-based reform in Iranian senior high schools: An activity theory analysis. *Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly*, 43(3), 113-140. <https://doi.org/10.22099/tesl.2024.50275.3298>
- Bauml, M. (2016). One size never fits all: Teachers' responses to standardized curriculum materials and implications for early childhood teacher educators. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 37(1), 76-95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2015.1133461>
- Beiki, M., Raissi, R., & Gharagozloo, N. (2020). The differences between Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and their instructional practices regarding the cooperative learning. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7(1), 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2020.1847420>
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Pearson.
- Radmehr, F., & Drake, M. (2019). Revised Bloom's taxonomy and major theories and frameworks that influence the teaching, learning, and assessment of mathematics: a comparison. *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology*, 50(6), 895-920. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020739X.2018.1549336>
- Borg, S., & Al-Busaidi, S. (2012). Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices. *ELT journal*, 12(7), 1-45.

- Çelebi, N., Özdemir, H., & Eliçin, Ö. (2014). Studying level of awareness of teachers in terms of their lifelong learning skills. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116, 2030-2038. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.515>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Emmer, E. T., & Sabornie, E. J. (Eds.). (2015). *Handbook of classroom management*. Routledge.
- Ferretti, E., Rohde, K., Moore, G. P., & Daboval, T. (2019). Catch the moment: The power of turning mistakes into 'precious' learning opportunities. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 24(3), 156-159. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxy102>
- Fullan, M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change*. Teachers college press.
- Garet, M. S., Porter, A. C., Desimone, L., Birman, B. F., & Yoon, K. S. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), 915-945. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312038004915>
- Gupta, P. B., & Gupta, B. L. (2023). Strategies for promoting autonomous learning. *Asian Journal of Management*, 14(1), 37-44. <https://doi.org/10.52711/2321-5763.2023.00007>
- Hammersley, M., & Traianou, A. (2011). Moralism and research ethics: a Machiavellian perspective. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(5), 379-390.
- Han, K. (2021). Fostering students' autonomy and engagement in EFL classroom through proximal classroom factors: autonomy-supportive behaviors and student-teacher relationships. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 767079. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.767079>
- Karagöl, D. (2008). *Promoting learner autonomy to increase the intrinsic motivation of the young language learners*. Unpublished master's thesis. Çukurova University, Adana.
- Kencana, N. (2025). Teachers' and students' perspectives on technology integration in EFL instruction: Strategies for fostering autonomy and overcoming challenges in Indonesian high schools. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 17(1), 152-164.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Sage publications.
- Loeng, S. (2020). Self-directed learning: A core concept in adult education. *Education Research International*, 2020(1), 3816132.
- Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1), 14-29.
- Mackey, A., & Gass, S. M. (2016). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Routledge.
- McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (2013). *Essential questions: Opening doors to student understanding*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Designing your study and selecting a sample. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 67(1), 73-104
- Morris, T. H. (2019). Self-directed learning: A fundamental competence in a rapidly changing world. *International Review of Education*, 65(4), 633-653. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09793-2>
- Mynard, J. (2024). Self-access language learning support in Europe: Observations and current practices. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 15(2), 258-279. <https://doi.org/10.37237/150209>
- Nanbedeh, S. (2025). Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Iranian EFL Classrooms: Exploring Teacher Perceptions and the Impact of Reading Strategy Instruction. *Frontiers in Educational Practice and Research*, 1(1), 17-34.
- Nasri, N., Eslami Rasekh, A., Vahid Dastjerdy, H., & Amirian, Z. (2015). Promoting learner autonomy in an Iranian EFL high school context: Teachers' practices and constraints in focus. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 4(3), 91-105. <https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrsl.2015.925>
- Riahipour, P., Tavakoli, M., & Eslami Rasekh, A. (2020). Curriculum reform and Iranian EFL teachers' professional identity: A marathon of change!. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 12(26), 435-463. <https://doi.org/10.22034/elt.2021.42087.2294>

- Rodgers, T. (2016). Mistakes I have made: and things they taught me while working as a peer. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 20(4), 212-216.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Saeb, F., Nejadansari, D., & Moinzadeh, A. (2021). The impact of action research on teacher professional development: Perspectives from Iranian EFL teachers. *Teaching English Language*, 15(2), 265-297. <https://doi.org/10.22132/tel.2021.143114>
- Safari, P., & Rashidi, N. (2015). A critical look at the EFL education and the challenges faced by Iranian teachers in the educational system. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 11(2), 14-28.
- Salimi, E. A., & Najjarpour, M. (2023). Unpacking EFL teachers' understandings and strategies of self-awareness competence in the classroom. *Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly*, 42(4), 45-69. <https://doi.org/10.22099/tesl.2023.47991.3203>
- Toohy, K., & Norton, B. (2003). Learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings. In *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language Education Perspectives* (pp. 58-72). Palgrave Macmillan
- Tsui, A. (2003). Characteristics of expert and novice teachers. In *Understanding expertise in teaching: case studies of second language teachers* (pp. 22-41). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524698.004>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V., & Rupert, L. J. (1993). The authority of cultural tools in a sociocultural approach to mediated agency. *Cognition and Instruction*, 11(3-4), 227-239.
- Xie, J. (2015). Learning to do teacher research independently: Challenges and solutions. In S. Borg & H. Santiago Sanchez (eds.), *International perspectives on teacher research* (pp. 47-56). Palgrave Macmillan
- Yanay, N. (1994). The social construction of autonomy: A motivational model. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, 22(3), 209-226.
- Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2010). Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action. *Active learning in higher education*, 11(3), 167-177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787410379680>

Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview for teachers

Section 1: Demographics

1. Age
2. Degree
3. How many years of experience have you got in teaching EFL?
4. Do you teach in public schools, private language institutes or both?

Section 2: Challenges and Obstacles to Learner Autonomy

1. What specific challenges do you face when trying to promote learner autonomy among your students?
2. To what extent does the institutional curriculum limit your ability to foster learner autonomy?
3. How do assessment methods affect your teaching approach regarding learner autonomy?
4. What personal barriers do you encounter in encouraging students to take charge of their learning?

Section 3: Final Thoughts

5. In your opinion, what is the most significant factor contributing to the development of learner autonomy in your context?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the promotion of learner autonomy in EFL education?

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview for learners

Section 1: Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. Have you been learning English solely at your school or have you also been going to any English language institute?
3. If you have been going to any language institute, what level are you currently studying at?

Section 2: Challenges and Hinders to Learner Autonomy

1. What challenges do you face when trying to exercise autonomy in your school /language institute?
2. Are there institutional or cultural factors that you believe hinder your ability to learn independently?
3. How do you feel about the assessment methods used in your EFL classes at school /language institute? Do they support or hinder your ability to learn autonomously?
4. What support do you think you need from your teachers to become more autonomous in your learning?

Section 3: Final Thoughts

5. In your opinion, what is the most significant factor contributing to the development of learner autonomy in your context?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the promotion of learner autonomy in EFL education?

Appendix C: The Persian translated version of semi-structured interview for teachers

بخش ۱: مشخصات جمعیتی

۱. سن؟
۲. مدرک؟
۳. چند سال تجربه در تدریس زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی دارید؟.....
۴. آیا در مدارس دولتی، موسسات زبان خصوصی یا هر دو تدریس می‌کنید؟

بخش ۲: چالش‌ها و موانع خودمختاری یادگیرنده

۱. با چه چالش‌های خاصی هنگام تلاش برای ترویج خودمختاری یادگیرنده در میان دانش‌آموزان خود مواجهه هستید؟
۲. تا چه حد برنامه درسی مؤسسه/ مدرسه توانایی شما را در پرورش خودمختاری یادگیرنده محدود می‌کند؟
۳. روش‌های ارزیابی چگونه بر رویکرد تدریس شما در ارتباط با خودمختاری یادگیرنده تأثیر می‌گذارد؟
۴. چه موانع شخصی را در تشویق دانش‌آموزان به مسئولیت‌پذیری در یادگیری خود تجربه نموده‌اید؟

بخش ۳: نظرات نهایی

۵. به نظر شما، مهم‌ترین عامل مؤثر بر توسعه خودمختاری یادگیرنده چیست؟
۶. آیا چیز دیگری وجود دارد که بخواهید در مورد ترویج خودمختاری یادگیرنده در آموزش زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی به اشتراک بگذارید؟

Appendix D: The Persian translated version of semi-structured interview for learners

بخش ۱: مشخصات جمعیتی

۱. لطفاً بفرمایید چند سال دارید؟
۲. آیا فقط در مدرسه زبان انگلیسی یاد می‌گیرید یا به موسسه زبان انگلیسی هم می‌روید؟
۳. اگر به موسسه می‌روید، در چه سطحی در حال حاضر مشغول به آموزش زبان هستید؟

بخش ۲: چالش‌ها و موانع خودمختاری یادگیرنده

۱. چه چالش‌هایی را هنگام تلاش برای ایجاد خودمختاری در مدرسه یا موسسه زبان خود با آن روبرو هستید؟
۲. آیا عوامل سازمانی یا فرهنگی وجود دارد که به نظر شما توانایی شما را در یادگیری مستقل محدود کند؟
۳. نظراتان در مورد روش‌های ارزیابی که در کلاس‌های زبان انگلیسی خود در مدرسه یا موسسه زبان استفاده می‌شود چیست؟ آیا این روش‌ها به نفع یادگیری مستقل شما هستند یا آن را محدود می‌کنند؟
۴. به نظر شما چه نوع حمایتی از معلمان خود نیاز دارید تا در یادگیری خود مستقل‌تر شوید؟

بخش ۳: نظرات نهایی

۵. به نظر شما، مهم‌ترین عامل مؤثر بر توسعه خودمختاری یادگیرنده چیست؟
۶. آیا چیز دیگری وجود دارد که بخواهید در مورد ترویج خودمختاری یادگیرنده در آموزش زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی به اشتراک بگذارید؟