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The Challenges and the Possible Solutions in Fostering Learner Autonomy in ESL Classrooms: ESL Teachers' Voices

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Abstract: The growing emphasis on learner-centered approaches in language teaching has led to increased consideration of autonomous learning. Although existing research has extensively explored the conceptualisation and evolution of learner autonomy, a notable gap exists in understanding the challenges faced by teachers in implementing practices to foster learner autonomy in tertiary-level ESL classrooms. This paper addresses this gap by examining the concept of learner autonomy, along with the associated challenges and possible solutions for implementation in tertiary-level English as a second language in Malaysia. Employing a qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews, the study aims to shed light on the reasons for integrating learner autonomy in the classroom and its significance from the teacher's perspective. The insights gained from this investigation are expected to inspire teachers to adopt effective methods, enabling learner involvement and empowering students to recognize their potential as confident, independent, and adult learners. By reshaping perspectives on learning modes, this study strives to guide learners towards a deeper understanding of knowledge with the supportive guidance of their teachers. The overarching goal is to offer a comprehensive view of the reasons behind using learner autonomy in the classroom, particularly in the Malaysian tertiary context, and provide practical suggestions for its effective integration. The paper concludes with recommendations drawn from its findings, intended to offer valuable insights for both novice teachers and policymakers as they navigate the evolving landscape of language education.

Keywords: learner autonomy, classroom practices, challenges, solutions, Malaysian tertiary context

Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy in language education can be traced back to the work of Henri Holec in the early 1980s (Holec, 1981, 1988). Holec's ideas laid the foundation for subsequent research and discussions in the field. Learner autonomy is believed to have a positive impact on learning achievements. When students take ownership of their learning process, they tend to be more motivated, engaged, and effective in acquiring language skills (Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995). The fact that there is a substantial body of research on learner autonomy indicates that educators and researchers have consistently recognised its importance over the years (Riley, 1985; Dickinson, 1987, 1992; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Dam, 1995; Van Lier, 1996). Different scholars and educators have contributed to the understanding and promotion of learner autonomy, leading to a variety of approaches and strategies. This diversity allows for flexibility in adapting the principles of learner autonomy to various educational contexts. (Jones, 1995; Lee, 1997; Aoki & Smith, 1999). Learner autonomy is often considered an essential educational goal. It aligns with the broader aim of education to empower individuals to become self-directed and lifelong learners (Jones, 1995; Lee, 1997).

Numerous pedagogical efforts have been made to foster learner autonomy in language learning. This includes the development of teaching materials, instructional methods, and assessment tools that support students in taking a more active role in their learning (Aoki & Smith, 1999). In Malaysia for instance, there is a growing emphasis on this concept, reflecting its global relevance in modern education (Lee, 1997) as one of the most crucial goals in language teaching, as the ultimate vision of education is to produce lifelong learners who can learn autonomously. Thus, learner autonomy is a crucial aspect of language education, with a rich history of research and practical implementation. It empowers students to become self-regulated and independent learners, which is essential in today's fast-changing world where lifelong learning is highly valued.

In the Malaysian educational system, English Language is obligatory, spanning from primary through secondary levels and extending into tertiary education. Malaysia places great emphasis on the English Language due to its widespread use, even in academia. For instance, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a public university, uses English as its medium of instruction. The popularity of students pursuing English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) is well-recognised within the educational community (Beare, 2020). However, reports by Nuruladilah and Nurul Amilin (2022), Nanthakumar (2022), James et al. (2020), Zainuddin et al. (2019), and Sani (2019) suggest that recent graduates in Malaysia lack proficiency in the English Language, rendering them less competitive in the job market. In a different perspective, as noted by Le & Nguyen (2022), students struggle with confidence in independent learning. Specifically, they encounter challenges in self-regulation when setting learning objectives and determining what to study. Additionally, both peer and academic support appear to be ineffective. Consequently, two thought-provoking questions arise: Firstly, could it be possible that these learners lack learner autonomy in their English Language learning? Secondly, do ESL teachers encounter challenges in cultivating learner autonomy in their ESL classrooms? Therefore, conducting a study to investigate teachers' viewpoints on the challenges they face and to identify potential solutions while implementing learner autonomy becomes imperative (Beare, 2020; Nuruladilah & Nurul Amilin, 2022; Nanthakumar, 2022; James et al., 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2019; Sani, 2019; Le & Nguyen, 2022).

Numerous scholars contend that teachers serve as the foremost "agents of change" in enhancing learner autonomy. Their roles extend beyond traditional knowledge transmission in classroom settings. Little (1996) emphasised that while learners possess the potential for self-regulation, this doesn't imply that they will autonomously embrace it without the guidance of teachers. Kemala (2016) and Leaver et al. (2005) suggested that teachers not only impart knowledge regarding how to set learning objectives and select appropriate learning tools but also provide opportunities for students to exercise their own choices and decision-making. Alonazi (2017) argued that in order to foster greater independence in students, teachers should assume multiple roles, including that of a facilitator, resource person, and guide. Furthermore, research by Tran and Le (2022) underscored that most ESL students exhibit a heightened interest in language learning when taught by an enthusiastic instructor. Learners perceive passionate language teachers as more effective in promoting academic progress and motivating active participation in the learning process (Tran & Le, 2022).

Moreover, teachers should adopt a more innovative approach when designing tasks for their students. As suggested by Kemala (2016), these tasks should not only promote learner autonomy (LA) but should also have a significantly positive impact on LA. Tasks that are both engaging and challenging tend to foster intrinsic motivation among students. Conversely, monotonous tasks may lead to a lack of motivation. This viewpoint aligns with the perspective of Tran and Duong (2018) in several respects. Their research indicates that students who grasp the significance of tasks, such as portfolio-based or project-based learning, tend to reap greater benefits. These benefits include enhanced self-management, improved self-assessment skills, and better decision-making abilities. However, challenges may arise when the content and materials are predetermined by educational institutions.

The focus of this study centres on the hurdles encountered by ESL teachers in implementing learner autonomy in ESL classrooms within the Malaysian context. The study's findings aim to offer empirical data for fellow researchers with similar interests. Additionally, it is hoped that these findings will influence future educators to cultivate autonomous learning skills and proficiency in foreign or second languages. This resonates with ongoing global research in the same field. However, it's worth noting that over the past 12 years, numerous studies have explored various aspects of learner

autonomy, contributing to innovative theories and empirical investigations. These areas of exploration encompass teachers' and learners' beliefs, theories, issues, and factors related to the promotion of learner autonomy in ESL/EFL teaching. Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies have delved into the challenges faced by teachers in fostering learner autonomy within their own ESL classrooms (Kemala, 2016; Tran & Duong, 2018). Thus, the current study seeks to address the following inquiries:

a. What are the primary obstacles to fostering learner autonomy within Malaysian ESL classrooms?
b. What kinds of strategies should be followed to foster autonomous learning and cultivate learner autonomy in the context of Malaysia?

Literature Review

Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Numerous definitions of learner autonomy exist in the literature, with one prominent perspective being articulated by Holec (1981, p. 3). Holec defines learner autonomy (LA) as "the ability to take control of one's learning" and "the responsibility for all decisions related to every facet of this learning" (Holec, 1981). Scharle and Szabó (2000) also acknowledge LA as an individual's capacity to manage their affairs and exercise self-determination. Essentially, it emphasises the degree of independence students can achieve from their teachers and encourages them to question, elaborate, and challenge teacher-led explanations and instructions. Several scholars have further refined Holec's (1981) definition, emphasising that learners' responsibility is comprehensive. This encompasses setting learning objectives, choosing materials and methods, participating in evaluation, and determining the learning environment (Holmes & Ramos, 1991; Dickinson, 1994).

Moreover, building upon Holec's perspective, Benson (2001) underscores that autonomy in language acquisition entails control over the cognitive learning process, management of content, and methodology (Benson, 2001). Regardless of how LA is defined, it is important to note that students are held accountable for their learning and encouraged to take active roles throughout the process. Learners are encouraged to develop their learning strategies and procedures, as well as to select their learning materials, methods, and assessment criteria (Richards & Rodgers, 2015).

Additionally, Little suggests that 'autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relationship with the process and content of learning' (1991, p. 4) (Little, 1991). However, Lewis (2008) defines autonomy as learners' 'independence' in 'controlling the learning experience' and assuming 'an increasingly important role' in the learning process (Lewis, 2008). Ultimately, learner autonomy represents a learner-centric approach that fully empowers learners, with teachers assuming more of a facilitating role (Reinders, 2016). In summary, all these definitions collectively reflect learner autonomy as a paradigm shift in pedagogy, emphasising teaching students how to learn and promoting learners' independence in all facets of the learning process.

Autonomy and Teaching Practices

Indeed, there is a clear connection between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. Thavenius (1991, p. 160, cited in Lamb, 2008) defines teacher autonomy as the capacity and willingness of teachers to assist learners in taking charge of their learning. Asmari (2013) further elucidated that learner autonomy relies on teacher autonomy, as both play integral roles in achieving optimal effectiveness in language teaching and learning. The pivotal aspect in language learning is that "both teachers and learners need to be prepared to appreciate and recognise the value of learners' autonomy as a means to successful learning" (Breen and Mann, 1997, cited in Wan, 2018, p. 4).

In this regard, the interconnection between learner autonomy and teachers is evident (Szőcs, 2016), considering that teachers are tasked with facilitating autonomous learning in students (Mustafa, 2018). Little (1995) emphatically states that "the development of autonomy in learners assumes the development of autonomy in teachers" (p. 175). Teachers must possess an awareness and comprehension of the limits of their control in the learning environment, as excessive control could undermine student autonomy. Despite many language teachers recognising the significance of

autonomous language learning and its impact on learning and learners, they often struggle to implement it in practice (Abdel Razeq, 2014; Benson, 2013).

In the context of foreign language learning in China, Li & Kim (2020) observed a positive influence of learner autonomy on English language competence. Their research demonstrated that an increase in learner autonomy correlates with the development of communicative competence in English. Similarly, Hermagustiana & Anggriyani (2020) found in the Indonesian context that learner autonomy enhances learners' confidence levels, allowing them to learn English independently with less guidance from teachers. Thus, the relationship between learner autonomy and teachers is intricately linked.

Malaysian ESL Classroom's Culture

The criticism that learner autonomy, originating from a Western cultural tradition, might not resonate with non-Western learners, suggests that it may not align with non-Western pedagogical traditions, potentially imposing behaviors contrary to national culture (Jones, 1995). The inclination of Malaysian university students to self-criticise and self-blame in their English language learning, as highlighted by Thang et al. (2011), is viewed as socio-culturally influenced. Additionally, other researchers have suggested that this learner attitude persists due to a high regard for teachers, a mindset instilled since early childhood and deeply entrenched in learners (Abdul Majid et al., 1999; Phillip & Koo, 2006). However, further investigation is necessary to ascertain whether this phenomenon impedes learner autonomy in non-Western cultures.

Teachers play a vital role in fostering autonomous learning within educational settings, as underscored by Barfield et al. (2001), who argue that "students' ability to behave autonomously is contingent upon teachers creating a classroom culture that embraces autonomy" (p. 3). Similarly, Dam (2003) emphasises that developing learner autonomy is primarily the responsibility of teachers. Little (1995) argues that expecting teachers to nurture autonomy is unreasonable if they themselves do not comprehend what it means to be an autonomous learner. In alignment, Tütüni (2011) states that in learner-centered classrooms, students should be guided by their teachers to understand concepts independently and make decisions regarding their own learning pursuits.

Moreover, it is widely recognised that understanding teachers' beliefs must be a fundamental component of initiatives aiming to induce change in classroom practices (Wedell, 2009). Hence, Borg (2007) posits that teachers' beliefs significantly influence their pedagogical choices. Without teachers' knowledge and understanding of learner autonomy's importance and their willingness to implement a new intended curriculum, these initiatives may remain theoretical concepts.

Even though many ESL educators advocate for encouraging learner autonomy, the question arises: do they genuinely implement what they believe in their classrooms? In Malaysia, researchers like Thang and Azarina (2007) studied the readiness for autonomy in three public universities, suggesting that, generally, learners still prefer teachers to take charge, including pointing out mistakes, providing guidance, and motivation. Thang and Nurjanah (2017) claimed that there is a common link between challenges in learning English and the socio-cultural context in which learners have grown up, described as a prevalent personality trait among many Asian individuals. Consequently, the opportunity to practice learner autonomy depends on the teacher's ability to create a classroom culture that embraces it. Therefore, comprehending teachers' challenges in fostering learner autonomy in their classrooms is of significance.

Barriers to Learner Autonomy

The studies conducted by Thang Siew Ming (2009), Thang Siew Ming and Azarina Alias (2007), and Thang Siew Ming (2001, 2003, 2005, cited in Thang Siew Ming & Azarina Alias, 2007) focused on tertiary students' autonomous learning initiatives across various institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. These studies revealed that a significant portion of learners tends to favor a teacher-centered approach, if not entirely depending on the teacher. They prefer the traditional role of the teacher as a knowledge provider, guide, and motivator. This inclination is also noted in a study by Suchitra Nair and Parvathy Ratnam (2003), where students exhibited a reluctance to empower themselves, even when encouraged by the teacher to take responsibility for their learning. Many

students lack the drive to be self-directed, both within and beyond formal learning environments. Rohayah Nordin and Naginder Kaur (2004, p. 11) similarly found that students refrained from addressing their language challenges independently and were hesitant to assume full responsibility for their learning process. A major frustration for learners is their difficulty in relating words to ideas by engaging in deep thinking about a word and understanding its functioning within the language. These attributes collectively influence the extent to which learners take control and responsibility for their learning.

Another potential issue contributing to the lack of learner autonomy in English classrooms is the discrepancy between instructor beliefs and the actual practices in imparting the skills sought by employers (Singh et al., 2014). Consequently, a thorough examination of teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and the delivery of the curriculum is warranted. Due to the issues and the limited research on teachers' actual implementation of generic skills within university curricula (Singh et al., 2014), there is a pressing need to investigate the reality of tertiary-level English language classrooms by exploring current practices and beliefs of English teachers regarding language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and study skills. Understanding teachers' beliefs and teaching practices in integrating these skills within English courses could shed light on the criteria useful for fostering autonomy and communicative competence among local graduates.

Challenges in promoting autonomy might also stem from teachers' fear of losing control. A study by Asmahanim Haji Mohamad Yusuf and Mohd Nur Fitri Mohd Salim (2015) revealed that a significant issue hindering students from becoming autonomous language learners is the lack of opportunities provided by teachers in the language classroom. Teachers often assume the role of authority in class, inhibiting students from expressing their opinions and actively participating in classroom activities. This finding is supported by Erdogan (2003), Buyukozturk (1999), and Karagul (1999), which assert that teacher-related factors impede the development of learner autonomy. Teachers are perceived as authority figures in the education system, and their fear of relinquishing power and control in the classroom contributes to this challenge. Given that most of today's students belong to Generation Z or even later generations, it is imperative to align teaching approaches with their needs, considering they have grown up in the era of technological advancement.

Methodology

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Kedah Campus, Malaysia. There are 45 lecturers teaching English, Mandarin and Arabic language. However, only six lecturers served as participants.

Design of the Study

The researcher's use of qualitative methods research enabled a thorough collection and analysis of data for this study. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of information, and conducts the study in a natural setting. The process can be a form, characteristics, relationships, similarities, activities, change, and differences between one phenomenon and another phenomenon.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The interview participants comprised a purposive sample of six ESL teachers employed at a public university. The responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analysed based on the study's objectives and the themes identified during the coding process. The aim was to identify the challenges encountered by teachers in fostering learner autonomy and to propose potential solutions to enhance future teaching practices.

Instrument

The interview questions were adapted from Nguyen (2010) and focused on exploring the challenges and solutions encountered by teachers in promoting autonomy within ESL classrooms. Specifically, the questions addressed teachers' challenges and potential solutions related to learner autonomy.

Interviews

To investigate the challenges arising from teachers' attempts to implement principles of learner autonomy, six lecturers participated in semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2023. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The meetings were carried out in English and took around 30 minutes. Initially, participants responded to questions in a provided guide and were encouraged to elaborate further. The sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The following section presents the results of the interviews in accordance with the study's inquiry.

Reliability and Validity of the Study

The study's internal validity and reliability in qualitative research can be assessed through various strategies, including member validation (member checks) and triangulation. Creswell (2008) uses triangulation to strengthen both reliability and internal validity. For this study, both triangulation and member checks were utilised to validate the collected data.

Triangulation, also known as convergent validation, involves cross-verifying evidence from diverse sources, individuals, or methods of data collection in the description and thematic analysis of qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). In this study, the primary source of data for presenting the research results was the information obtained through interviews.

Thematic Analysis on Qualitative Data

Aggregate numbers were intentionally avoided during the analysis to prevent potential biases in the discussion. Instead, the analysis focused on identifying the most prominent points mentioned by the interviewees. Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework was utilised in analysing the interview data. This framework is widely regarded as highly influential, especially in the social sciences, due to its clear and practical structure for conducting thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this framework is often recommended as the first qualitative method to learn, as it equips researchers with fundamental skills applicable to various types of analysis (p. 78).

Findings

Major challenges of promoting learner autonomy in the classroom

The findings were divided into two parts. The first part deals with the identification of challenges in promoting learner autonomy. The second part describes how the teachers dealt with the challenges. The data analysis has shown that three main factors which limit the promotion of learner autonomy among students are; policy constraints, institutional constraints, teachers ‘language teaching, including experiences and beliefs, and learners’ backgrounds. The results of the survey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The summary of challenges and solutions applied by ESL teachers in promoting learner autonomy

	Identification			
Dimension	**Policy Constraints**	**Institutional Constraints**	**Language Teaching**	**Learner's Background**
Challenges	Syllabus Design from the main campus to be standardised to all branch campuses	Limited contact hour for English Language Courses.	Lack of knowledge for a teaching strategy that can promote learner autonomy.	Student's different characteristics; Unsupported
		Lack of long-term consistent plan for fostering LA		Socioeconomic background
				Lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, teacher dependence; primacy of passing the course rather than learning, lack of training to be autonomous.
Solutions	Applying collaborative learning strategies	Planning and managing time	In house training for teachers.	Initiating activities to involve in strategies
	Giving autonomy to the branch campuses on developing own syllabus design.		Applying collaborative learning strategies	Giving reinforcement in autonomous skills

Table 1 presents the challenges faced by the teachers and the solutions/strategies applied to meet the challenges—the detailed information, as was described in the first and second part of this section.

The result of the interview showed that some of the challenges were faced by the teachers in promoting learner autonomy. The identified challenges were educational policy and institutional constraints, language teaching, and the learner's background. The identification was shown in Table 2. The identifications in Table 2 about the challenges faced by ESL teachers in promoting learner autonomy were described for each dimension.

Table 2. Challenges faced by the ESL teachers in promoting learner autonomy

Identification				
Dimension	**Policy constraints**	**Institutional constraints**	**Language teaching**	**Learner's background**
Challenges	Syllabus Design from the main campus to be standardised to all branch campuses.	Limited contact hour for English language courses. Lack of long-term consistent plan for fostering LA	Lack of knowledge and training toward teaching strategies to promote learner autonomy Be used to their traditional role as an authority,	Student's different characteristics; Unsupported socio-economic background. Lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, teacher dependence; primacy of passing the course rather than learning; lack of training to be autonomous

Table 3 illustrates the main categories, subcategories, and some related quotes regarding the challenges to learner autonomy.

Table 3. Main categories, subcategories and related quotes regarding the challenges to learner autonomy

Main Categories	Subcategories	Related Quotes
Policy	Curriculum design	*I think the design curriculum is another challenge, another challenge for me because we have to finish the syllabus.* *As much as we want to be creative, we can be creative but then it's the first challenge again student proficiency.* (T2)
	Focused on completing the syllabus.	*So, we are more focused on finishing the syllabus, making sure that students at least understand and get something out of the course.* (T2)
	Top-down system	*Red tapes from the bosses up and high above* (T4)

Institutional	Limited teaching hour	*Contact hours during the formal process is not enough. Definitely not enough. I just like reading storybooks, I like listening to English songs, I like watching movies, I like singing in English.* [T1]
	Too many skills to teach	*ESL teachers had limited time to always assist students.* [T1]
Teachers' Knowledge	Learner autonomy is not suitable for all ESL subjects.	*Depending on the subjects and students' proficiency. Technical subjects like guided academic writing or critical reading might not be suitable. However, for certain subjects like grammar, it is possible.* (T1)
	Learner Autonomy is only for proficient and mature learners only.	*Only applicable for proficient and matured learners, moderate to beginner junior students still have to rely on teachers.* (T5)
	Traditional method Spoon-feed culture.	*1 believe in traditional way of teaching especially when teaching the less proficient students who were doing Pre-Diploma course. "I am going to be like their mother, their father so I spoon-feed everything" I'm going to give the instruction from A to Z".* [T3] *We are still in the very traditional classroom setting*[T3]
	Not willing to let go of power.	
	Students' perception	*But this is about the because the perception and the paradigm that you're having right now, how you want to shift the paradigm from school to university and how we want to shift from the settings of learning process and new processes of learning process and becoming an autonomous learner.* [T3]
	Paradigm shift	
	Misconceptionof Learner Autonomy	*So when they come to the university, they feel that, "okay, if I do everything, if I find all the resources, then what are my lecturers doing?"(*T5)
Students' Background	Student's different Characteristics	*There are so many kinds of students with different learning needs, different learning styles*[T1]

Lack of confidence	*It's not really an autonomous classroom because like I said, the students are not confident. They'd rather be directed.* [T2]
Teacher dependence	
Passive learners	*I think there are some passive students who are still passive, I have, you know what you call hard time to reach out* [T4]
Spoon feeding culture	*Because so far at school they have been so used to spoon feeding, they are so used to being given everything by their teachers, so when they come to the University, especially the pre-diploma students, part one students, they are still carrying a lot of inheritance from their schools (T1)*

To summarise the results on challenges faced by ESL teachers in promoting learner autonomy, four main categories have been identified from the interviews. The categories included challenges on policy, institutional, teacher's knowledge and learner's background. The subcategories for barriers in policy were standardised curriculum design, teacher focused on completing the syllabus and top-down system. In addition, other subcategories for barriers in institutional were limited teaching hour, too many skills to teach. The subcategories for teachers' knowledge where learner autonomy is not suitable for all ESL subjects, learner autonomy is only for proficient and mature learners only, traditional method persist, spoon-feeding culture in ESL classrooms, teachers not willing to let go of power, students' perception about learning and paradigm shift. Another subcategory is teachers' misconception of learner autonomy. Furthermore, a hindrance to learner autonomy is learners' background. The subcategories were students' different characteristics and level of proficiency, lack of confidence, teacher dependence, passive learners, and spoon-feeding culture.

The Solutions/Strategies to Learner Autonomy

Based on the interviews, the possible solutions to the identified challenges are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Solutions/Strategies to Learner Autonomy

Challenges	**Solutions/Strategies**
Policy	1. Applying collaborative learning strategies.
	2. Giving autonomy to branch campuses for syllabus design.
Learning Institutions	Planning and managing time.
Teachers' Knowledge	1. In-house training for teachers.
	2. Applying collaborative learning strategies.
Student's Background	**Proposed Strategies:**
	1. Initiating activities to involve in learning.
	2. Giving reinforcement in autonomous skills.
	3. Empowering students by teaching skills for Learner Autonomy.

The participants shared several skills which they believe are ideal and significant for their learners to become autonomous learners. In general, these skills can generally be categorised as study skills, critical thinking skills, information searching skills and team working. Selected interview

excerpts are included in the table below to support the themes identified. Table 5 shows the summary of skills to promote learner autonomy.

Table 5. Summary of skills in promoting learner autonomy

Skills	**Interview Excepts**
Information searching skills/ Research skills	*They need to know where they can get the information. How to use google scholar etc*. (T4)
Critical thinking skills	*Critical thinking skills that's the most important thing. for them to differentiate which information is useful and how to solve problem.* (T2)
Study skills	*They need to learn how to learn, note taking, summarising and paraphrasing skills* [T1]
Team working skills	*Teamwork and group work assignments can help the weaker learners.* [T3]

The interviewees emphasised the paramount importance of the skills mentioned for the promotion of autonomous learning. These skills enable learners to take more responsibility for their learning and reduce their dependence on teachers for tasks and projects. By acknowledging these challenges and implementing these solutions, English teachers can create a more conducive environment for promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms.

Discussion

The research findings shed light on the critical challenges that English teachers face in promoting learner autonomy in ESL classrooms. These challenges are multi-faceted and can be categorised into four dimensions: policy constraints, institutional constraints, teachers' knowledge and learners' backgrounds. These challenges are in line with the existing academic discourse on learner autonomy in language teaching.

The results of the interview indicate that the promotion of learner autonomy is hindered by policy, such as the standardised design of the curriculum. The established zoning system in the old curriculum design, which determines the quality of pupils, has an impact on student autonomy. The focus on completing the curriculum leads to limited teaching time. To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to consider autonomy as the core of a new course rather than an add-on to existing learning programmes (Cotterall, 1995). However, successfully integrating learner autonomy requires a new approach that is supported by the institution. This new approach requires the support and endorsement of institutional authority figures, such as policy makers or academic authorities, to ensure the official inclusion of autonomy in the curriculum. The institutionalisation of this new approach is crucial for its survival and effectiveness.

In terms of policy constraints, the identified challenge of standardised curriculum design aligns with the work of scholars such as Smith (2019), who emphasises the importance of curriculum design and the impact on promoting learner autonomy. The top-down system and focus on curriculum completion highlighted in the study reflect a wider concern discussed by Johnson (2018), emphasising the need for creative teaching methods within the constraints of performance targets.

Institutional constraints as revealed in the study highlighted ESL teachers face a limitation in terms of curriculum time allocation associated with educational institutions. This constraint highlighted that limited time in the classroom is a major challenge in promoting learner autonomy. Insufficient time affects the duration available for teachers to effectively fulfil their role in the learning process and limits certain functions and activities that are essential for promoting autonomy (Borg & Al-busaidi, 2012; Lengkanawati, 2017). In addition, limitations related to teachers' ability to think independently, educational laws, institutional regulations and the lack of clear teaching guidelines have been identified (Alonazi, 2017; Lengkanawati, 2017; Nakata, 2011; Borg & Al-

Busaidi, 2012). The particularly limited teaching hours and the challenge of covering different skills are consistent with the findings of Jones et al. (2020) who discuss the constraints faced by ESL teachers in terms of time constraints and the struggle to balance different language skills in a limited time frame. The inadequacy of contact hours for effective English language learning also aligns with the concerns raised by Brown (2020) regarding the impact of institutional structures on learner autonomy.

One of the main challenges for teachers identified in this study coincides with the findings of Al Asmari (2013), who highlights that although teachers understand the need to base teaching on learner-centred approaches, they often lack the necessary experience and knowledge to effectively promote learner autonomy in the classroom. Therefore, training is essential to enable teachers to facilitate autonomy for their students. Furthermore, the challenge related to teachers' knowledge, particularly the notion that learner autonomy is not appropriate for all ESL subjects, resonates in the literature. The belief that technical subjects may not be suitable for autonomy aligns with discussions by Taylor (2017), who emphasises the context-specific nature of autonomy. The persistence of traditional teaching methods and the reluctance of teachers to relinquish their power aligns with the findings by Roberts (2020) and emphasises the need for a paradigm shift.

The research brought to light another difficulty related to the assumption of autonomous learning strategies, as learners are often highly dependent on teachers. Concerns about students' backgrounds, such as their characteristics, their lack of self-confidence and their dependence on teachers, are consistent with existing studies. The problem of a culture of paternalism and the inheritance of passive learning behaviours from previous educational experiences aligns with research by Garcia (2016) and Clark (2018), who emphasise the impact of previous educational practises on learner autonomy. The heavy reliance on the teacher means that students do not actively seek alternative resources for language learning and perceive the teacher as the primary and sometimes only source of knowledge. This finding is in line with a study by Shahsavari (2014) at Islamic Azad University in Iran, which found that both teachers and students lack a deep understanding of the importance of autonomous learning for language development. The study also revealed that students continued to adhere to traditional learning practises such as memorisation. These findings emphasise the need to train learners to improve their autonomous language learning skills and encourage them to take more responsibility for their own learning (Haughton & Dickinson, 1988).

The study also identified passive and reluctant learners as a significant challenge within the educational foundation. Lower participation in classroom activities was observed, which intertwined with similar findings that ESL learners in public universities tend to be passive, often due to lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and low self-esteem and motivation (Permatasari & Arianti, 2016). Overcoming these challenges requires changing students' perceptions and fostering their belief that they can succeed in their tasks with effort. This is in line with Loh and Teo's (2017) findings on the conservative and collectivist nature of Asians.

These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the challenges and obstacles in developing learner autonomy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016; Nguyen, 2016; Tapinta, 2016). In addition, teachers play an important role in training students to become more autonomous ESL learners. Al-Asmari (2013) conducted a study at Taif University to investigate teachers' views on learner autonomy and the situation of Saudi learners. The study concluded that by introducing learner autonomy in the classroom, students become less dependent on teachers. According to the researcher's findings, teachers can improve students' understanding of language learning through autonomous learning tasks in class, such as working with peers, group work and participation in decision making regarding learning topics. Therefore, students' level of knowledge about how to learn a language was seen as a barrier to their development of autonomous language learning. Consequently, students continued to seek the help of their teachers as the main source of their language knowledge.

Fundamentally, an autonomous learner must proactively engage in the learning process generate ideas and utilise learning opportunities rather than merely react to teacher-directed stimuli (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975). This is consistent with the theory of constructivism. In proposing solutions and strategies, the study draws on collaborative learning approaches, time management, in-house training for teachers and activities to engage students in learning. These strategies align with the recommendations by Smith (2019) and Brown (2018), who advocate

collaborative and student-centred approaches to increase learner autonomy. The emphasis on internal CPD is consistent with discussions of continuous professional development in the literature (Roberts, 2020; Taylor, 2017).

The suggested strategies for learners, such as initiating activities, strengthening autonomous skills and empowering learners, are consistent with the skills advocated by researchers. These skills empower learners to take more responsibility for their learning and reduce their dependence on teachers for assignments and projects. This resonates with Bajrami's (2015) assertion that learners equipped with a spectrum of learning-to-learn skills are more likely to evolve into proficient autonomous learners. In particular, T3 expressed the hope that these skills would be useful not only in English but also in other academic fields. This emphasises the importance of transferring acquired knowledge to broader contexts (Little, 1991). This aspect of transferability emphasises why the cultivation of autonomous learners is a priority in the education system. The emphasis on skills such as information searching, critical thinking, learning and teamwork aligns with Trowler (2011) and Benson (2011) who underscore the importance of these skills for autonomous learning. In summary, the findings are consistent with and contribute to existing scholarship on learner autonomy in the ESL context. The challenges and proposed strategies provide valuable insights for educators and policy makers seeking to improve learner autonomy in the language classroom and reflect an ongoing dialogue in this area.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the conclusions drawn by Borg and Al-Busadi (2012) in their study on English teachers' beliefs and practises regarding learner autonomy. In the qualitative study conducted among 61 English teachers at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, found that teachers were generally positive about learner autonomy. However, various challenges, such as curriculum constraints, learners' lack of prior experience in autonomous learning and their dependence on teachers, limit teachers' expectations of learners' ability to become autonomous. Despite these challenges, the study also identified strategies to overcome these limitations.

Pedagogical Implications for Teachers

In understanding the factors that influence student autonomy in the English classroom, teachers are encouraged to adapt their pedagogical strategies to provide students with more decision-making opportunities, problem-solving exercises, and independent learning experiences. Teachers have a great influence on students' motivation and confidence, which are crucial for successful autonomous learning. In addition, teachers are encouraged to show creativity in the classroom by adapting their approaches to stimulate students' interest in learning English, regardless of the prescribed course materials.

Teachers play a pivotal role in transforming the education system. As intermediaries between theory and practise, curriculum designers and learners, they mediate the idea of autonomy in the different contexts of practice. Teachers need to actively apply valuable learning theories and be practical in their approach. With the evolution from a dominant paradigm in teaching methodology to a constructivist approach, teachers are now seen as active decision-makers who draw on complex and personalised networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs to make instructional decisions. To be effective decision makers and critical thinkers, teachers need to cultivate their autonomy.

Implications for Students

Students are strongly encouraged to define their learning goals and methods on their journey to learning English. They should set clear learning goals and use appropriate ESL learning methods. It is also recommended to utilise modern technology to create a self-sufficient learning environment. Researchers emphasize that learners need a comprehensive metacognitive knowledge to be autonomous and strategic. This knowledge includes self-awareness, learning strategies, and an

understanding of the learning tasks. These aspects should be integrated into English language learning programmes. Teachers should guide learners to activities and resources that match their individual learning goals.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although this study provides valuable insights, there are limitations that should be considered in future research. Firstly, the inclusion of classroom observations to compare with the interview results would improve the depth of understanding and the association between the two. In addition, future studies should strive for a mixed-methods design and expand the sample size to include students with different majors. Furthermore, the inclusion of teachers would enrich the study and provide a more comprehensive view to capture their different perspectives.

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