

A Qualitative Exploration of English Language Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy in Lahore's Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines English language teachers' perceptions and classroom practices concerning learner autonomy (LA) in secondary schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The study aimed to understand the teachers' views, the challenges they face, and their practical strategies for fostering LA, particularly across public and private school contexts. Using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 teachers, and the resulting data were analyzed via thematic analysis. Findings revealed that while teachers value LA, its implementation is significantly hindered by systemic factors, including a rigid curriculum, lack of institutional support, and students' limited readiness for self-directed learning. The findings highlight a clear dichotomy in autonomy practices between the more flexible private schools and the constrained public schools. Despite these barriers, teachers are employing creative strategies such as collaborative group work and student-led projects. The study concludes with a critical call for comprehensive professional development initiatives and curriculum-level reforms to effectively integrate learner autonomy into the Pakistani educational system.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, English language teachers, Pakistan, education, thematic analysis, challenges, strategies, professional development.

Introduction

The term learner autonomy refers to the ability of learners to manage the learning process and has drawn considerable interest in second language acquisition, especially in English Language Teaching. It involves moving from teacher-centered approaches to student-centered learning, where learners not only take control of their learning but also set and achieve specific goals. Although the topic of learner autonomy has been widely studied in the Western environment, the lack of research on this specific area of the Pakistani education system is enormous. This paper is expected to fill in the gap of empirical research concerning the perceptions, challenges, and strategies of English language teachers working in the secondary schools of Lahore, with references to such variables as school type (public and private) and gender. In the Pakistani educational context, English is pronounced as a foreign language and a major subject. Autonomy of learners, particularly in the context of Pakistan, is very important, considering the scope of globalization and technology in education.

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Despite this importance, learner autonomy is directly hampered by the continued use of old, teacher-centered pedagogy in Pakistan, which is further complicated by the socio-cultural practices and restrictive curricula. This is critical because student-centered learning is imperative in providing students with lifelong skills in a globalized world. Therefore, in order to establish pedagogical frameworks to foster self-directed learning in the region, it is a precondition that teacher perceptions need to be addressed.

Recording the Perceptions and Practices of Pakistani teachers in respect to autonomy is important to facilitate the formulation of a pedagogical framework to facilitate self-directed learning. Many Pakistani teachers of EFL think that their students are not experienced and competent enough to take part in independent study, which explains the need to use a more teacher-centered approach to classroom organization (Abbas & Iqbal, 2018).

The main purpose of the study is to provide a detailed discussion of what Pakistani English language teachers perceive and what practices they have on the topic of learner autonomy. These findings will be used to create curriculum development and changes in the pre-service and in-service training modules of teachers in a manner that will promote learner autonomy within the national education system. To be more precise, the proposed study will be carried out with respect to teachers of the secondary school in Lahore and the influence that the institutional, cultural, and pedagogical factors have on their perception and classroom performance. In this way, this study will aid in the formulation of effective curriculum reform and teacher training policies.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the perceptions and practices of Pakistani English language teachers toward learner autonomy (LA) in secondary schools in Lahore.
2. To identify the institutional, cultural, and pedagogical challenges that teachers face in promoting LA within their classrooms.
3. To explore the specific practices and methods teachers use to foster LA, and to compare these approaches across public and private school contexts.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions and classroom practices of Pakistani English language teachers regarding learner autonomy at the secondary school level?
2. What institutional, cultural, and pedagogical challenges do these teachers face when attempting to foster learner autonomy?
3. How do English language teachers in Lahore promote learner autonomy among their students, and how do these strategies differ between public and private schools?

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is the process whereby learners have control over their learning, and it has attracted a lot of interest in second language learning, particularly in the English Language Teaching. It is a transformation of the traditional teacher-centered methods into a more student-centered one, where learners are given the responsibility for their learning and they strive to realize their objectives.

The theoretical foundation is significant

The concept of learner autonomy gained prominence in the 1970s alongside learner-centered approaches (Holec, 1981). Autonomy was first characterized as the ability to control one's learning and has, over time, been extended to encompass the skills of self-management and lifelong learning (Benson, 2011). The argument on the extent of control that the student is able to exercise and the control a teacher possesses is a persistent one. Scholars such as Carless (2007a) have explored how autonomy is promoted within specific regional contexts, highlighting its applicability beyond Western classrooms.

Autonomy in the Pakistani Context

Although there is a lot of literature, especially from the Western angle, there is still a major gap in research concerning the perceptions and practices of Pakistani English language teachers. English is one of the foreign languages that is taught as a subject in the Pakistani educational setting. Autonomy of learners is especially significant because of the growing emphasis of the country on globalization and technology. Nevertheless, systemic pedagogical practices and emphasis on tests and exams tend to interfere with its actualization. Several Pakistani researchers assume that students are not yet mature enough or able to engage in independent learning, which is why the teacher-centered classroom practices should be maintained (Abbas & Iqbal, 2018).

Challenges and Socio-Cultural Factors

Savin-Baden (2000a) posits that autonomy demands a radical change in the old teacher-student relationships, which involves instructors sacrificing some power. This is quite a challenge in Pakistan, where institutional and pedagogical factors, including scarcity of resources and an examination-oriented culture, are key obstacles (Suleiman, 2013). However, despite such limitations, autonomy can be promoted with small changes in the teaching practices (Tharp, 2011a). Research has unearthed an inconsistency between the positive attitude towards learning independence in universities and the traditional, lecture-based, classroom practices of teachers (Saeed & Asghar, 2020). It is also perceived that learner autonomy is a Western idea that would not be easily recreated in local cultural and institutional realities (Javed, 2021).

These negative perceptions are often conditioned by the belief that direct instruction better contributes to high test scores under an exam-oriented system (Nawaz & Aziz, 2019). Sociocultural aspects are also emphasized in Pakistani-specific literature, as many views complete autonomy as one of the manifestations of professional negligence because respect towards teacher authority is high in Pakistan (Rizwan & Khan, 2019). The resistance to learner-centered teaching adds to the difficulty of student-centered pedagogy in Pakistan, similar to the challenges faced in contexts with deeply ingrained traditional educational practices (Carless, 2007b).

Existing Research Gaps

The fact that grammar-translation techniques are prevalent in certain teaching fraternities also serves as an attitudinal impediment to learner-centered approaches

(Zafar & Batool, 2020). A key divergence, however, is that research has also discovered that educators in private schools tend to have a more positive view of LA because of less enrollment in classes and a greater degree of flexibility in the curriculum (Iqbal & Ahmed, 2017). Lots of teachers believe that the explicit focus on language learning strategies is an obligatory step to training autonomous learners (Yasmin & Bano, 2022). Different qualitative and quantitative methods have been used in this research (Gulzar & Saleem, 2018; Hussain, 2019; Khan, 2015).

While previous studies have established general teacher beliefs, there is still a tremendous gap in the Lahore case, particularly on a secondary level. The lack of literature directly comparing the attitudes and the classroom practices of male and female educators in the various contexts of the public secondary schools and the private secondary schools is very remarkable. This gap is directly related to the current study, as it sought to find out the perceptions and practices employed by Pakistani teachers to facilitate autonomy and address these obstacles.

Theoretical Framework

Moving from the broader literature, this study is conceptually anchored in two primary theories. The conceptual foundation of this study is primarily rooted in Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and the principles of autonomy development.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and the ZPD

Developmental psychology is the basis of theories of learner autonomy. Social interaction and the teacher as a facilitator are significant according to the Sociocultural Theory of Social Learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The perspective plays a crucial role in understanding how learners get to an even higher stage of autonomy through deliberate interactions within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is the change of dependence to self-reliance, which is one of the primary themes in the autonomy-based pedagogy. In this context, a teacher is not considered the source of knowledge, but an enabler who scaffolds students into learning on their own. This view is critical in the analysis of the teacher practice within the Pakistani context, where a progressive disenfranchisement of control, as opposed to a disenfranchisement of control, is probably the best and culturally responsive practice.

Defining and Nurturing Autonomy

While Vygotsky provided the psychological basis, scholars like Holec (1981) first defined the concept of autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning." Little (2007) has since extended the theoretical framework, emphasizing how learner autonomy can be applied and nurtured in real-world educational settings. This study uses these theoretical perspectives to frame and interpret the discrepancy found between teachers' positive perceptions of autonomy and the limitations in their actual classroom practices.

Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. The rationale behind this choice was to explore and gain deep insight into the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of English language teachers regarding learner autonomy (LA). The interpretivist paradigm enabled a rich and contextualized understanding of how teachers in Lahore interpret, construct, and navigate the concept of LA within their specific educational settings. The selected

qualitative survey design followed a cross-sectional descriptive approach, which aimed to portray the phenomenon comprehensively without attempting to manipulate or control any variables. In doing so, it provided a holistic and authentic picture of LA practices within Pakistani classrooms. This approach is particularly suitable for research questions that seek to understand *what* individuals experience and *how* they make sense of their experiences, especially in studies focused on human perceptions, meanings, and behaviors.

Sampling Technique and Participants

The sample used in this research was a sampling of 20 English language teachers of both the general and private secondary schools of Lahore, using the purposive method of sampling. This is what has been applied throughout the paper. We chose 10 female teachers and 10 male teachers in order to get a representative sample; both boys' school and girls' school were represented in the sample. The sample was purposive as it consisted of the selection of participants, who have the required experience, as far as teaching (3 to 10 years of experience) experience was involved, and the participants are expected to provide the qualifying information related to the subject of the research. This controlled heterogeneity in terms of gender, school type, and teaching experience enabled a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the institutional and contextual factors shaping learner autonomy (LA) across diverse educational settings in Lahore.

Data Collection Tools and Ethical Considerations

A semi-structured interview guide was used as the primary data collection instrument because it would help to understand how teachers perceive the concept of learner autonomy and what steps they take to develop it. A rigorous content validation process was applied in order to make the instrument sound. A panel of four independent experts (one a senior academic and one an experienced educator) screened the protocol professionally and commented on its clarity, relevance, and contextual appropriateness. A pilot study was then undertaken with 5 teachers based on their feedback in order to further streamline the guide. This was done to ensure that the final tool was as accurate and strong as it could be to allow useful responses.

The interviews have been divided into two face-to-face and Zoom to fit into the schedules and the location of the participants. This dual-mode approach enhanced flexibility while maintaining depth, enabling the collection of rich, high-quality data. The objectives of the study were disclosed to the participants clearly prior to any interview, and their confidentiality was guaranteed. This was carried out to make sure that the research was ethical because all the participants had to be informed through a formal procedure. The methodology allowed collecting a broad and diverse data with a diverse sample of respondents.

Data Analysis

Data from the interview were analyzed using thematic analysis; the thematic analysis is a methodological process of identifying destruction explaining as well and describing the trends or themes of the qualitative data. This was done using the 6-phase model suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) revisions, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) report production. This methodical way of

researching permitted the strict interpretation of the perceptions, strategies, and confrontations of teachers in the sense that the given results were based on the personal language and experience of the participants.

Delimitations

- The study was delimited to English language teachers working in secondary schools in the District of Lahore.
- The small sample size of 20 teachers restricts the generalizability of the findings to the wider Pakistani educational context.
- The reliance on self-reported interview data may introduce bias, which is a common limitation of qualitative research.
- Future studies can address these limitations by using larger and more diverse samples and incorporating objective measures such as classroom observations.

Findings

The findings presented here are based on semi-structured interviews with 20 English language teachers from public and private secondary schools in Lahore. The data was then subjected to thematic analysis in order to come up with the main themes and trends. Participants were coded using their gender and school affiliation to guarantee anonymity:

- **PTF:** Girls' Private-School Teachers
- **GTF:** Girls' Public-School Teachers
- **PTM:** Boys' Private-School Teachers
- **GTM:** Boys' Public-School Teachers

Three themes were found in the analysis: (1) Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy, (2) Challenges to Fostering Learner Autonomy, and (3) Strategies and Practices

Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

The results showed an insightful perception of learner autonomy (LA) by both male and female teachers. The value for all participants was the ability to make learners responsible for their education and control their learning activities. A clear distinction emerged between the perspectives of teachers working in private schools and those teaching in public institutions.

Private school teachers, such as PTF1 and PTM3, were significantly more positive, as they saw their institutional context as having more support for autonomy-based pedagogy. According to the assertion of PTF1, *"learner autonomy is imperative since it fosters student control of learning. I have been promoting the idea of researching the topics in my class and presenting them to students. It makes them self-confident and self-reliant."* This was echoed by PTM3, who observed, *"I think that those students who are encouraged to think on their own... have a higher chance of success. I attempt to make them feel empowered through choice and responsibility in their education."*

In sharp contrast, educators in state schools, including GTF3 and GTM2, had a more cautious outlook, with reference to the constraints of their situation. GTF3 commented, *"Students in government schools are not yet prepared to be independent. Students often require more guidance and structure... Encouraging autonomy is*

difficult when students are not accustomed to it, and there is minimal room for flexibility in the syllabus." GTM2 similarly explained, "*I acknowledge the role and significance of learner autonomy, but the government school reality is different. Things like big class numbers, the fixed curriculum, and sparse resources are so hard to work around.*"

Gender-Based Differences in Perceptions

While both male and female teachers in our sample demonstrated a clear understanding of learner autonomy, some subtle differences emerged in their expressed attitudes and perceived challenges. Female teachers—especially those in public schools—expressed greater caution, often highlighting concerns related to students' limited readiness and the classroom's need for more structured guidance. In contrast, male teachers more frequently pointed to systemic challenges such as rigid institutional policies and overcrowded classrooms as major hindrances to fostering learner autonomy. These nuanced findings suggest that gender may play a role in how teachers perceive and navigate the complexities of fostering learner autonomy within their specific school environments.

Challenges to Fostering Learner Autonomy

One of the most prominent issues identified by all participants was the significant challenges to promoting LA. These constraints were consistently categorized into three sub-themes: institutional limitations, student reluctance, and curriculum rigidity.

- **Institutional constraints:** Several public-school teachers described a lack of institutional support for self-directed learning. GTF4 noted, "*The administration does not support... autonomy... They are more focused on results and standardized testing. There is little encouragement for teachers to allow students to make decisions about their learning.*"
- **Student reluctance:** Both male and female teachers observed that students, particularly in government schools, were often unmotivated to take ownership of their learning. As GTF5 shared, "*Many of my students are used to being told exactly what to do. They are hesitant and uncertain when I try to give them more control. It's a cultural issue—they are much more used to the teacher doing all the work.*"
- **Curriculum rigidity:** Teachers, especially in the public sector, were vocal about the inflexibility of the curriculum and its fixation on examination results. GTM3 explained, "*The curriculum is constructed in a manner that does not allow any form of autonomy. There is a lot of focus on examinations, and there is no room for divergent or innovative thought.*"

Strategies and Practices for Promoting Autonomy

Despite the obstacles, teachers reported employing a range of practices to encourage LA. The most common methods included collaborative learning, independent research projects, and student-led instructional activities.

- **Collaborative and peer learning:** Many teachers integrated group work to foster greater student engagement. As PTF3 explained, "*I have group work as part of project work. The students have specific duties that they have to*

manage, and then they have to make choices collectively. It promotes independence in collaboration among them."

- **Independent research projects:** This approach was used by teachers across both public and private schools. PTF2 described setting work that "*involves students in research. They have to develop conclusions, and this enables them to take control of their learning and not depend on the teacher all the time."*
- **Student-led instructional activities:** Some teachers empowered students to take on the role of instructors. GTF2 narrated, "*I permit some students to take the lessons as instructors... they teach grammar by explaining its constituents, or they do presentations on topics they research. It provides them with the opportunity to own and therefore builds their confidence in learning."*

Summary of Findings

The findings suggest that while English teachers in Lahore generally appreciate the concept of learner autonomy, its practical implementation is shaped by institutional and cultural contexts. A significant contrast emerged between school types: private school teachers reported better access to resources and pedagogical freedom, whereas public school teachers struggled with institutional limitations and lower student readiness for autonomous learning. Despite these challenges, both groups are actively attempting to foster autonomy through various pedagogical methods. The results highlight a noticeable gap between teachers' conceptual understanding of learner autonomy and the constraints that hinder its consistent classroom application.

Discussion

The analysis begins with the observation that while English language teachers in Lahore understand learner autonomy, actually making it happen in the classroom is deeply affected by their school's environment and the wider culture. We found a clear difference between public and private school teachers. Those in private schools were more willing to encourage autonomy, largely because they have more flexible systems and institutional support. Conversely, public school teachers faced significant hurdles, including student resistance, rigid curricula, and a heavy focus on exams. This confirms what other research has shown about the challenges of promoting autonomy.

Connecting to literature: Our findings are consistent with the work of autonomy scholars by providing empirical evidence from a non-Western context. The discovery that teachers conceptually grasp learner autonomy but struggle with its practical application is consistent with the arguments of Little (2004) and Benson (2011), who contend that autonomy is often stifled by curricular and institutional constraints.

Specifically, the challenges cited by public school teachers, particularly their difficulties with student resistance and a reliance on traditional teaching, highlight the need for the kind of fundamental change in pedagogy argued by Savin-Baden (2000b) and Tharp (2011b). Furthermore, this research adds to the growing body of literature from developing nations, emphasizing how local cultural practices and traditional teaching approaches can contradict and limit the adoption of autonomy-driven methods.

Practical and Theoretical Implications: Our study has important practical and theoretical implications for improving education in Pakistan.

Practical Implications: We found a critical need for curriculum reform to create a system that values independent learning over rote memorization. We also saw that teacher training is key; it needs to not only teach new skills but also address the real challenges of keeping students engaged in large classes. Finally, schools need to offer more institutional support by shifting their focus from standardized test scores to developing independent learners.

Theoretical Implications: Our research gives a new, contextual understanding of learner autonomy by exploring the cultural and institutional factors that either help or hurt its implementation. By studying this specific, under-researched setting, our work contributes to a more global and nuanced view of how learner autonomy works outside of Western countries.

Conclusion

This qualitative study confirmed that English language teachers in Lahore's secondary schools understand and value the core principles of learner autonomy. A major finding is the pronounced 'perception-practice' gap: while teachers recognize the importance of learner autonomy, they encounter significant systemic barriers—especially in public schools—such as rigid curricula, large class sizes, and an overemphasis on examination performance. Conversely, teachers in private schools reported being better positioned to implement learner autonomy, benefiting from greater flexibility and supportive institutional structures. Therefore, the study concludes that fostering LA in the Pakistani educational environment requires systemic and institutional reform, extending beyond the efforts of individual teachers.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence that structural factors are the primary constraint, the researcher proposes the following actionable recommendations:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** The government and educational boards must initiate curriculum reform that shifts the focus from rote memorization and high-stakes testing toward competency-based, independent learning models.
2. **Targeted Professional Development:** Teacher training programs (pre-service and in-service) should be revised to provide practical strategies for scaffolding autonomy in large classes and culturally constrained environments, aligning teacher practices with their positive perceptions.
3. **Institutional Support:** School administrations, particularly in the public sector, must create a culture that rewards teacher innovation and student-led learning, rather than strictly prioritizing standardized test scores.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides rich, contextual data, it is important to note its inherent limitations: a small, localized sample of 20 teachers limits the transferability of the findings to the wider Pakistani context. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported interview data may introduce social desirability bias.

The following areas are recommended for future investigation to build upon our findings:

- **Student Perspectives:** Future research should include students' views on learner autonomy to provide a more holistic understanding of the belief-practice gap observed in this study.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal research to measure the long-term impact of autonomy-based instructional methods and their development over time.
- **Role of Technology:** Investigate the specific ways technology can be leveraged to foster learner agency, particularly in the context of remote and blended learning environments in Pakistan.

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