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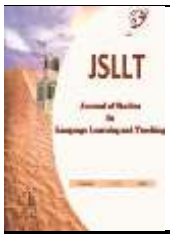

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Teacher Autonomy in the Iranian EFL Context: A Mixed-Methods Study of Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

Teacher autonomy is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective language education, shaping instructional decision-making, professional identity, and teacher motivation. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine how autonomy is perceived and implemented by fifty Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers. Quantitative data were collected using the Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS), and qualitative insights were generated through semi-structured interviews with five participants. Based on the findings, both groups conceptualized autonomy as freedom to select teaching materials, methods, and classroom procedures; they reported greater levels of perceived autonomy in instructional domains. However, the in-service teachers reported higher autonomy in procedural (pacing and materials adaptation) and content-related tasks. Despite high instructional freedom, the perceived autonomy was lowest in systemic areas. The interview data confirmed that centralized curricula, mandatory external assessment, and limited teacher involvement in school-level decision-making serve as major structural constraints on autonomous practice. These findings suggest that, while Iranian EFL teachers value autonomy and exercise control over their methods, they operate within restrictive educational systems that limit professional agency in broader institutional contexts. The study recommends reforms in teacher education and institutional policy to cultivate reflective, empowered, and autonomy-oriented professionals.

Keywords: Teacher autonomy, Iranian EFL teachers, Pre-service, In-service, Teacher perceptions.

I | Introduction

Teacher autonomy (TA) has emerged as a pivotal and multidimensional construct in language education, recognized for its influence on pedagogical effectiveness, teacher development, and student success (Huang, 2005; Smith, 2003). Broadly defined, TA refers to the degree of professional independence that teachers exercise in critical domains such as curriculum planning, instructional methodology, and assessment design (Smith, 2003). Contemporary research consistently links TA to favorable outcomes, including enhanced instructional decision-making and greater job satisfaction (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Olsen & Mason, 2023; Worth, J., & Van den Brande, 2020), reduced burnout (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Parker, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; Wilches, 2007), and teacher retention (Nguyen et al., 2024). Conversely, restrictive education policies, limited teachers' autonomy over curriculum decisions, and administrative leadership approaches that hinder collaboration and fail to empower teachers are major sources of teachers' dissatisfaction (Sterrett &

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Irizarry, 2015). Autonomy is a fundamental human need, essential for personal fulfillment and engagement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). When teachers are deprived of adequate freedom to make decisions about their students and school, their confidence in their capacity to impact student outcomes diminishes. This restriction on independence further weakens their motivation to stay actively engaged in the teaching profession (Berry, 2014). On the contrary, empowering teachers with decision-making authority enhances their sense of self-efficacy (Abdolhamid & Mehdinezhad, 2016).

Within educational research, TA is understood as a highly context-dependent construct (Wilches, 2007). Current discourse is often framed around two interconnected conceptualizations: structural autonomy and perceived autonomy (Dawson, 2021; Friedman, 1999). Structural autonomy concerns the external conditions, i.e., institutional policies, formal authority, and resource allocation, that objectively enable or restrict teachers' decision-making power (Friedman, 1999). In contrast, perceived autonomy highlights teachers' subjective sense of professional agency, focusing on how they interpret their freedom to shape practice, regardless of external constraints. Pearson and Hall (1993) described TA as teachers' perception of their ability to exercise control over their own actions and the conditions of their work environment. Perception-based models contend that autonomy is not merely a matter of institutional permission but a lived experience shaped by professional values, beliefs, and local cultural norms (Baykara & Orhan, 2020). Recent studies have confirmed that TA continues to evolve in response to institutional pressures and instructional standardization, with teachers actively negotiating their roles within organizational constraints (Narayanan et al., 2024). These findings highlight the influence of teachers' perceptions, revealing that similar organizational frameworks can lead to markedly different experiences of autonomy. Autonomy; therefore, is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, relational process shaped by various factors such as trust, institutional culture, and the quality of interpersonal relationships between teachers and administrators (Narayanan et al., 2024).

Drawing on this important distinction, the present study adopts a perception-based framework to explore Iranian EFL teachers' self-reported autonomy, utilizing Pearson and Hall's (1993) Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS) as a foundational measure. Despite the global consensus on its importance, the study of TA in the Iranian EFL context faces significant structural and empirical limitations. Iran's education system is characterized by a high degree of centralization, with the consequence of standardized curricula and high-stakes national assessments that often constrain teachers' professional freedom (Riazi, 2005). While existing studies have examined correlations between TA and variables like teacher identity or job satisfaction (e.g., Agheshteh & Mehrpur, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2020; Fadaee et al., 2021; Ghiaei & Abedini, 2020), these quantitative analyses provide little deep insight into the mechanisms by which teachers understand or enact autonomy within their tightly regulated classrooms.

Despite this body of work, little is known about how teacher autonomy emerges and develops from the stage of teacher preparation to professional practice. Understanding this developmental trajectory is particularly important in centralized systems like Iran's, where institutional constraints may shape teachers' expectations and experiences differently across career stages. Examining both pre-service (PS) and in-service(IS) teachers allows for an exploration of (a) how autonomy beliefs are initially formed through teacher education, (b) how they are enacted or challenged in real classroom settings, and (c) whether the realities of school policy and assessment reform support or suppress these beliefs. By comparing these two groups, this study seeks to reveal not only the developmental continuity (or disjunction) in autonomy beliefs but also the systemic and contextual barriers that hinder the translation of PS ideals into IS practice.

To address this theoretical and empirical gap, the present study employs a mixed-methods sequential design, as autonomy is both a measurable construct and a lived experience that cannot be fully captured by quantitative data alone. This approach allows one to quantify the self-reported perceived autonomy of both PS and IS teachers across key instructional domains, while also uncovering the qualitative, context-dependent processes and meanings underlying these perceptions. By systematically comparing the autonomy perceptions of Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers, this research aims to establish a contextualized baseline for understanding TA in Iran, move beyond correlational descriptions toward practical enactment, highlight the specific structural challenges, namely curriculum, assessment, and administrative practices, that influence autonomy at different career stages and contribute to professional policy by providing evidence-based recommendations for fostering teacher agency and

improving teacher education programs in centralized EFL environments. In particular, the study aims to find answers to the following questions:

a) What are the self-reported levels of teacher autonomy among Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers and how do these differ across the dimensions of autonomy (general autonomy and curricular autonomy)?

b) How do Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers conceptualize autonomy as part of their professional identity and what specific contextual (e.g., institutional constraints, policy) and developmental factors (e.g., career stage, beliefs) influence their perceptions of autonomy?

II. Review of literature

Teacher Autonomy has emerged as a critical element in language education, contributing to educators' professional efficacy, instructional decision-making, and long-term commitment to the profession (Huang, 2005; Wilches, 2007). However, the concept defies a singular definition. Rather than a fixed trait, TA is best understood as a dynamic, context-dependent construct shaped by the interplay between an educator's individual agency and the surrounding structural and sociocultural conditions (Paradis et al., 2018). Recent studies highlight the significance of teachers' perceptions of autonomy, suggesting that TA is not merely the absence of external control but is fundamentally about teachers' perceived capacity and willingness to act (Dawson, 2021; Narayanan et al., 2024; Olsen & Mason, 2023; Strong &Yoshida, 2014). This distinction between objective freedom and subjective perception is critical for understanding how autonomy is experienced in practice. The way teachers experience autonomy is influenced by both contextual conditions and personal dispositions. For some, particular institutional arrangements may foster a strong sense of freedom, while others may view those same conditions as a lack of support from school leaders (Frase & Sorenson, 1992).

A foundational theoretical lens for this study is the model developed by Pearson and Hall (1993), which defines autonomy as perceived control over professional practice across two key dimensions: general teaching autonomy (control over classroom management and instructional methods) and curricular autonomy (control over content and assessment). Importantly, their framework acknowledges that a teacher's sense of agency is mediated by internal factors like professional confidence and external factors like institutional norms (Erss et al., 2016; Ozturk, 2019). This socially constructed view posits that teachers actively interpret, negotiate, and enact their autonomy, rather than passively receiving it from administrative structures.

Cross-cultural research validates this perspective, demonstrating that perceived autonomy often operates independently of formal educational systems. For instance, Lennert da Silva and Mølstad (2020) found that teachers in Brazil's high-stakes, incentive-driven system and Norway's low-stakes, trust-based model reported comparable satisfaction with their classroom autonomy. This suggests that teachers' internal beliefs and professional culture can be more decisive than top-down accountability measures (Mausethagen, 2013; Verger, et al., 2024). Similarly, Khezerlou (2013) compared Iranian and Turkish EFL teachers' perceptions of autonomy and found that, although both systems are highly centralized, Turkish teachers reported higher autonomy than their Iranian counterparts across dimensions such as instructional choice, decision-making, and problem-solving. These findings underscore that perceived autonomy does not always correspond directly to structural freedoms but depends on how teachers interpret, negotiate, and exercise agency within centralized or decentralized contexts.

The experience of autonomy is not static; it evolves with experience (Tan & Levesque-Bristol, 2023). PS teachers typically operate in structured training environments where autonomy is constrained by institutional curricula and mentor guidance. Crucially, this stage is where the belief system underlying future practice is formed. Research confirms that, even within this phase, the intention to enact autonomy-supportive behaviors is tied to internal constructs like autonomous orientation and a growth mindset (Tan & Levesque-Bristol, 2023). Intervention studies show that for teachers to successfully adopt autonomous practices, they must first revise their beliefs and perceptions about autonomy and its pedagogical value (Öztürk, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2015). This highlights that autonomy is not simply a behavioral outcome but a psychological capacity that must be consciously cultivated early in teacher development.

The Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context presents a compelling case for examining this dynamic. The system is characterized by a highly centralized curriculum, high-stakes national

examinations, and minimal teacher involvement in policy decisions (Alibakhshi, 2015; Riazi, 2005), all of which structurally curtail TA. Teachers are often positioned as technicians tasked with implementing a pre-defined syllabus (Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016). Comparative research underscores this reality, showing Iranian EFL teachers report significantly lower autonomy than their counterparts in other centralized systems, such as Turkey, particularly in areas of instructional choice and curriculum design (Khezerlou, 2013).

Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) and the pedagogical shift towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) officially champion learner-centered, interactive approaches (Anani Sarab et al., 2016). However, successful implementation of CLT fundamentally depends on teachers possessing the autonomy to adapt materials, design authentic tasks, and respond flexibly to learner needs. The limited professional agency afforded to teachers thus creates a persistent policy-practice gap, in which educators are expected to be innovative without the freedom to do so (Amini & Kruger, 2022; Ansari, 2023).

While the existing research on the Iranian context confirms lower levels of TA, significant gaps remain. The foundational comparative study by Khezerlou (2013) and a more recent investigation by Soleimani and Shirbagi (2024) relied on quantitative measures that, while useful, primarily capture the outcomes of constraint without exploring the underlying processes. These studies do not reveal how Iranian teachers themselves conceptualize autonomy, internalize it as part of their professional identity, or navigate their limited agency across different career stages. Consequently, the lived experiences, belief systems, and professional values that shape their enactment of autonomy remain underexplored. Failing to address this gap hinders the development of targeted professional development programs and top-down policy reforms, which often fail because they are not in line with the professional realities of teachers.

The present study addresses this gap by employing a mixed-methods design that integrates Pearson and Hall's (1993) Teaching Autonomy framework with in-depth qualitative inquiry. By examining both pre-service and in-service EFL teachers, the research provides a developmental and belief-oriented perspective on autonomy to explore how autonomy is perceived, negotiated, and enacted within Iran's centralized EFL system. In doing so, the study offers actionable insights for teacher education programs and policy initiatives aimed at fostering genuine teacher agency and professional empowerment.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study followed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers would perceive and experience professional autonomy. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately but integrated at the interpretation stage to provide both breadth and depth of understanding. The quantitative phase, using the Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS; Pearson & Hall, 1993), identified general patterns and differences in perceived autonomy between the two teacher groups. The qualitative phase, consisting of semi-structured interviews, explored teachers' personal definitions, contextual constraints, and lived experiences of autonomy in greater depth

This design was chosen because autonomy is a context-dependent and developmentally evolving construct (Moomaw, 2005; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006). A single quantitative or qualitative approach would not adequately capture both the measurable dimensions and the personal, institutional, and developmental nuances of autonomy. The sequential approach supports triangulation of findings, allowing qualitative insights to explain and enrich the quantitative patterns rather than serve as a separate or sequential phase.

3.2. Conceptual Framework

The study was grounded in the conceptualization of TA proposed by Pearson and Hall (1993), which defines autonomy as "teachers' feelings about whether they control themselves and their work environments" (p. 173). Autonomy is treated here as a multidimensional, perceptual, and contextually mediated construct comprising two major domains: Curricular Autonomy, i.e., control over instructional content, materials, and classroom activities, and General Teaching Autonomy, or control over classroom management, pacing, and strategies. Drawing on this model, autonomy is further viewed

as developmental (changing as the teachers progressed from PS to IS stages) and context-sensitive (shaped by institutional and systemic factors such as centralized curricula and exam-oriented policies). This conceptualization guided both the instrument selection and the thematic design of the interview questions, ensuring theoretical coherence across the mixed-methods design.

3.3. Participants

A total of 50 participants, comprising both PS and IS Iranian EFL teachers, took part in the study. Convenience sampling was employed due to accessibility and participant availability. The sample included 25 PS teachers (senior undergraduate TEFL students at Mazandaran University, Babolsar, Iran) and 25 IS teachers (public high school teachers in Iran). Both male and female participants were native Persian speakers. This sample size was considered adequate for an exploratory mixed-methods study, though generalizability was limited due to the non-random sampling and sample size.

For the qualitative phase, five teachers (two PS and three IS) were purposefully selected from the larger sample to ensure representation of both career stages. The selection was based on the participants' willingness to elaborate on their survey responses and availability for interview scheduling. Each participant provided informed consent, confirming voluntary participation and permission for audio recording.

Table 1. Participants' demographics in quantitative phase

Participants	Age (%)		Gender (%)	
Pre-service teachers	< 25	30.00	Male	35.0
In-service teachers	26-35	34.00	Female	65.0
	36-45	30.00		
	>46	6.00		

Table 2. Participants' demographics in qualitative phase

Participants	Type	Gender	Experience
Teacher A	PS	Male	-
Teacher B	PS	Female	-
Teacher C	IS	Female	15
Teacher D	IS	Female	3
Teacher E	IS	Male	8

3.4. Instruments

The Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS) developed by Pearson and Hall (1993) was employed to assess teachers' perceived professional autonomy. The TAS operationalizes autonomy as a multidimensional construct consisting of two domains, including Curricular Autonomy and General Teaching Autonomy. While more recent conceptualizations of TA have expanded to include reflective and collaborative dimensions, the TAS continues to serve as a foundational instrument in autonomy research, particularly in educational contexts where teacher agency is shaped by institutional constraints. The instrument has been successfully adapted and validated in Iran (e.g., Javadi, 2014), supporting its relevance to the Iranian educational landscape. To ensure contextual appropriateness, the scale was reviewed and adapted to reflect current pedagogical language and cultural relevance. The original developers reported good internal consistency ($r = .80$), which was further confirmed by Pearson and Moomaw (2005), who found a Cronbach's alpha of .83. In the current study, a pilot test with 10 participants (5 PS and 5 IS) yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78, acceptable for exploratory research. However, due to the small sample size, this reliability estimate should be interpreted cautiously.

For the qualitative phase, some interview questions were designed to complement and expand upon the TAS dimensions, focusing on teachers' perceived control, institutional constraints, and conceptions of autonomy in practice. The items were informed by key themes in the literature (e.g., Smith, 2003; Huang, 2005) and refined through expert review to ensure content validity. The final protocol consisted of nine questions: one on demographic information and eight addressing the participants' definitions of autonomy, their practical experiences, perceived constraints, and recommendations for fostering autonomy through teacher education. Piloting with one PS and one IS teacher led to minor revisions, making the questions more concrete and contextually relevant.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

To measure teachers' perceived autonomy level, the printed version of TAS was distributed among participants. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, summarized teachers' autonomy levels. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the perceived levels of professional autonomy between PS and IS teachers. This statistical test was appropriate because it allows for the comparison of mean scores between two independent groups, determining whether any observed differences in autonomy perceptions are statistically significant. Using the t-test also aligns with the explanatory sequential design of the study, providing a quantitative foundation for understanding potential developmental differences in teacher autonomy across career stages. To determine whether the observed differences between the two groups were statistically significant, independent-samples t-tests were conducted for each autonomy dimension. Prior to reporting the t-test results, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was checked using Levene's test. A difference between the group means was considered statistically significant if the two-tailed significance value was less than .05.

The interviews were face-to-face in Persian, lasting ~30 minutes, with consent for audio recording. The data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Repeated reading, manual coding, and theme development captured perceptions of autonomy, institutional constraints, and professional experiences. Direct quotations supported authenticity, and triangulation compared qualitative themes with TAS patterns. Trustworthiness strategies included member checking and peer debriefing to reduce bias. The quantitative and qualitative data were integrated at the interpretation stage. This allowed numerical trends to be contextualized with lived experiences and revealed institutional, pedagogical, and cultural influences on Iranian EFL teachers' autonomy.

The quantitative and qualitative data were integrated during the interpretation phase, allowing for a deeper and more contextualized understanding of teacher autonomy. The survey findings, such as consistently low scores in curriculum-related autonomy and instructional time management, were interpreted alongside the interview responses that illustrated the lived experiences behind those perceptions. This complementary approach enabled a fuller picture of how autonomy is both conceptualized and constrained across different teaching contexts. Through triangulation, qualitative insights helped explain the numerical patterns observed, revealing the institutional, pedagogical, and cultural factors that influence Iranian EFL teachers' autonomy.

3.6. Use of AI Tools

During manuscript preparation, ChatGPT (GPT-5) was employed solely to refine language, improve readability, and ensure APA 7 compliance. The study design, data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation were conducted entirely by the authors. The AI tool did not influence the research process or findings.

IV. Results

4.1. Quantitative results and analysis

To address the first research question concerning the self-reported levels of autonomy among Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers, descriptive statistics were first calculated for each group across the two dimensions of teacher autonomy: General Teaching Autonomy (Items 1-12) and Curriculum Autonomy (Items 13-20). All the items were analyzed using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Always true for me) to 5 (Never true for me). Negatively worded items (e.g., Q3, Q5, Q6, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q12, Q18) were reverse-coded so that the interpretation would be consistent across the entire instrument. Crucially, for the final reported means, a lower score (closer to 1) consistently indicated higher perceived professional autonomy, and a higher score (closer to 5) indicated lower perceived professional autonomy/higher constraint.

4.1.1. Descriptive statistics: Mean autonomy scores

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for all the 20 items, showing the mean perceived autonomy for the PS teachers (group1) and the IS teachers (group 2).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: Mean autonomy scores

	Group	Mean	Std. deviation
Q1	1.0	2.125	.7974
	2.0	2.000	.8710
Q2	1.0	2.250	.8470
	2.0	1.833	.8339
Q3	1.0	3.042	.8065
	2.0	2.833	1.1167
Q4	1.0	3.083	.8805
	2.0	2.667	.9942
Q5	1.0	2.333	.7614
	2.0	2.700	1.2635
Q6	1.0	3.208	.9315
	2.0	3.100	.9948
Q7	1.0	1.783	.7952
	2.0	1.567	.8172
Q8	1.0	3.333	.8681
	2.0	3.233	1.1651
Q9	1.0	3.458	1.3825
	2.0	3.724	1.0656
Q10	1.0	4.000	1.2158
	2.0	4.207	.9016
Q11	1.0	2.083	.9286
	2.0	1.833	1.0532
Q12	1.0	3.417	1.1001
	2.0	3.448	1.2126
Q13	1.0	2.417	1.1765
	2.0	2.467	1.3578
Q14	1.0	2.500	1.1795
	2.0	2.600	1.4044
Q15	1.0	2.333	.8165
	2.0	2.433	1.2229
Q16	1.0	2.417	1.0598
	2.0	2.333	1.2411
Q17	1.0	2.542	.8836
	2.0	1.800	.8867
Q18	1.0	3.250	.9891
	2.0	2.567	1.0726
Q19	1.0	2.333	.9168
	2.0	2.033	1.0334
Q20	1.0	2.417	.8805
	2.0	1.900	.8847

Note: The item mean values closer to 1 indicate higher autonomy, and those closer to 5 indicate lower autonomy.

The following descriptive analysis focuses on identifying the areas of highest and lowest perceived professional autonomy within the General and Curriculum domains, based on the mean scores. All the items were interpreted on a 5-point scale where a lower mean score (closer to 1) indicated higher autonomy, and a higher mean score (closer to 5) indicated lower autonomy (greater constraint).

In general, the IS teachers consistently reported higher autonomy (lower mean scores) across almost all the 20 items, especially those related to Curriculum Autonomy (Q17, Q20). The mean difference of 0.742 points on Q17 (2.542 vs 1.800) is one of the largest, strongly suggesting that as teachers gain experience, they feel much more freedom to establish their own instructional guidelines and procedures. Both groups, particularly the IS teachers, felt strong autonomy in creativity, classroom management, and choosing learning activities.

4.1.2. General autonomy subscale (Q1-Q12)

Within the general domain, the highest autonomy was reported on the items related to controlling the use of time and selecting instructional methods. The highest overall autonomy across the entire survey was observed for the item concerning control over the object of time use (Q7), with the IS group reporting the lowest mean score (M_{IS} =1.567) and the PS group close behind (M_{PS} =1.783). Both groups reported very high autonomy in how they controlled time**,** especially the IS group. High autonomy was also evident in the freedom to select teaching methods and strategies (Q11**)** (M_{IS} =1.833; M_{PS} =2.083) and the freedom to be creative in the teaching approach (Q1) (M_{IS} =2.000; M_{PS} =2.125). Another area in which both groups reported high autonomy was the selection of instructional activities as presented by item 2, with IS (M_{IS} =1.833) feeling to have greater control than PS (M_{PS} =2.250).

Teachers perceive the least autonomy in assessment**,** classroom space**,** and time scheduling, that is, areas typically dictated by institutional policies. The item with the highest perceived constraint for both groups was Q10, concerning the selection of evaluation and assessment activities by people other than the teacher (MIS = 4.207; MPS = 4.000). These high scores indicate that both groups widely perceived external control over assessment as a major professional constraint. The other constraint statements related to operational control hovered around the scale midpoint, suggesting mixed constraint: having little say over the scheduling of time (Q12) (MIS = 3.448; MPS = 3.417), having only limited latitude in how major problems are resolved (Q8) (MIS = 3.233; MPS = 3.333), and having little control over how classroom space is used (MIS = 3.458; MPS = 3.724).

4.1.3. Curriculum autonomy subscale (Q13-Q20)

Within the curriculum domain, the in-service teachers demonstrated notably greater autonomy in planning, setting standards, and applying personal procedures. The IS teachers reported particularly strong autonomy in using their own guidelines and procedures (Q17) (MIS = 1.800) and in following their own dictates as when and how the topics would be taught (Q20) (MIS = 1.900). The ability to set classroom standards (Q19**)** was also an area of high autonomy (MIS = 2.033; MPS = 2.333).

Curriculum content was partly predetermined, particularly for the pre-service teachers who reported lower influence over content and skill selection. Within the curriculum domain, the constraint statement regarding having little say over the content and skills (Q18**)** was an area of relatively lower autonomy, particularly for the PS teachers (MPS = 3.250). The IS teachers, however, reported slightly higher autonomy on this item (MIS = 2.567), suggesting they perceived less constraint over content selection. The items related to what is taught being determined by the teacher (Q13 and Q14) had mean values close to the scale midpoint (2.4-2.6). This indicates a moderate level of autonomy and suggests that the curriculum is often co-determined or fixed by some external factors.

4.1.4. T-test results: Group differences

Table 4 reports the findings of the independent samples t-test conducted to compare the perceived levels of professional autonomy between the PS teachers and the IS teachers. There are subscales of General Autonomy (Items 1-12) and Curriculum Autonomy (Items 13-20).

Table4. Independent samples t-test results for the pre-service and in-service teachers' autonomy scores

	T-test for equality of means						
						95% Confidence interval	
Item	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	SD	Lower	Upper
Q1	.544	48	.589	.1250	.2298	-.3362	.5862
Q2	1.812	48	.076	.4167	.2300	-.0448	.8781
Q3	.767	48	.446	.2083	.2715	-.3366	.7532
Q4	1.609	48	.114	.4167	.2590	-.1030	.9363
Q5	-1.250	48	.217	-.3667	.2933	-.9552	.2218
Q6	.409	48	.684	.1083	.2649	-.4233	.6399
Q7	.965	48	.339	.2159	.2239	-.2335	.6654
Q8	.350	48	.728	.1000	.2860	-.4738	.6738
Q9	-.790	48	.433	-.2658	.3363	-.9410	.4094
Q10	-.711	48	.481	-.2069	.2911	-.7913	.3775
Q11	.913	48	.366	.2500	.2739	-.2995	.7995
Q12	-.098	48	.922	-.0316	.3210	-.6760	.6128
Q13	-.143	48	.887	-.0500	.3508	-.7538	.6538
Q14	-.279	48	.782	-.1000	.3587	-.8198	.6198
Q15	-.344	48	.732	-.1000	.2910	-.6839	.4839
Q16	.261	48	.795	.0833	.3189	-.5565	.7232
Q17	3.059	48	.004	.7417	.2425	.2551	1.2282
Q18	2.407	48	.020	.6833	.2839	.1137	1.2529
Q19	1.114	48	.270	.3000	.2693	-.2405	.8405
Q20	2.137	48	.037	.5167	.2418	.0315	1.0019

4.1.5. General autonomy subscale (Q1-Q12)

No statistically significant differences were found between the PS and IS teachers on the majority of the items related to general professional autonomy (Q1 to Q12). This suggests that both groups reported similar levels of perceived freedom regarding overall teaching approach, selection of learning activities, and the use of classroom time. For instance, neither group showed a significant difference regarding their ability to be creative in their teaching approach (Q1 = .589, $p > .05$) or the perceived control over classroom time use (Q7 = .339, $p > .05$). Similarly, there was no significant difference in the extent to which their job allows for discretion on their part (Q6 = .684, $p > .05$).

4.1.6. Curriculum autonomy subscale (Q13-Q20)

Statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) were identified for three items within the Curriculum Autonomy subscale, consistently indicating that the IS teachers perceived higher autonomy than the PS teachers in these specific areas:

Use of Own Guidelines and Procedures (Q17): There was a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding the reported use of personal guidelines and procedures. The IS teachers reported a significantly higher use of their own guidelines and procedures (M = 1.800) compared to the PS teachers (M = 2.542). This difference was significant, t(50) = 3.059, p = .004.

Say Over Content and Skills Selection (Q18, Reverse-Coded): A significant difference was found regarding having "little say over the content and skills" selected for teaching. The PS teachers reported a significantly greater feeling of having little say (M = 3.250) compared to the IS teachers (M = 2.567). This difference was significant, t(50) = 2.407, p = .020 . Interpreted as a measure of autonomy, this suggests that the IS teachers felt they had more influence over the content selection.

Control Over Topics (Q20): The groups differed significantly in following their own dictates as when and how topics would be taught. The IS teachers reported significantly higher levels of control over timing and methodology (M = 1.900) than the PS teachers (M = 2.417). This finding was statistically signify
cant, t(50) = 2.137, p = .037.

In summary, while both groups perceived similar levels of General Autonomy, the IS teachers reported a distinctly higher sense of Curriculum Autonomy, specifically in establishing their own classroom procedures, influencing content selection, and controlling the manner of instruction.

4.2. Qualitative results and analysis

The qualitative analysis, based on the semi-structured interviews with five participants (including both pre-service and in-service teachers), revealed a notable alignment between the value that the teachers attributed to autonomy and the limitations they experienced within the Iranian EFL system. Three major themes emerged from the qualitative analysis, reflecting the participants' perceptions of teacher autonomy and the factors influencing its enactment within the Iranian EFL context

4.2.1. Conceptualization of a "good English teacher"

Initially, the participants did not explicitly name autonomy as a key trait of a good teacher. Instead, they focused on three core areas as explained below.

Student-Teacher Relationships: Participant A emphasized the need for empathy and individualized support, noting that *"For me, a good teacher is someone who is patient and tries to understand every student. When students are comfortable, they learn better. A good teacher respects students and provides help with kindness".*

Instructional Delivery and Professionalism: Participant C highlighted instructional delivery and professionalism by saying, "*Students expect clear explanations. I think a good teacher should be knowledgeable and able to adjust his or her methods based on the students' level*".

Creativity: Participant D recognizes creativity as the quality of a good teacher, noting that "*We learned in our courses that being creative is helpful, but I noticed in practice that teachers often just follow the textbook. I think a good teacher should try to make lessons enjoyable, even simple things like asking students questions or using pictures."*

Although autonomy was not explicitly mentioned by the participants, the traits they prioritized, such as responsiveness, adaptability, and creativity, cannot be effectively enacted without a certain level of professional freedom. This suggests that autonomy functions as an implicit or latent value within teachers' professional beliefs. In other words, while teachers may not directly articulate autonomy as a core concept, their emphasis on flexible and student-centered practices indicates that autonomous decision-making is inherently embedded in what they perceive as effective teaching.

4.2.2. Definition and of teacher autonomy

When explicitly asked about TA, all the participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept. Autonomy was broadly defined as freedom in selecting materials and scheduling content and handling institutional constraints. The teachers described autonomy as the ability to determine class content, pacing, and teaching methods. The participants pointed out that autonomy is limited by the curriculum, syllabus, and exam-focused teaching system.

Participant B stated that "*Typically, teachers receive a syllabus and are required to follow it while planning lessons for the entire term. That syllabus determines what and how much, and how long they should teach every session. Teachers has no freedom to use their favorite teaching method, which make them frustrated and demotivated*".

Similarly, Participant A admitted that there are rules and guidelines for teachers to follow, but they need to have some degree of freedom within that domain to fulfill what he/she has in their mind. Participant C defined teacher autonomy as freedom to choose their own teaching methodology, teaching materials, and activities as well. He maintained that:

"we are constrained with school syllabi and materials. Everything is determined by the school administrators. The teachers are autonomous as long as they stay within these constrains. In fact, I don't know how it would be if I was autonomous. We didn't learn about it".

Participant D said that teachers must be free to choose appropriate content and teaching time in terms of students' level and capabilities. For participant 5, autonomy was being free from constrains so that teacher can develop and use creativity in teaching. She said: "*Teacher should be given autonomy as far as they are allowed to exercise their creativity and encourage students to learn. He added that teachers must be permitted to use supplementary materials, including powerpoint presentation, overhead projectors, and films. But we are constrained by the curriculum which requires us to prepare students for final examinations. We have to finish the course books imposed and conduct classroom quizzes based on what we taught and lots of other responsibilities that leave us no room for incorporating our independent practices."*

These findings highlight a tension; while teachers conceptually support autonomy and link it to professional quality, their lived experiences reveal systemic barriers that suppress its expression. This

latent value of autonomy, appreciated yet largely inaccessible, sets the stage for deeper discussion on the structural and pedagogical reforms needed to empower teachers meaningfully.

Regarding teachers' conceptualizations of autonomy, all the participants described autonomy as the freedom to select teaching materials, choose instructional methods, and manage lesson pacing. The most common definition emphasized freedom in material selection, lesson scheduling, and methodological choice**.** Despite understanding autonomy, the participants consistently reported that strict syllabi, exam-oriented curricula, and administrative guidelines severely limit their autonomy. These constraints were linked to feelings of helplessness and stagnation, especially among those who wanted to integrate more student-centered or creative materials. The responses revealed an underlying dissonance between valuing autonomy and experiencing autonomy. The teachers articulated a strong belief in the importance of autonomy for professional quality, but most admitted that, in practice, they rarely felt autonomous.

4.2.3. Desired but unrealized autonomous practices

When asked about activities they wish to implement but feel unable to, a pattern of suppressed learner-centered and creative teaching emerged. The following notes are suggestive.

Instructional focus: A common frustration among the participants was the rigid structure of prescribed syllabi, which restricts instructional flexibility and the use of alternative teaching methods. Participant C expressed a desire to "*give more speaking time and use podcasts",* but he indicated that grammar and vocabulary take precedence due to curricular demands. Participant D mentioned wanting to implement "*student presentations or project work",* yet he noted that these are dismissed by administrators as inefficient, particularly in exam-driven contexts. Participant E reflected that *"there's no time or flexibility"* to address authentic language use, like email writing, because the curriculum is focused on test preparation.

Methodology and materials: The participants voiced interest in integrating creative and learner-centered materials, yet such efforts are often discouraged or seen as inefficient. Participant B hoped to use "*instructional cartoons or videos*" but was told it was not appropriate or feasible. Participant A noted that project-based and group activities were discouraged in practice classes, which are tightly aligned with textbooks and traditional lesson formats.

These findings reveal that, while autonomy is recognized as important, most participants, regardless of experience, operate within tightly controlled frameworks that suppress creative, student-centered teaching. The recurring references to external barriers underscore a systemic lack of instructional freedom, reinforcing the need to examine autonomy not only as a teacher trait but as an institutional and cultural phenomenon within Iran's EFL system.

4.3. Mixed methods triangulation: Divergence and confirmation

4.3.1. Divergence: Experience and curriculum autonomy

The most notable divergence appeared in the Curriculum Autonomy domain. The T-test showed a statistically significant advantage for the IS teachers (Group 2.0) over the PS teachers (Group 1.0) on three key items (Q17, Q18, Q20). The IS teachers reported higher autonomy in using their own guidelines/procedures (Q17), having more say over content/skills (Q18), and controlling when and how topics are taught (Q20). Qualitative findings, however, showed the IS teachers' strong frustrations about systemic constraints (Participant C, D, E), suggesting that, while their experience affords them more autonomy than beginners, they feel highly constrained by the system.

The quantitative data suggest that experience is a necessary condition for slightly higher autonomy, particularly over instructional methods (Q17, Q20). However, the qualitative data suggest that even this higher level is constantly overshadowed by the institutional pressures (syllabus, exams), leading to a low subjective rating.

4.3.2. Confirmation: Systemic constraints and low General autonomy

Both datasets strongly confirmed the presence of systemic, non-negotiable constraints that limit general professional freedom. Based on the quantitative findings, both groups rated the items related to external control or lack of control over institutional processes high. In this regard, Q10 (Assessment chosen by others) was considered the highest constraint for both groups. Similarly, both groups reported low autonomy for Q9 & Q12 (Control over space/scheduling).

The interviews explicitly identified these constraints as the major barriers. They referred to strict syllabi, mandated course books, and the exam-focused system (Participant E). The desired, yet unrealized,

activities (podcasts, projects, authentic tasks) directly correspond to the loss of control implied by the quantitative data, particularly in time and content allocation.

Consequently, it is agreed on both sides that institutional factors, especially those governing assessment, time, and external content mandates, are the primary structural barriers that uniformly restrict autonomy, regardless of a teacher's experience level.

The qualitative results help explain the nuances of the quantitative findings by highlighting the dissonance between valuing autonomy and experiencing it. The qualitative data reveal that teachers value autonomy implicitly through concepts like creativity and individualized instruction and they understand autonomy as freedom over materials and methods. Yet, they feel forced into textbook-driven, test-prep methods, which suppresses the creativity and adjustment they value. The quantitative data show *where* teachers have slightly more freedom (methods, pacing), but the qualitative data reveal *how* insignificant that freedom feels when the core content and assessment are dictated externally. The ability of in-service teachers to use their "own procedures" (Q17) is a small battle won within a much larger and highly controlled institutional war.

V. Discussion

This study aimed to explore Iranian pre-service and in-service EFL teachers' perceptions and self-perceived level of TA through both quantitative and qualitative lenses. Integrating the findings provides a comprehensive view of how autonomy is understood, experienced, and constrained at different stages of professional development.

The quantitative results of this study offer a nuanced perspective on the perceived professional autonomy level of pre-service and in-service EFL teachers. The findings suggest that teachers, particularly IS, have freedom in the "how" and "when" of teaching, yet they encounter clear constraints in systemic areas like assessment and content determination. The most striking finding is that teachers, regardless of their experience level, report high autonomy in the most visible parts of their job, namely instructional methods, classroom management, and creativity. Both groups reported high degree of professional freedom in the areas of teaching methods (Q11, M_{IS} = 1.833; M_{PS} = 2.083), student activities (Q2, M_{IS} = 1.833; M_{PS} = 2.250), and general creativity (Q1, M_{IS} = 2.000; M_{PS} = 2.125). This suggests that teachers feel confident and free to select the pedagogical methods they deem most effective.

The highest overall autonomy was recorded for Q7 (control over the object of time use), with a mean value of 1.567 for IS teachers. This item reflects procedural autonomy, i.e., teachers' freedom to organize classroom activities and allocate instructional time as they see fit. This finding indicates strong agreement that teachers control the purpose behind how time is spent, perhaps reflecting the general understanding that while the time is fixed, the goals and focus of that time are determined by the classroom teacher. These findings align with Ingersoll (2009), who argues that control over instructional methods and classroom organization often remains the final domain in which teachers can exercise autonomy. Yorulmaz and Çolak (2023) similarly found that Turkish teachers enjoyed autonomy in instruction and classroom communication but faced strong constraints from centralized curricula, rigid policies, and administrative oversight. Just like the Turkish context, autonomy in Iran is predominantly conceptualized as classroom autonomy. Despite operating within a highly centralized educational system, teachers retain a degree of agency over the pedagogical decisions made within their classrooms. This localized autonomy allows teachers to adapt instructional strategies, manage classroom dynamics, and make context-sensitive decisions that reflect their professional judgment. The parallels between Turkey and Iran highlight that in centralized education systems, autonomy is structurally limited by top-down control mechanisms.

The analysis identifies specific areas where TA is limited, particularly in systemic domains such as assessment. The item with the lowest perceived autonomy for both groups was Q10, concerning external control over evaluation and assessment activities (MIS = 4.207; MPS = 4.000). Both groups viewed institutional assessment policies as the greatest constraint, suggesting that accountability measures are perceived as limiting professional freedom. This aligns with Berliner (2011) and Ingersoll et al. (2016), who note that high-stakes standardized testing narrows curricula and reduces teachers' roles to implementers. Similarly, Wermke et al. (2019) found that German teachers retain classroom-level control

while assessment remains externally controlled. Comparable evidence from Varatharaj et al. (2021) shows that, among Malaysian Cluster School teachers, both autonomy and assessment practices were moderate, but only curriculum autonomy significantly affected assessment practices. When teachers can adapt curricular content, they design more meaningful, student-centered assessments, a finding echoed in this study, where limited curricular freedom corresponds to constrained assessment autonomy. Likewise, Abdu (2019) argued that centralization in developing countries removes teachers from their key evaluative role, leaving them to prepare students for standardized exams rather than authentic learning. This critique directly resonates with the Iranian context, where top-down accountability similarly limits teachers' authority in assessment.

The data reveal a clear autonomy gap between the PS and IS groups, indicating that perceived autonomy increases significantly with actual professional experience. This gap is most pronounced in items related to procedural freedom and pacing. The IS teachers (M=1.800) reported substantially higher autonomy in using their own guidelines and procedures (Q17), compared to the PS teachers (M = 2.542). This difference of 0.742 suggests that serving teachers have either earned or asserted the right to deviate from standard school protocols, establishing their own effective routines. The PS teachers, by contrast, may still be constrained by the explicit, procedural nature of their training or school placements. A similar gap was found in following their own dictates as when and how topics are taught (Q20, M_{IS} = 1.900 vs. M_{PS} = 2.417). In-service IS teachers thus feel more confident in controlling the rhythm and flow of the curriculum, likely adapting pacing based on students' needs, whereas PS teachers tend to adhere more strictly to pre-set syllabi and schedules. This supports Tan and Levesque-Bristol (2023), who emphasize that professional experience strengthens teachers' self-efficacy and perceived control over instructional decision-making. These results underscore the need for teacher education programs to explicitly cultivate autonomy by encouraging reflective decision-making within institutional constraints. While assessment was a shared constraint, differences emerged in content control (Q18). The PS teachers reported higher constraints (M = 3.250), reflecting their limited say in curriculum content and skill focus. Conversely, the IS teachers reported greater autonomy (M=2.567), suggesting that experienced professionals either gain more institutional voice or become adept at strategically interpreting and adapting prescribed content to suit their own classroom needs.

The qualitative data reinforce these findings. It is indicated that both groups hold a clear conceptual understanding of autonomy, commonly viewing it as independence from external interference such as administrative control, prescriptive curricula, or policy restrictions. However, their lived experiences reveal that this idealized view of autonomy is only partially realized within the centralized educational system. This echoes Gabryś-Barker's (2016) findings that PS teachers similarly equate autonomy with independence from principals, curricula, and other external actors. It further revealed that structural barriers such as prescribed syllabi, exam-oriented curricula, and administrative supervision were considered as key obstacles. The teachers in the current study similarly expressed frustration and demotivation, viewing autonomy as a valued but practically inaccessible construct. These narratives mirror previous research in Iran (Khezerlou, 2013; Soleimani & Shirbagi, 2024) and align with global research, emphasizing how institutional structures shape teachers' perceived agency (Min, 2019; Lennert Da Silva & Mølstad, 2021; Parcerisa et al., 2022). Consistent with Humaera et al. (2023), who identified "professional growth" and "freedom from control" as the dimensions of autonomy, the participants here also viewed autonomy as freedom in instructional decisions. However, unlike Humaera's pre-service teachers, who linked autonomy with reflective and developmental practices, the participants in this study viewed it mainly as freedom from external constraints. This probably reflects Iran's highly centralized and hierarchical education system, where autonomy is understood more as lack of control than presence of self-direction.

Theoretically, the findings contribute to the multidimensional understanding of TA. The data reveal that autonomy is neither uniform nor binary, but a layered and context-dependent construct. Teachers tend to maintain higher autonomy in instructional and methodological decisions, while accepting lower autonomy in externally regulated domains such as assessment. This dynamic supports the view that autonomy operates along curricular, procedural, and organizational dimensions, each influenced by institutional and experiential factors. These findings align with prior research (Moomaw, 2005; Pearson & Hall, 1993; Strong & Yoshida, 2014;) that conceptualizes teacher autonomy as multifaceted and contextually mediated rather than absolute.

Moreover, these findings strongly support perception-based models of autonomy (Baykara & Orhan, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2024), which conceptualize autonomy as a subjective, contextually mediated experience rather than a purely structural condition. Despite their different career stages, both PS and IS teachers conceptualized autonomy independent of control rather than self-directed professional practice, indicating that autonomy perceptions are shaped more by educational culture than by experience. As Pearson and Hall (1993) argue, autonomy encompasses teachers' perceptions of control over their work and context, and it is influenced by their beliefs, competence, and attitudes. This explains why both groups held similar conceptualizations, even though the IS teachers reported higher perceived levels of autonomy.

VI. Conclusion

This study explored Iranian pre-service (PS) and in-service (IS) EFL teachers' perceptions and self-perceived levels of teacher autonomy, offering both quantitative and qualitative insights into how autonomy is conceptualized and enacted across professional stages. The findings revealed that, while teachers, particularly IS ones, exercise freedom in instructional methods, classroom management, and time allocation, their autonomy remains highly constrained in systemic areas such as assessment and curriculum design. These results underscore that autonomy in the Iranian educational context is largely confined to classroom-level practices, with limited extension into institutional or curricular decision-making.

A significant gap emerged between PS and IS teachers, suggesting that professional experience may enhance perceived autonomy, especially regarding procedural and pacing decisions. However, both groups predominantly conceptualized autonomy as freedom from external interference rather than as reflective self-direction or professional empowerment. This perception reflects the broader centralized and hierarchical nature of the educational system, where institutional structures, prescriptive curricula, and administrative control limit teachers' capacity for independent judgment.

Theoretically, the study reinforces the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy, encompassing instructional and organizational dimensions. Practically, the findings emphasize the need for teacher education programs to explicitly foster autonomy-supportive skills, such as reflective decision-making, critical evaluation, and self-directed professional growth. Policymakers and institutional leaders should also recognize that genuine autonomy cannot flourish without systemic reforms that decentralize assessment, curriculum design, and school governance.

The study offers valuable insights into teachers' perceptions of autonomy, but several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data are solely based on self-reported perceptions, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias or limited awareness of institutional constraints. The interviewed teachers might unintentionally have overestimated their autonomy or interpreted autonomy differently depending on their teaching environment. In addition, the analysis does not incorporate contextual variables that are known to shape autonomy, such as school type, administrative leadership style, or curriculum mandates at national and regional levels. The relatively small sample size (N = 50) also constrains the generalizability of the findings, particularly when comparing PS and IS teachers.

Despite these limitations, the findings have important implications for teacher education, professional development, and theoretical understandings of teacher autonomy. From a practical perspective, the results underscore the need for teacher training programs to extend beyond instructional techniques and emphasize the development of TA. Moreover, professional development initiatives should focus on strategies that help teachers maintain pedagogical creativity while navigating high-stakes testing environments. Theoretically, the results contribute to the multidimensional understanding of TA. The data reveal that autonomy is not a unitary construct as teachers tend to maintain higher autonomy in instructional and methodological decisions (the 'how' and 'when' of teaching), while accepting lower autonomy in externally regulated domains such as assessment and operational policy.

The findings also open several directions for future research. Future studies can incorporate larger and more diverse samples, including teachers across regions, school types, and levels of education. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable in tracing how teachers' perceptions of autonomy evolve from pre-service training through in-service practice. A qualitative follow-up study is needed as an immediate next step to complement the quantitative data and explore how teachers narrate and

negotiate the paradox of high instructional freedom coexisting with limited control over assessment practices. Future quantitative investigations could further examine the mechanisms underlying the autonomy-experience gap, identifying variables such as administrative support, collegial trust, or participation in curriculum design as potential predictors of perceived autonomy.

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