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Enhancing Teachers' Capacity to Foster Autonomous Learning in EFL Acquisition – A Case Study of Georgia

Abstract

With learning contexts globally promoting putting learners in the centre, it is no surprise that autonomous learning will gain ground in contemporary classrooms. As there is no learner autonomy without autonomous teachers, investigating instructors' preferences about autonomous learning is necessary for more successful language education. The research assessed Georgian teachers' viewpoints on fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition. The study employed a close-ended questionnaire completed by over 100 teachers. The analysis concludes that Georgian teachers associate obstacles with a lack of resources, technical problems, and class size, while challenges linked to teachers include lack of experience, limited development opportunities, and time management.

Keywords: *learner autonomy; teacher autonomy; educational culture; English as a foreign language*

Introduction

With almost unlimited access to foreign language resources online and free-of-charge participation in thematic groups on social media, it is hard to imagine the language learning process without independent learning out of class. First

introduced in the 1970s and established throughout the 1980s and 1990s, learner autonomy is finding a new application in today's social media era. However, learner autonomy is closely connected with (or even dependent upon) teacher autonomy – it is hard to imagine, at the same time, traditional teacher-centred methods that expect learners to be free and independent.

Moreover, the cultural dimension needs to be taken into account – language teaching methodologies have a certain cultural background (usually Westernised – British or American), and the same is true of autonomous learning. These methodologies do not have to be compatible with local learning cultures in different parts of the world. Those countries that are only being introduced to learner-centred teaching (like Georgia) might experience some confusion or even clashes between society-rooted beliefs and predominantly promote Western methodologies.

The article reports on a study investigating how prepared Georgian teachers of English are to foster autonomous learning. For that purpose, medium-scale quantitative research has been conducted among teachers from all over Georgia. The quantitative perspective was complemented by qualitative interviews conducted with teacher trainers.

Research Background

From Learner Autonomy to Teacher Autonomy and Back

One cannot deny that there is a close relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. As Little (2022) states, teachers cannot be expected to nurture the development of autonomy in their learners if they do not know what it means to be autonomous. For Lamb (2008), teacher autonomy relies on three pillars: knowing how to develop autonomously as a professional through critical reflection, being committed to empowering learners by creating appropriate spaces for autonomous learning and being ready to introduce interventions to support principles and values underpinning learners' autonomy. According to Little (2007), it means gradually enlarging the scope of learners' autonomy by allowing them more control of the content and process of their learning. As Mynard (2013) states, in this way, teaching becomes more of advising, which is the process of helping a learner become aware of cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective domains and gain charge of their learning. It occurs through reflective dialogue and co-construction of knowledge, taking learners' needs rather than curriculum aims as the starting point (Mynard, 2013).

Consequently, an autonomous teacher is ready to adopt a new set of roles in the classroom, being more of a counsellor, facilitator, advisor, manager and guide (e.g., Benson, 2013; Camilleri, 1999; Gardner & Miller, 1999), fostering learners' personal development (Han, 2020). The essential position, however, according to Little (2009), is to "set up classroom communication in a way that provides learners with access to a full range of discourse roles, initiating as well as responding" (p. 153), being ready to "identify their individual and collective learning needs and find ways of meeting them; and they must initiate, model and support the various forms of discourse required for learner involvement, learner reflection and appropriate target language use" (p. 155).

Since educators play a major role in learning as social agents, their interaction with students from the social perspective has a crucial effect on student engagement and autonomy building (Han, 2021). Teacher support for autonomy (Ma, 2020) is a strong predictor of learners' particular resources, along with their enhanced motivational styles and improved educational achievement. Promoting learner autonomy also proves to be beneficial for educators – as proven by Jerrim et al. (2023), teachers with very low levels of autonomy are more likely to report reduced job satisfaction. At the same time, however, individual professional autonomy does not prove appropriate in cases of continuing students' academic underperformance (Day, 2020), while strengthening teacher agency can be difficult to achieve due to perceived issues of workload, accountability and rigid curriculum (Hughes & Lewis, 2020; Rushton & Bird, 2023).

Cultural Appropriacy of Learner Autonomy

While reflecting upon obstacles to developing learner autonomy, many authors (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a; Reinders & Lazarou, 2011; Nakata, 2011) point to institutional factors (such as frozen nature of teacher-learner interaction, teachers' little trust in learner abilities, lack of teacher autonomy, traditional teaching practices, fixed curriculum, examination systems, and educational policies) as major aspects of educational cultures. At the same time, however, the role of national culture is not to be underestimated, as, according to Pennycook (1997), there can be a problem with the applicability of the concept of autonomy conceived in Western cultures in cultures less traditionally suited for autonomous learning, usually of a more collectivist type. For Littlewood (1999), national culture is learner-autonomy-friendly if it allows individuals to assume responsibility for their lives, make decisions, and collaborate with others for better performance in tasks. Thus, there can be a need for radical changes in the educational approach to foster the development of autonomy

acting in opposition to established cultural norms in the society around (Egel, 2009). Luckily, as Palfreyman and Smith (2003) state, in the era of globalisation, ethnic cultures differ from each other much less than they used to, which means that their typical classroom cultures are generally globalising towards a more student-centred approach. However, as was proved by Palfreyman and Smith (2003), the degree of independence from the teacher is still statistically different across countries, with Eastern countries being less liberal in the past as opposed to Western states politically more traditionally democratic.

Perceptions of and practices in fostering autonomous learning differ across cultures. For instance, Lennert da Silva and Mølstad (2020) indicate that Brazilian teachers have a constrained scope of action and possibilities for achieving autonomy and agency compared to their Norwegian counterparts, who, however, feel their individual autonomy is restricted by extended state control over curriculum and testing. According to Erss (2018), teachers from Finland perceived control over teachers' work as unnecessary due to their high professionalism, while their counterparts from Estonia and Germany preferred to "have complete freedom to choose within limits". In Southeast Asian educational systems, nurture is essential to become a fully autonomous learner, meaning autonomous learning behaviours are determined by the learning context (Swatevacharkul & Boonma, 2020). Fixed conceptions about teaching and a switch to autonomy can occur through academic collaboration (Tran, 2020) and teacher-collaborative action research (Guan, 2021), which is not customary in all cultures.

Learner Autonomy in Georgian Language Education

Learner autonomy research is also thriving outside Western educational systems, showing the importance of fostering beliefs and training autonomous teachers for future implementation of self-directed learning in the language classroom while also reporting problems and obstacles on the part of teachers. For instance, Win (2022) proves that investigated teachers in Myanmar regarded themselves as responsible for in-class learning only, leaving out-of-class learning for learners themselves. Similarly, Haque et al. (2023) see over-reliance on teachers and test results, lack of opportunity to express opinions about learning and not discussing how they work out their learning tasks as major obstacles to learner autonomy in Saudi language education. For Turkey, Basri (2023) mentions teacher/learner backgrounds, a mismatch between teacher and learner expectations, spoon-feeding tendencies of teachers, limited teacher autonomy and large classes as the main limiting factors. Also, studies from other countries situated close to Georgia indicate the need for improving teach-

ers' reflective skills to foster learner autonomy (Sener & Mede, 2023), building learners' motivation and self-direction by teachers (Ozer & Yukselir, 2023) and advocating learners' autonomous practices for more effective vocabulary learning (Almusharraf, 2020).

With Georgia situated on the border between Europe and Asia, with a strong legacy of Soviet rule, at the same time perceived as high in In-group Collectivism, Assertiveness and Power Distance cultural dimensions, Georgians see themselves as close to Eastern European countries cluster according to the GLOBE study by House et al. (2004) (Tkeshelashvili, 2009).

Georgia is still an under-researched country regarding learner autonomy in language instruction, both in terms of teachers' and learners' attitudes and preferences, as well as actual classroom practices. Few studies conducted to date have focused on the application of selected autonomous learning procedures and tasks in primary education (Mesiridze & Tvaltchrelidze, 2017), reflection on the preparation of the Georgian educational system and its Core Curriculum for developing learner autonomy in listening skills (Chitashvili, 2020) or perceptions as autonomous learners of students from private vs. public schools (Chitashvili et al., 2020). Generally, despite a great emphasis on learner autonomy in Western-brought language methodology, there is still a lack of understanding and practice of student autonomy in Georgian classrooms (Mesiridze & Tvaltchrelidze, 2017), the strong position of traditional teacher culture results in low use of self-, peer and co-assessment as well as the dominant perception among students that their learning autonomy needs to be increased (Chitashvili et al., 2020). As indicated by a study of a primary language classroom (Chikovani & Pipia, 2022), inquiry-based reading activities through digital applications have a positive influence on students' autonomy and interest enhancement, hence student-centred methods need to be promoted to increase the level of autonomy in digital natives.

Research Methods

The article aimed to assess Georgian teachers' viewpoints about enhancing their capacity to foster autonomous learning in EFL acquisition. The study employed the quantitative (questionnaire) research methodology, with a supplementary qualitative (interview) method, to address the following research questions:

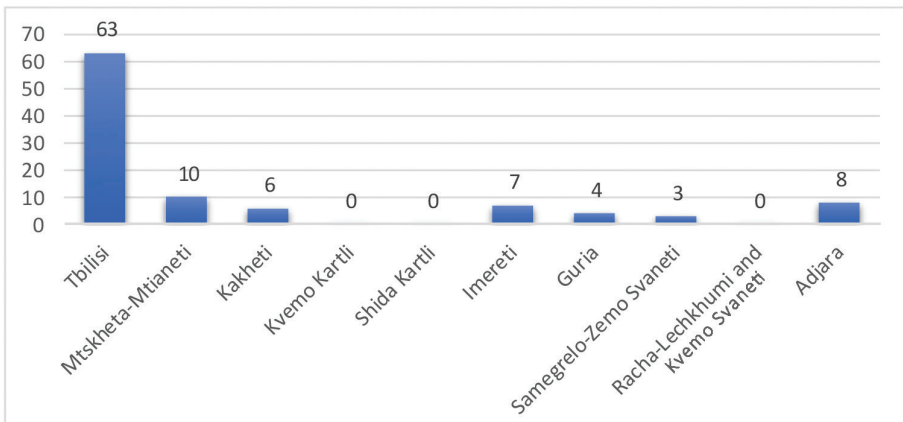
1. How important is fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition from Georgian teachers' perspective?
2. How prepared and supported are Georgian teachers in fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition?

3. What specific challenges do EFL teachers face when trying to foster autonomous learning in their classrooms?
4. What steps can be taken to enhance teachers' capacity to foster autonomous learning in EFL acquisition?

Sample

The target population consisted of EFL teachers from educational institutions in Georgia, including schools and universities in the private and public sectors. Participants were informed about the aim of the study as well as the fact that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. The survey was completed by 101 teachers (online). Among the respondents, 85 were female, and 16 were male. Most participants (47.5%) were 35-44 years old, while 34.7% were in the 45 to 54 age group. Additionally, 13.9% of participants were between 25 and 34, and 4% were aged 55 to 65.

Figure 1. Location of respondents' institutions



The survey participants were drawn from only 7 out of the given 10 regions in Georgia. No teachers from regions such as Kvemo Kartli, Shida Kartli, and Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti were involved. Notably, Tbilisi had the highest level of participation with 65 respondents, followed by Mtskheta-Mtianeti with 10 participants, Imereti with 7 participants, Kakheti with 6, and Guria with 4, and Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti with just 3 participants.

Most respondents (75) were school teachers, while 26 were affiliated with universities. 40.6% of the participants were EFL teachers in private schools,

while 33.7% taught in public schools. Conversely, 17.8% were affiliated with private universities, while only 7.9% were EFL instructors in public universities.

Instruments and Procedures

The study employed a close-ended Likert-scale questionnaire with statements eliciting respondents' attitudes toward and preferences for autonomous learning activities. To standardise the questionnaire, it was given to 11 participants with similar qualifications to the target population. As the target population was EFL teachers from schools and universities in Georgia, 11 of them were asked to fill out the form twice at a 15-minute interval. The participants filled out the printed version. A coding system was used to measure the correlation of the questionnaire to keep the results anonymous.

To measure the correlation between the two results of the Likert-scale questions, the Pearson correlation was applied. Table 1 represents the results.

Table 1. Correlation

		VAR00001	VAR00002
VAR00001	Pearson Correlation	1	0.853
	Sig, (2-tailed)		<0.001
	N	11	11
VAR00002	Pearson Correlation	0.853	1
	Sig, (2-tailed)	<0.001	
	N	11	11

Based on the results, Pearson Correlation equals 0.853, which indicates that the correlation is high (more than 0.8) and the significance is $p = < 0.001$. It means that there is a strong correlation between the two results, the result is statistically significant and this part of the questionnaire is reliable.

To maintain consistency and reliability of the data collection process, the same set of questions was utilised during the interview process with four teacher trainers from Tbilisi, 2 of them from the public sector and 2 from the private one. In this way, necessary data triangulation could be assured by verifying the findings obtained from teachers with the perspective represented by the trainers.

Data Analysis

The research questions adopted in the study were to be elaborated upon based on descriptive statistics of the questionnaire data. In particular, the researchers were interested in the means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis of questionnaire items.

Results

Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistics for 11 items of this part of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Responses to Likert-scale questionnaire items

	Item	Mean	Mode	Median	St. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
1.	I believe that fostering autonomous learning is important in EFL acquisition.	4.426	4	4	0.572	-0.358	-0.779
2.	I collaborate with other EFL teachers or educators to share best practices for fostering autonomous learning.	4.218	4	3.5	0.672	-0.490	0.109
3.	I think integrating technology and digital tools (presentation kit, digital books, etc.) can enhance my capacity to foster autonomous learning in EFL acquisition.	4.495	5	4	0.594	-0.712	-0.441
4.	I involve EFL students in the decision-making process regarding the content and pace of their language learning.	4.238	4	4	0.650	-0.278	-0.689
5.	I effectively scaffold EFL students' learning experiences to gradually increase their autonomy over time.	4.109	4	3.5	0.631	-0.331	0.507
6.	I am willing to adapt my instructional materials and resources to meet individual EFL student needs and interests in fostering autonomous learning while using presentation kits and digital books.	4.396	4	3.5	0.634	-0.801	0.818

	Item	Mean	Mode	Median	St. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
7.	I often provide opportunities for EFL students to engage in self-directed projects and inquiry-based learning.	4.188	4	4	0.612	-0.124	-0.437
8.	I effectively guide EFL students in developing self-assessment and reflection skills to evaluate their learning.	4.238	4	4	0.586	-0.092	-0.404
9.	I believe ongoing self-evaluation is important in enhancing my capacity to foster autonomous learning in the EFL classroom.	4.337	4	4	0.605	-0.312	-0.632
10.	I feel knowledgeable about different strategies, techniques, and using digital tools for fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition.	4.218	4	3.5	0.642	-0.462	0.439
11.	I often engage in professional development activities specifically aimed at enhancing my knowledge and skills in fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition.	4.198	4	3.5	0.617	-0.408	0.748

Items 1, 3, and 6 have higher means than the others. Specifically, Item 1 states that fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition is important for the teachers (Mean = 4.426), while Item 6 indicates that the participants are willing to adapt their instructional materials and resources to meet individual EFL student needs and interests in fostering autonomous learning while using presentation kit and digital books (Mean = 4.396). Regarding Item 3, which has the highest mean (4.495), it shows the teachers' positive thoughts about the possibility of enhancing their capacity to foster autonomous learning in EFL acquisition by integrating technology and digital tools. Although each item is positively evaluated, Item 5, stating that the participants can effectively scaffold EFL students' learning experiences to gradually increase their autonomy over time, has the lowest mean (4.109).

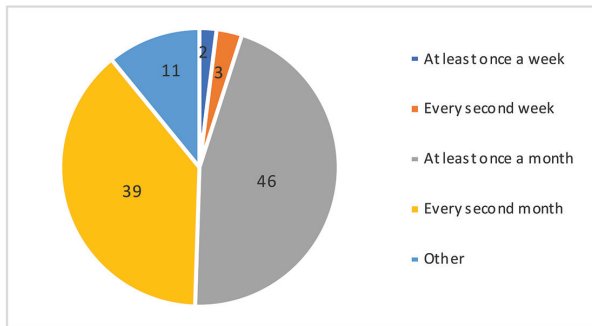
The median and mode for most items are relatively close to the mean, particularly for Items 4, 7, 8, and 9 indicating a more or less normal distribution and accurate representation of the results. Furthermore, standard deviations for every item are less than 1, which implies homogeneous responses.

Regarding the Skewness and Kurtosis, the results fall between -3 and 3, indicating that the opinions are not substantially divergent. However, in terms of item 1 (Skewness = -0.358; Kurtosis = -0.779), item 3 (Skewness = -0.712;

Kurtosis = -0.441), item 4 (Skewness = -0.278; Kurtosis = -0.689), item 7 (Skewness = -0.124; Kurtosis = -0.437), item 8 (Skewness = -0.092; Kurtosis = -0.404), and item 9 (Skewness = -0.312; Kurtosis = -0.632), both Skewness and Kurtosis are negative, which indicates that the results are mostly lower than the mean.

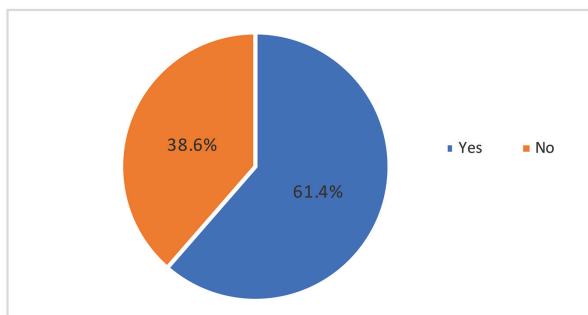
Figure 2 presents the results, revealing that nearly half of the participants (46) confirmed their attendance at such activities. 39 respondents reported that they engage in professional development activities every other month. Notably, only two teachers reported participating at least once a week, while 3 participants mentioned attending professional development workshops or training sessions every other week. 11 respondents chose the other option and specified the frequency.

Figure 2. Attending professional development activities



61.4% of the respondents feel adequately prepared and supported by their educational institutions to implement these strategies in the EFL classroom, while 38.6% of the participants responded negatively to the question.

Figure 3. Preparation and support by the educational institution to implement strategies that promote autonomous learning in the EFL classroom



74.3% of the participants believe that their current curriculum offers sufficient flexibility and opportunities for students to engage in autonomous learning activities, while 25.7% of the teachers do not agree with this statement.

Regarding the open-ended questions, the first aimed to identify the specific challenges EFL teachers face when attempting to foster autonomous learning. Based on the results, these challenges can be categorised into the following 3 groups:

Table 3. Challenges EFL teachers face when trying to foster autonomous learning

Student-related challenges	Teacher-related challenges	Other challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Motivation; · Reluctance; · Poor involvement; · Lack of experience; · Lack of autonomous skills; · Lack of vocabulary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of experience; · Time management; · Lack of professional development sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Class size; · Technical challenges; · Lack of technology; · Lack of resources.

The results indicated that training sessions and workshops, whether online or face-to-face, along with exchanging experiences with colleagues and using online resources were frequently cited.

Based on the insights gathered from interviews, fostering autonomous learning in English is deemed very important from their perspective. However, they expressed a need for support, particularly in acquiring new teaching resources and integrating technology into their classrooms to facilitate autonomous learning effectively. Specific challenges EFL teachers highlight include managing large class size and time constraints, which hinder individualised attention to students. All four interviewees recommend supporting training sessions and workshops to address these challenges. These initiatives aim to equip teachers with the essential skills and resources to create an environment conducive to autonomous learning and student engagement in EFL acquisition.

Discussion

This study's findings shed light on Georgian EFL teachers' perspectives regarding the fostering of autonomous learning in language education. The results indicate a positive overall attitude among teachers towards the importance of autonomous learning in EFL acquisition. However, challenges are identified and linked to student- and teacher-related factors.

One noteworthy aspect is the correlation between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. As highlighted in the literature review, teachers play a pivotal role in creating an environment that nurtures autonomy in learners. The study suggests that teachers who engage in professional development activities and are open to adopting new roles in the classroom, such as being a counsellor, facilitator, and guide, are more likely to contribute to fostering autonomous learning.

The study acknowledges the potential clash between Western-influenced methodologies promoting learner autonomy and local cultural beliefs in a country like Georgia. The findings reveal that the cultural aspects can impact teachers' readiness and approach to autonomous learning.

The challenges identified in the study align with common issues faced by educators globally. Lack of resources, technical challenges, and large class sizes are challenges that resonate across different contexts. However, the study emphasises that challenges more directly related to teachers, such as lack of experience and limited professional development opportunities, need targeted attention.

Conclusions

Although the overall results reflect a generally positive attitude towards the importance of fostering autonomous learning in EFL acquisition, along with the preparedness and support of Georgian teachers to engage students in autonomous learning, specific challenges identified in the survey suggest several recommendations for teachers and educational authorities:

- Teachers should be afforded greater access to training sessions and workshops, especially those focused on promoting autonomous learning;
- Teachers should be encouraged to engage in cross-border communication with educators from other countries;
- Schools and universities should be better equipped with modern technologies. Teachers and students should receive comprehensive training sessions;
- Teachers and students should have access to a wide range of resources that are designed to promote autonomous learning and are tailored to students' specific interests and needs;
- The curriculum should emphasise developing autonomous learning skills, ensuring that it aligns with the needs and demands of EFL education.

However, it is important to note that the presented results cannot be generalised and have to be taken as the initial step in investigating Georgian teachers' preparedness for implementing learner autonomy. It is important to acknowl-

edge that the outcomes may significantly vary in these regions, considering that educational institutions in the mentioned regions are predominantly public. The employed research methods should be verified with quasi-experimental and observational data collection techniques since, as pointed out by Chang (2020), while teachers unanimously agree on the importance of learner autonomy in language learning, there is a statistically significant difference between their beliefs and practices, which calls for verification through further in-class research. The mismatch may also be influenced by the original learning environment in which teachers were raised and did not foster learner autonomy (Kartal & Balcikanli, 2019), which was also the case in the present study.

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