AUTONOMY UNVEILED: DIGGING DEEP INTO THE INTERWOVEN REALMS OF TEACHER AND LEARNER DYNAMICS OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

(Research article)

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis and comparison of learner and teacher autonomy concepts among prospective teachers of English (PTEs). The study intends to uncover the diverse viewpoints, attitudes, and practices surrounding autonomy in the context of EFL instruction by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data from autonomy scales and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. The study intends to provide useful insights into the elements that influence both learner and teacher autonomy, with the ultimate objective of guiding teacher training programs and teaching practicum in pre-service education. The study involved 72 prospective EFL teachers, and data were collected using *The Learner Autonomy Scale* (2006) and *The Teacher Autonomy Scale* (2006), as well as through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that participants' learner and teacher autonomy levels were moderate. Interview results yielded teacher training programs and teaching practicum have both positive effects e.g. self-reflective activities, independence during the practicum, and negative effects, e.g. heavy workloads, lacking parts of practicum in terms of providing a flexible environment to cultivate autonomy, presence of mentors on learner and teacher autonomy of prospective teachers of English.

Keywords: EFL; learner autonomy; teacher autonomy; teacher training programs; teaching practicum

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1.   Introduction

Traditionally, foreign language teachers were put at the center of the teaching and learning process. Language learners passively learnt the information provided by language teachers. As a result, language learners lacked autonomy and agency in learning due to their dependence on teachers. In recent years, however, language learning has shifted from "teacher-centered" to "learner-centered." This notion has revealed the importance of being an autonomous learner. The term "autonomous learners", initially defined by Holec (1981) as learners' ability to take charge of the learning process, was perceived as autonomous learners taking responsibility for their learning on their own without the help of teachers, and the role of teachers in making learners autonomous was ignored. Over time, the notion of learner autonomy has evolved into the ability to manage one's education in social settings such as classrooms (Kohenen, 1992). Thus, the role of teachers as developers of learner autonomy and, consequently, the term "teacher autonomy" began to emerge. The concept of teacher autonomy and its role in fostering learner autonomy has emerged as a significant area of inquiry in foreign language education. Over two decades ago, Little (1996) posited that the interdependence between learner and teacher autonomy necessitates the promotion of both to promote learner autonomy. It is widely acknowledged that a teacher must possess these characteristics before graduating from their teacher training program. Stakeholders expect teacher education programs to enhance practical knowledge and pedagogical skills, contribute to professional development, and increase interaction with language learners. In this respect, the importance of teacher training and teaching practice in promoting teacher autonomy is evident. Benson (2011) argued that educational interventions, teacher education, and training programs that support and promote teacher autonomy can also help create it. However, Little (2000) emphasized that it is unrealistic to expect language teachers to promote learner autonomy without understanding what it means to be an autonomous learner. In other words, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers, to support their students in becoming autonomous learners and be autonomous in their own learning, must possess both learner and teacher autonomy. English Language Teaching (ELT) programs are the only place where EFL teachers can acquire these two autonomies. Therefore, investigating the teacher and learner autonomy of students in ELT programs will be beneficial in understanding the effectiveness of these programs in providing students with both autonomy and in improving and developing these programs accordingly.

In the EFL setting, the dynamics of autonomy among pre-service teachers constitute a critical yet complex area that warrants extensive research, which also is the mainstay of the present study. Fostering learner autonomy is recognized as a cornerstone for promoting independent language learning (Benson & Voller, 1997). At the same time, existing literature emphasizes the important role of teacher autonomy over curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment practices, and classroom management in shaping effective language teaching (Hoy & DiPaola,

2008). Despite this theoretical interdependence, the interaction between teacher and learner autonomy remains underexplored in empirical research, especially within pre-service teacher education. While there is an abundance of studies addressing each construct independently, the dynamic relationship between the two and how it develops simultaneously within EFL context, has not received sufficient attention (Han, 2020; Little, 1995; Smith, 2003). Moreover, although teacher education programs are expected to foster both learner and teacher autonomy, existing literature often neglects how effectively these programs achieve this goal or the challenges they present. Thus, this study seeks to address that gap by examining the interwoven dynamics of learner and teacher autonomy among PTEs.

1.1.   Literature review

1.1.1. Learner autonomy

Autonomy, defined as the ability to take charge of the learning process (Holec, 1981), is generally acknowledged as one of the main goals of education (Raya et al., 2017). After the term emerged in the literature, many scholars defined it from their own perspectives. As one of the first scholars to define learner autonomy (LA), Holec (1981) mentioned some components that LA entails, such as being the authority to decide the objectives, determine the strategies to be used, and assess the outcomes (Little, 1991). Various scholars have also contributed to the definition of autonomy. Learner autonomy, according to Camilleri (1999), is an essential idea that empowers students to take ownership of their learning and to share their ideas, emotions, and knowledge. They are also inspired to appraise and analyze their own development as a result. Little (1996) also highlighted the fact that learner autonomy is associated with a higher likelihood of long-term success and that autonomous learners devote more time to organizing, supervising, and assessing their education. Benson (1997) indicated that the awareness of the rights of the learners in educational contexts is described as autonomy. According to Little (1991, p. 2), "Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning". Little (2022) subsequently defined "language learner autonomy" as a teaching/learning dynamic in which students independently strategize, execute, oversee, and assess their own educational progress. Among different definitions of the term, one thing was common: having a grasp of their own learning.

The significance of LA in educational environments has grown substantially because of paradigm shifts. According to the paradigmatic scale ranging from behaviorism to constructivism, the new approach to the classroom and instructional processes emphasizes the lifelong nature of the educational experience, and connectivist learning is prioritized for contemporary learners (Firat, 2016). In the connectivist learning theory, learner choice and independence in making informed decisions during the learning process are fundamental scopes.

The learner must comprehend the nature of language acquisition and their own role in the process to be autonomous. Teachers must perceive learner autonomy not as an action but rather as a disposition or capability. By doing so, they can envision students utilizing and controlling autonomy in a plethora of settings. Consequently, autonomy is considered an intrinsic quality that is not associated with specific educational environments (Balçıkanlı, 2010).

1.1.2. Teacher autonomy

Being an autonomous learner is not always a natural ability (Basri, 2023). It is not something that cannot be transmitted or learned; instead, it can be facilitated by the suitable support educators give to their students. Therefore, it is important that teachers also have teacher autonomy, as it contributes to the ultimate goal of education, facilitating students to increase their autonomy. Attempts were undertaken to provide a clearer definition of teacher autonomy after its significance was acknowledged. According to Little (1995), teacher autonomy is defined as a teacher's ability to engage in self-directed instruction. Likewise, Aoki (2002) defines it as the capacity of teachers to actively participate in self-directed teacher learning. Benson (2001) introduced a different aspect of teacher autonomy and explained it as instructors' ability to maintain themselves free from control that may be dictated by others.

Although the term has been defined in different ways throughout its history, it is generally conceptualized as consisting of three main elements. The first is *structural autonomy,* which encapsulates general teaching autonomy and shows how much freedom and authority the teacher has related to key elements of classroom matters, like lesson planning, selecting learning activities, and evaluation of the learners. Besides, structural autonomy entails professional freedom, which depends on structural aspects of teaching such as the education system, and the teaching context and is external to teachers themselves (Benson, 2001). Curriculum autonomy is a subset of structural autonomy that includes the design and sequencing of the curriculum as well as other instructional elements like the choice of teaching materials. The second component of teacher autonomy is *individual autonomy,* which indicates internal capacity that is based on the teacher's aptitude for working under contextual limits (Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018). This component may be defined as an individual teacher's capacity to deal with pedagogical or institutional limits in their teaching environment, as well as their ability to develop learner autonomy (Little, 1995; Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018). Furthermore, Smith (2003) introduced a new term to the idea of teacher autonomy, known as *teacher-learner autonomy*, highlighting that teacher education should strive to foster 'teacher autonomy' as a kind of teacher professional growth. This autonomy entails instructors being independent in regard to their profession in ways such as setting learning goals, designing course material, or participating in the process of assessing their own accomplishments. According to Smith (2003), under this approach, pre-service teachers are not only taught learner autonomy but also enabled to develop equivalent

autonomy in their own professional practice. According to Little (1995, p.180), "Language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has inspired them to be autonomous."

It is crucial to note, however, that autonomy does not imply that a teacher may do anything he or she wants without regard for the implications of actions on students, colleagues, and other stakeholders. In truth, a teacher is in a position of great responsibility, and his or her actions have the potential to have a significant impact on others (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017). Being an autonomous teacher is essential because certain political and structural limitations, like a lack of professional control and a feeling of helplessness over autonomy, can make teachers feel stressed, demotivated, and anxious. Not having teacher autonomy can also lower teachers' self-esteem and desire to continue in the teaching profession. Certain concepts, like curriculum-related aspects of their teaching practice, can impede teachers' autonomy because they are obligated to follow a syllabus that specifies learning objectives and instructional materials (Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018). Therefore right in between "doing whatever one likes" and "stuck in the pre-determined aspects", teachers need their own space to take actions considering the impact on others.

As one of the venues for teachers to develop their autonomy, teacher training programs have critical significance. All along with these training programs prospective teachers of English can experiment with novel teaching approaches, methods, and strategies; and make use of the information they obtain during language teaching programs. This increases the creativity and autonomy of their practice and, ultimately, their individual autonomy (Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018). Based on empirical research, it can be concluded that teacher training programs have a direct impact on prospective teachers' degrees of teacher-learner autonomy by fostering a self-directed learning environment (Jiménez Raya & Viera, 2015; Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008). All these show that prospective teachers of English should be assisted in raising their awareness of teacher autonomy in addition to learning about learner autonomy through language teacher education programs. Language teachers and prospective teachers cannot be expected to promote and improve learner autonomy in case they cannot comprehend learner autonomy as argued by Smith (2003) and Little (2000). Thus, it is evident that prospective teachers can integrate their acquired knowledge and experiences into their language teaching practice if they have a clear understanding of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, as well as a comprehensive conception of the two (Han, 2020).

1.1.3. Learner-teacher autonomy relationship

Research has suggested that promoting learner autonomy (LA) can lead to a number of positive outcomes. For instance, researchers yielded that autonomous learners tend to be more willing to communicate in the target language (Barin & Eyerci, 2021), understand their strengths and weaknesses (Öztürk, 2019), exhibit a positive attitude towards learning English (Tanyeli & Kuter, 2013) and have higher self-efficacy beliefs (Alkan & Arslan, 2019). Furthermore, autonomous learners develop critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and a sense of ownership over their learning (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Additionally, autonomy is linked to increased satisfaction and a positive attitude toward learning (Lin & Reinders, 2019). Thus, it is crucial for prospective teachers of English to have learner autonomy to become more effective language learners.

Additionally, related research has indicated that teacher autonomy (TA), improves the effectiveness of language teachers by influencing their methods of instruction, curriculum development, and assessments of students (Hoy & DiPaola, 2008). TA which can be defined as a teacher's ability to engage in self-directed instruction, can help teachers feel less burnout in their profession (Javadi, 2014), increase their self-awareness about their teaching process (Smith & Erdoğan, 2008), provide job satisfaction and increase their self-confidence (Yildirim, 2017). According to the literature, obtaining teacher autonomy prior to graduating from their departments is critical for prospective teachers of English for the sake of their forthcoming teaching careers. Thinking of autonomy as a broad concept embracing teacher and learner autonomy within EFL context, also previous studies (Little, 1995; Smith, 2003) showing the interwoven realities of learner and teacher autonomy, the concepts had better be inspected more through research for a better understanding and upgrade.

1.2.   Research questions

According to researchers, learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent and like two sides of one coin (Aoki, 2002; Little, 1995). Despite the wealth of independent research on each aspect, there is a notable gap in understanding how these aspects are intertwined in the context of pre-service teacher education (Han, 2020). Studies conducted in this domain have mainly focused on learners' autonomy and the restrictions they encounter while fostering the autonomy of their learners (Benson, 2010; Nakata, 2011; Smith, 2003). Although pre-service teacher education is crucial for prospective teachers to acquire both LA and TA, there have not been enough studies aiming to reveal the teaching and learning autonomy of prospective teachers of English (PTEs). To fill the gap in the literature, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1.   What are PTEs' self-perceptions of their autonomy as learners?
2.   What are PTEs' self-perceptions of their autonomy as teachers?

3. Is there a relationship between PTEs' teacher autonomy and learner autonomy?

4. What are PTEs' perceptions on their Language Teaching Program at their faculties in terms of fostering their learner autonomy?

5. What are PTEs' perceptions on their Teaching Practicum in terms of fostering their teacher autonomy?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

An explanatory sequential research design was employed in this study, which is classified as a mixed-methods design encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data. The data collection process comprised two stages: initially, quantitative data was gathered and analyzed; then, qualitative data were employed in conjunction with that data to furnish a more intricate and comprehensive results from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) To examine the LA and TA of PTEs, using a mixture of these techniques was thus believed to offer a more comprehensive understanding.

2.2. Participants

This research was conducted with a total of 72 PTEs studying at a state university English Language Teaching Department in the 2023-2024 academic year. They were studying their final years indicating that along with being enrolled in a Language Teaching Program, they were also attending a Teaching Practicum Program. Over the course of four years, these individuals took numerous courses related to language teaching. In their final year, they had the opportunity to participate in a teaching practicum, which allowed them to apply the knowledge they had acquired. As prospective English language teachers, this demonstrates that the participants in the present study were in need to exhibit both teacher and learner autonomy. The participants of this study were selected using convenience sampling method (Creswell & Creswell, 2022) to provide time and cost advantages to the researchers. The average age of the participants was 22.73. Detailed information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Gender Distribution of the Participants

		n	%
	Female	48	66.6
Gender	Male	24	33.3
	Total	72	100.0

2.3.   Research instruments and processes

In line with the research questions of this study, the "Learner Autonomy Scale" adapted by Balçıkanlı (2006) in the Turkish context from Camilleri (1997) was used to measure the student autonomy perceptions of all participants and the "Teacher Autonomy Scale" developed by Pearson and Moomaw (2006) was used to measure the teacher autonomy perceptions of PTEs. The scales were administered one week apart to guarantee that participants did not mix up the scale's questions with those on the other scale and answered them separately.

In addition, a semi-structured interview, which was formed in the light of the results of both questionnaires and related literature being reviewed, edited and finalized under the guidance of the field experts, with the need to further investigate the quantitative findings, was conducted by the researchers with 8 PTEs studying in the Department of English Language Teaching on a purposeful basis to examine the views of the participants in more detail and to enrich their views. Based on the findings of the scales, 8 PTEs were purposely chosen for the second phase of the study: PTEs with one low, two moderate and one high level of LA; also, PTEs with one low, two moderate and one high level of TA to provide better portrait of the fuller picture and ensure objectivity and reliability. During the interviews, participants were asked to contemplate their language teaching programs with regard to their development of learners' autonomy and teaching practicum for teachers' autonomy. Interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants to enable them to express themselves in more detail and accurately. The interview questions are provided below:

1.   How do you perceive the concept of LA in the context of English language teaching?
2.   In what aspects do you think your English Language Teaching Program is particularly beneficial or lacking in relation to LA?
3.   How do you perceive the concept of TA in the context of English language teaching?
4.   In what aspects do you think your Teaching Practicum is particularly beneficial or lacking in relation to TA?

2.4.   Data analysis

To collect data for the first phase of the study Learner Autonomy (Balçıkanlı, 2006) and Teacher Autonomy (Paeson and Moomaw, 2006) scales were used. First the reliability scores of the scales were calculated. The Cronbach Alpha score for the Learner Autonomy scale (Balçıkanlı, 2006) was 0.895 and the Cronbach Alpha score for Teacher Autonomy scale (Paeson and Moomaw, 2006) was 0.823 in the present study. These results imply that the scales were reliable. To answer research question 1 and 2, the means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values of the total scores obtained from the Learner Autonomy and Teacher

Autonomy scales were calculated. For research question 3, correlation analysis was carried out. First, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk normality tests were performed to determine whether the scores obtained from the two scales were normally distributed. Table 2 shows the results of the normality tests.

Table 2. Normality test results for total scores of Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy scales

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	D	*sd*	*p*	*W*	*sd*	*p*
Learner Autonomy	0.058	72	0.200	0.979	72	0.503
Teacher Autonomy	0.096	72	0.200	0.983	72	0.648

Considering the p values in the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk normality tests, it was concluded both scale scores show normal distribution characteristics. Therefore, correlation analysis was conducted to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the scores obtained from the two scales. Pearson correlation coefficient was used in the correlation analysis due to the normal distribution of the two scale scores.

To address research questions four and five, the transcription and content analysis of the interview data were carried out with utmost care by two researchers who served as coders. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. After getting familiar with the transcribed data, the researchers decided initial codes by determining the meaningful units. Following this, the researchers independently scrutinized the data and subsequently they came together to alter or change the tentative codes, if necessary. For example, codes such as "journal writing," and "use of self-evaluation tasks" were merged into the theme "positive aspects of ELT program." In contrast, codes like "mentor interference," "predetermined curriculum," and "lack of material freedom" were grouped under " negative aspects of teaching practicum." Ultimately, the researchers came to a consensus on the final codes and themes. By employing focused coding, the content analysis was completed, and the researchers yielded four themes. To ensure the inter-rater reliability, Miles and Huberman (1994) analysis was conducted (0.96). Additionally, an outside researcher also participated within the analysis process to check the agreed-upon themes, to increase reliability.

3.   Findings

3.1.   *Quantitative findings*

3.1.1. *Findings on PTEs' LA and TA levels*

To answer the RQs 1 and 2 which are about shedding light on the LA and TA levels of PTEs, Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy scales were implemented.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values of total scores obtained from Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy scales.

	n	Mean ± SD	Minimum	Maximum
Learner Autonomy	72	42.02 ± 10.46	21.00	71.00
Teacher Autonomy	72	38.58 ± 6.11	24.00	52.00

The maximum score that can be obtained from the Learner Autonomy scale is 75.
The maximum score that can be obtained from the Teacher Autonomy scale is 56.

Table 3 displays the mean, standard deviation, and percentage values for PTEs' LA and TA. The average total score received by participants on the Learner Autonomy scale was 42.02, suggesting that PTEs demonstrated a moderate level of learner when the data was analyzed by taking the median as a basis. The Learner Autonomy scale yielded total scores ranging from 21 to 71.

The average total score on the Teacher Autonomy scale attained by participants was 38.58, indicating that PTEs displayed a moderate level of teacher autonomy when the data was analyzed by taking the median as a basis. Total scores on the Teacher Autonomy scale ranged from 24 to 52.

3.1.2. *Findings on the relationship between LA and TA of PTEs*

To answer RQ 3, correlation analysis was performed to evaluate whether there was a significant association between the scores obtained from the two measures. Table 4 displays the findings of the correlation analysis.

Table 4. The relationship between LA and TA scales (Correlation analysis)

		Learner Autonomy	Teacher Autonomy
Learner Autonomy	*r*	1	-0.088
	p		0.533
	n	72	72
Teacher Autonomy	*r*	-0.088	1
	p	0.533	
	n	72	72

The correlation analysis in Table 4 revealed that the overall scores for Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy do not significantly correlate (r(50) = -0.088, p = 0.533 > 0.05).

3.2. *Qualitative findings*

To answer RQ 4 and 5, semi-structured interviews conducted with PTEs. The data gathered from the participants during the interviews were analyzed implementing content analysis and categorized into four main themes according to interview questions which were formed in the light of items of the questionnaires and related literature. Table 5 illustrates themes and subthemes emerged from the interviews.

Table 5. Themes and subthemes

Themes	Sub-themes
The concept of Learner Autonomy	Definition of learner autonomy
	PTEs' perceived learner autonomy
The effect of ELT Program on Learner Autonomy	Positive aspects of ELT program
	Negative aspects of ELT program
The concept of Teacher Autonomy	Definition of teacher autonomy
	PTEs' perceived teacher autonomy
The effect of Teaching Practicum on Teacher Autonomy	Positive aspects of teaching practicum
	Negative aspects of teaching practicum

3.2.1. The concept of learner autonomy

"How do you perceive the concept of LA in the context of English language teaching?" was the first semi-structured interview question in the present study. The data yielded two sub-themes: *PTE's definition of LA* and *their perceived LA*.

Most of the PTEs conceptualized LA as *learner learning* and *discovering new ways to learn on his/her own*. They indicated LA as the autonomy of the learner to be responsible for his/her own decisions, that he/she makes without being dependent on anyone else. One of PTEs' views on that is presented:

"*Autonomy, in my opinion, is the ability to decide on one's own learning by knowing one's wants and needs, that is, to manage one's own learning process, to understand and know well how to learn in the learning process and to decide accordingly.*" (PTE2)

While one of the PTEs defined LA as learning without the need for a teacher, three of the PTEs defined LA as student self-directed learning under a supervisor (the teacher in this case), in accordance with the learning objectives; PTEs expressed that the teacher should serve as a guide to help them attain autonomy. The chosen quotes highlight PTEs' views:

"LA could be more about self-learning and the teacher being a guide in the process rather than an authoritarian and helping the student to discover the way they learn on their own." (PTE5)

"Learning autonomy is student self-directed learning under the supervision of the teacher, in line with the learning objectives." (PTE1)

PTEs' perceived concept of their LA was also revealed during the interviews. Five out of eight interviewees identified themselves as autonomous. The following are some chosen responses from the PTEs that consider themselves autonomous in their learning:

"I mean, in my learning process so far, I have always tried something, I mean, if I do this, I will learn better, if I do that, I will learn better, so I think I am autonomous because now I understand how I learn." (PTE3)

"Being an autonomous learner means taking charge of my learning. I set goals, like improving my listening skills, and use resources such as podcasts or articles that I find interesting. I also track my progress by noting new vocabulary or grammar points in a journal." (PTE2).

Although there is a tendency towards being autonomous learners, the other three PTEs indicated that they were not as autonomous as they would like to be. Some PTEs mentioned their heavy workloads from exams and presentations, and their need to follow a strict curriculum to pass their exams. Furthermore, it was brought to light that a state exam must be undertaken upon completion of their university studies if they aspire to assume the role of an English language teacher in state-run educational institutions. These aforementioned variables were listed as factors reducing their LA by PTEs as one of the PTEs indicate:

"I think my autonomy has decreased since I came to university because now that I am an adult, there are different expectations from me. I have difficult university courses at the university, and I need to finish university. After that, I need to study hard for KPSS exam as I want to become a teacher. Thus, I do not have any authority to choose what to study or learn." (PTE7)

3.2.2. The effect of ELT program on learner autonomy

"In what aspects do you think your English Language Teaching Program is particularly beneficial or lacking in relation to LA?" was the second question in the semi-structured interviews. Throughout the interviews, two subthemes emerged: sufficient and lacking aspects of the program.

Majority of PTEs expressed favorable opinions regarding the ways in which English language programs impact their LA. They expressed that their programs encourage them to find their learning methods providing sufficient materials to obtain this goal. In addition, PTEs elucidated that they are encouraged to do self-reflection by keeping a journal on their learning. Below, the opinions of PTEs highlighting this situation are presented:

"In fact, I think there are many practices that support autonomy, especially in our courses, our teachers always encourage us not to depend too much on textbooks, to improve ourselves by using the internet, to find methods that suit us." (PTE6)

"Especially in the third and fourth year, we are given more autonomy. Our teachers say what do you want to do about the internship, what subject do you want to teach, what kind of feedback do you want to get. Also, when we are given a presentation task, they ask us what subject we want to study, so all my classmates, including me, play an active role in determining the content of the courses." (PTE3)

However, during their interviews, PTEs voiced they lack autonomy in deciding the course content as the course content is often predetermined by their lecturers. Additionally, they

expressed that they do not possess the necessary competency to determine the course content or select the materials to be used in the course. The following quotes show PTEs views:

"Of course, they don't ask us about the books or resources they will use in the lesson, so we don't have autonomy in this way, but I think we shouldn't have it anyway because I do not know appropriate books" (PTE2)

3.2.3. The concept of Teacher Autonomy

"How do you perceive the concept of TA in the context of English language teaching?" was the third question in the semi-structured interview. During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect their teaching practicum experiences. The data yielded two sub-themes: *PTE's definition of TA* and *their perceived TA*.

PTEs defined TA as one that possessed ultimate authority and control within the classroom. The PTEs voiced that being an autonomous teacher indicates an absence of adherence to rigid program or curriculum requirements, and instead, adding something from themselves according to the needs of their learners or adjusting and changing materials to make them suitable for their learners. As one of the PTEs states:

"To me, being an autonomous teacher means to have complete authority over the material or subject matter you teach in the classroom. In addition, we can say that it is left to me to decide what kind of techniques, when and in what ways to teach the subject, and we are going to teach." (PTE8)

The PTEs also emphasized that the teacher should be the authority on the subject matter and materials to be taught, employing the techniques and methods they consider most effective, without being constrained by strict protocols or procedures. As one of the PTEs exemplifies:

"I think the definition of teacher autonomy is that the teacher generally teaches in his/her own way rather than acting within the framework of a program." (PTE4)

The subtheme concerning their *perceived TA* revealed that PTEs held a variety of viewpoints. PTEs asserted that they are more autonomous compared to teachers employing traditional methods. Moreover, they indicated that participating in teaching practicum enabled them to recognize their TA level. PTEs stated that they were unaware of their TA level prior to teaching practicum, and consequently, some PTEs discovered that their TA level was higher than they initially thought. Following excerpts highlight PTEs' views:

"I mean, I am more autonomous than a traditionalist teacher, but as a self-criticism, I am not as autonomous as I should be. But I think practicum made me realize that I am capable of more than I thought." (PTE1)

"I feel that I have become more autonomous with the internship. Before, I was not confident, but now I think I can do it and I can choose the appropriate materials for the students." (PTE3)

Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that one PTE recognized that her level of autonomy was not as high as she desired during her teaching practicum experience. Additionally, they acknowledged that although they perceive themselves as autonomous, the curriculum impedes their ability to fully show their potential. As one of the PTEs indicate:

"I felt like my autonomy decreased with the internship because real life was really different, I was autonomous with my students there but this time I felt like I restricted their autonomy, and I realized that I failed in classroom management." (PT5)

3.2.4. The effect of teaching practicum on teacher autonomy

"In what aspects do you think your Teaching Practicum is particularly beneficial or lacking in relation to TA?" was the fourth question asked in the semi-structured interview and unveiled two sub-categories: *beneficial* and *lacking* aspects of the teaching practicum.

On the beneficial side, PTEs stated the help of their mentors to provide them sufficient autonomy.

"I am very free to do whatever I want, and I can teach however I want in the lessons, our mentor lets us." (PTE1)

Additionally, one of the PTEs mentioned his gender helped him to be more autonomous in teaching practicum, as students are more likely to respect him because of his appearance.

"Being a man helps a lot in terms of autonomy, it really helps a lot, they take male teachers more seriously, as far as I heard from my friends, as far as I heard from my own teacher. My appearance in general, you know, my outlook, it helps a lot in this regard." (PTE1)

On the lacking side, they mentioned several factors influencing their TA in teaching practicum. Some PTEs mentioned the presence of their mentor as another authority source and a negative factor for them to be autonomous. They indicated that students follow the directions of their teachers rather than PTEs' instructions. Following quote highlights PTEs' views on that:

"I cannot say that I have much say in the lesson because they (students) already have a teacher and even though I am a teacher there, the students actually see their teachers more as an authority. Our mentor teacher also shows that he has authority, for example, he intervenes while we are lecturing, so the children do not listen to us." (PTE6)

The interviews conducted with PTEs revealed certain instances of mentors in teaching practicum engaging in spoon-feeding. Mentors manage the allotted time, materials, and activities for PTEs in accordance with their plans; PTEs are not permitted to conduct their own lessons using their own materials and instruction. As PTEs indicate:

"Our mentor told us not to use materials because they don't normally use them and the students want materials after we leave, or not to play games as students want to play games after we leave, etc., so we were very restricted in this regard." (PTE3)

"He decides how we should do everything, what material we should use, everything. Unfortunately, we have no authority." (PTE6)

Furthermore, PTEs mentioned the classroom dynamics (students' lack of interest, their background and differences), lack of resources in the classroom as factors that hinder their TA. As following quotes exemplify:

"I think the environment we are in restricts us a lot, especially in schools because if there is no material around us, if there is nothing you can do around you, it really hinders my autonomy as a teacher" (PTE2)

"I think the interest of the students is directly proportional to my autonomy because a student who is not curious about English does not want to learn English, so they do not want to participate much in activities and my autonomy decreases." (PTE1)

Finally, PTEs mentioned their lowered TA due to the obligation to follow the curriculum. As following quote illustrates:

"I think that my teacher autonomy during the teaching practicum is within a certain limit because there is a curriculum, I have to strictly follow this curriculum, I have to process the units according to schedule." (PTE4)

4.   Discussion

The present study aimed to address five research questions. To start with the first research question "What are PTEs' self-perceptions of their autonomy as learners?" focused on the LA level of PTEs which was assessed using the Learner Autonomy scale (2006). The results of quantitative data showed that the participants' LA level was moderate. This finding contrasts with previous studies in literature, which concluded that learners consider themselves autonomous (Lin & Reinders, 2019). Additionally, in Turkish context Şakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı (2019) concluded that EFL learners considered themselves autonomous in their learning. The moderate level of learner autonomy in this research suggests that PTEs had a general understanding of self-directed learning to a certain extent, but with limitations. The qualitative data also supports this finding. During the interviews, PTEs demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the definition and scope of autonomy and highlighted the importance of teachers in supporting their learner autonomy. However, PTEs identified several factors that may explain why their learner autonomy was moderate. They mentioned that they needed to take a state exam after graduation and had to study hard for it, as well as prepare numerous presentations and manage heavy workloads. Additionally, as Tunaz and Sarıçoban (2023) stated teacher education system in Turkey causes identity complications for PTEs due to theory-and exam-based education process and the general public's view of teachers. Basri (2023) discovered that students who have received their education in exam-oriented systems, where achievement is prioritized over authentic learning, exhibit greater resistance towards embracing autonomous learning behaviors. These variables seem to decrease PTEs' autonomy of learning. The research conducted by Kalyaniwala (2021) showed that PTEs highlighted the importance of technology as an enhancer of their LA as it helps them find the information they need and suggests that the use of technology-based instruments increases learner autonomy levels. In their study, Alkan and Arslan (2019) concluded that LA was associated with academic achievement of the learners. This suggests that increasing LA of PTEs will also result in increased academic achievement. Thus, it is essential to have higher LA level for PTEs to be successful at the university as well (Basri, 2023). Additionally, research by Adanır and Güven (2023) emphasized how digital tools and online learning post-pandemic have altered learners' strategies toward autonomy by increasing access to diverse resources and platforms. However, such benefits were not fully explored by the participants in this study, suggesting a potential underutilization of digital tools to support autonomy.

The second research question which is "What are PTEs' self-perceptions of their autonomy as teachers?" aimed to discover TA of PTEs which was investigated through the Teacher Autonomy scale (2006). The results indicated that the TA level of the PTEs was also moderate. The findings of this study are consistent with the research conducted in Türkiye by Yazici (2016) which concluded that the general TA of teachers was at medium level. During the interviews,

PTEs expressed that they have an overall understanding of the term's definition and held a favourable opinion of their TA. Nevertheless, they referred to teachers as the only authority in the classroom, disregarding the autonomy of the students and the teachers' role as facilitators of their learners' autonomy. This indicates that they should improve their conceptual understanding of TA, given that TA also involves supporting the LA of the learners (Basri, 2023) and as Yazici (2016) revealed, teachers with higher TA support their students' autonomous learning behaviours. Teachers can cultivate LA when they themselves have the liberty and capacity to exercise their own TA. PTEs during the interviews stated that teaching practicum helped them recognise their true level of TA; some found their actual level to be lower than they had anticipated, while others found it to be the opposite. Furthermore, PTEs expressed that despite their perception of themselves as autonomous teachers, specific obstacles (e.g., Ministry of Education-designed curriculum and instructional constraints) prevent them from exercising autonomy. Tunaz and Sarıçoban (2023) indicated that because of predetermined curriculum PTEs were hesitant to be autonomous in their teaching. Additionaly, curriculum constraints and the mentors' authoritative roles restricted PTEs' ability to exercise autonomy fully. This aligns with Nguyen and Walkinshaw's (2018) discussion of external factors limiting teachers' professional freedom. Additionally, the interviews revealed that PTEs associated TA with flexibility in adapting teaching methods to learner needs, echoing Benson's (2011) emphasis on the role of teacher autonomy in curriculum design and classroom management. Alibakhshi (2015) indicated in his study that even EFL teachers with PhD suffer from pre-determined curricula and materials. Additionally, Javadi (2014) concluded that TA is negatively correlated with burnout level of the teachers indicating that teachers with higher TA levels are less likely to experience burnout in their profession, which gives us highlights about the importance of TA and LA.

The relationship between LA and TA levels of PTEs was investigated with the aim of the third research question which is "Is there a relationship between PTEs' teacher autonomy and learner autonomy?". The quantitative data indicated that there was no significant relationship between these two variables. The absence of a correlation between LA and TA may reflect asynchronous development, as Nguyen and Walkinshaw (2018) suggest, where teacher autonomy is constrained by structural forces even when learner autonomy is intact. Alternatively, sociocultural dynamics, such as learned dependence in hierarchical systems (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017), may differentially affect the two dimensions. However, despite the lack of a relationship, it can be concluded that PTEs' autonomy levels correspond with one another, as both their LA and TA levels were moderate. This result is consistent with the assertions made by Little (2000) that expecting language instructors to foster learner autonomy without first comprehending what it means to be an autonomous learner is impractical. Han (2020) further suggested that PTEs can apply their experiences and knowledge into language teaching practice if they have a clear understanding of LA and TA and a firm grasp of the

underlying concept. Thus, LA and TA proficiency of PTEs should be improved by English language teacher training programs and teaching practicums and they should be encouraged to develop autonomy in both dynamics.

The fourth research question which is "What are PTEs' perceptions on their Language Teaching Program at their faculties in terms of fostering their learner autonomy?" examined the impact of teacher training programs on LA levels of PTEs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. The results indicated that PTEs viewed the teacher training program as beneficial in developing their LA. They reported that their instructors provided sufficient support for them to improve their LA. However, they noted that they do not have enough autonomy to decide on the coursebook for the lecture or the time of the lesson. This finding aligns with Balçıkanlı (2010), who suggested that due to the Turkish educational system, the issues like the time and place of courses are considered as administrative topics and students' decisions are irrelevant. Other than administrative hinderances regarding LA of the PTEs, Basri (2023) examined the autonomy support given to PTEs by their instructors, and concluded that teacher/student backgrounds, misalignment between teacher and student expectations, limited teacher autonomy, and large class sizes are the primary factors that affect autonomy supports. As positive remarks, PTEs stated in the interviews that their instructors encourage them to reflect on their own learning practices using self-evaluation reports or journals. This assists them in increasing their learner autonomy and is consistent with results of the study conducted by Balcıkanlı (2006), which emphasize the importance of encouraging self-assessment and keeping journals and notes to track progress throughout their education.

The fifth research question which is "What are PTEs' perceptions on their teaching practicum in terms of fostering their teacher autonomy?" aimed to answer the effects of teaching practicum on TA levels of PTEs. During the semi-structured interviews, PTEs discussed both favorable and unfavorable aspects of their TA, considering teaching practicum. While some students suggested that the actions of their mentor teachers benefited their TA, others argued that the mentors hindered their TA by providing all classroom materials, prohibiting PTEs from bringing additional materials, or being the sole authority in the classroom. This finding may suggest that mentors stand as the vital element in PTEs' practicum journey in terms of their TA. Similarly, in line with this finding, Alibakhshi (2015) indicated that ELF teachers had no autonomy over choosing the material that will be used in the classroom and must follow the book step by step as they have pre-determined curricula. In the interviews, participants mentioned the level of teacher autonomy is impacted by learners' interest in English during the teaching practicum. This result aligns with Alibakhshi (2015) which concluded that teachers' autonomy is challenged by the learners' lack of motivation and their dependency on the teacher and their low English level. Also, the large number of the students and learner differences have a lowering effect on TA of the PTEs found by (Basri, 2023) which was also brought up by PTEs during

interviews. As a result of the mentor teachers' and institutes' policies and regulations, the PTEs perceived themselves as being unable to exercise their autonomy as teachers, as efficiently as they like. This result is consistent with a body of related research (Balçıkanlı, 2010; Benson, 2011).

5.   Conclusions

The main aim of the study was to investigate the interwoven realm of autonomy by looking at both teacher and learner dynamics. The results contributed to the literature by illuminating the intertwined relationship between LA and TA of PTEs. A comprehensive examination was conducted, involving the sequential collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings revealed that, despite their moderate LA and TA levels, PTEs had a general understanding of both autonomies. PTEs mentioned both positive and negative aspects of teacher education and teacher training programs on their LA and TA respectively.

It is suggested that teacher education programs be augmented by incorporating specific courses aimed at enhancing learner and teacher autonomy of PTEs. By comprehending the principles of autonomy, PTEs' autonomy in their learning and teaching processes will be better. Furthermore, it is recommended that teaching practicums be enhanced with elements that promote PTEs' TA. Additionally, the Ministry of Education can offer in-service training for in-service teachers. As it is evident that mentor teachers play a key role on PTEs' TA, the Ministry of Education should consider providing mentor teachers with in-service training to enhance their TA and support PTEs' TA.

Further research can examine the association between PTEs' and their instructors' perceptions of PTEs' LA and TA. This study solely examined the participants' self-perceptions; therefore, collecting data through observations of PTEs during their teaching practicum can also illuminate their actual level of autonomy. Additionally, a longitudinal study can be conducted to see whether their perceptions alter after they start their profession. A further study can examine the effect of gender on both TA and LA level of PTEs to determine if there is a significant difference between male and female PTEs. Although further investigations are needed, the present study contributes to unveil the dynamics of learner and teacher autonomy of prospective teachers of English.

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