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Teacher Agency and Learner Autonomy in ESL Education: A study of selected ESL teachers in Galle zonal division

Saumya Batuwatta

Department of English Language Teaching, University of Ruhuna

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*Corresponding author

E-mail address:

Saumyabatuwatta@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1304-6247>

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy has long been recognized as a vital component in English as a Second Language pedagogy. However, its implementation remains limited in Sri Lanka, where English language proficiency continues to pose a significant challenge across diverse social strata. In this context, promoting autonomous learning practices is not only beneficial but essential. Given the centrality of the teacher's role in shaping learning experiences, this study investigates the dimensions through which teachers contribute to the development of learner autonomy, focusing on a selected group of English teachers from the Galle zonal division. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study was conducted in two phases. Phase One utilized quantitative methods, analyzing data via SPSS Version 21, while Phase Two employed qualitative techniques to provide deeper contextual understanding. The sample comprised 60 English language teachers (N=60) teaching Grade 8 students, from which a purposive sample of six teachers (N=6), representing the three main school categories, was selected for the qualitative phase. The findings emphasized the importance of teacher's role in fostering learner autonomy. However, prevailing pedagogical practices of the observed classrooms remain largely traditional, offering limited opportunities for autonomous learning. Although teachers demonstrate awareness of its importance, systemic barriers—including inadequate resources, rigid curricula, and lack of institutional support—contribute to teacher demotivation and reduced emphasis on autonomy-oriented practices. Consequently, learner autonomy should be conceptualized as a collaborative process in which both teachers and learners develop, with teachers' own autonomy, supported through institutional trust and empowerment, serving as a prerequisite for fostering it in students.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has emerged as a pivotal concept in foreign language education, reflecting a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches. It is a fundamental aspect of language teaching and learning that underscores the need for teachers to guide and support students on their path to becoming autonomous learners (Nguyen, 2012).

Further as highlighted by Bajrami (2015), a central principle of learner autonomy involves shifting the educational spotlight from teaching to learning. In an autonomous learning environment, learners are responsible for decision-making and directing their own learning. However, this process is only partially self-sufficient; the guidance and supervision of teachers are essential to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness.

Moreover, the role of a teacher in promoting learner autonomy in a second language classroom is crucial, even though autonomous learners tend to be more successful in language acquisition. Teachers must first recognize their students' diverse learning styles and strategies to encourage learners to improve their learning processes and outcomes. Teachers are uniquely positioned to observe and understand that students may have different learning preferences and approaches. It is essential to help students become aware of their own learning styles if they are to take responsibility for their learning process (Wang, 2011).

Conversely, the Sri Lankan education system has undergone considerable experimentation and reform over the decades, particularly in the area of English as a Second Language (ESL) education. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of English proficiency in navigating the demands of globalization and modern professional contexts, the efficacy and productivity of ESL

instruction in Sri Lanka remain questionable (Samaranayake, 2016 & Karunaratna, 2003). The prevailing pedagogical approach is often described metaphorically as "giving the student a fish" rather than "teaching the student how to fish." This reflects a system heavily reliant on rote memorization and textbook-based instruction, which limits the long-term benefits of lifelong learning. Furthermore, the emphasis on teaching learners how to practically apply language knowledge in real-life contexts remains largely absent from current teaching and learning practices. As a result, English language proficiency continues to be a persistent challenge for individuals across various sectors of society.

A significant contributing factor to this issue is the narrow conception of English learning, commonly perceived by both teachers and students as the ability to read prescribed textbooks and answer comprehension questions. This limited view neglects the broader communicative competencies required for functional language use. Moreover, Sri Lanka's ESL landscape, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, demonstrates minimal engagement with learner autonomy. Language learning continues to be predominantly teacher-centered, examination-oriented, and conservative, offering little space for independent or self-directed learning behaviors.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Defining Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy has emerged as a pivotal concept in the field of foreign language education over the past five decades. The introduction of the term "autonomy" into the language learning context is credited to Yves Chalon, who established *The Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (CRAPEL) in 1970. Following his contributions, Henri Holec further developed the notion, offering what has become the

most widely cited definition: the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1971, as cited in Smith, 2008). Over time, this definition has evolved with the terms *ability* and *take charge* being interpreted variably as *capacity*, *taking responsibility for*, or *taking control of* one's learning (Benson, 2007).

Balcikanli (2008, as cited in Dinçer, 2010) notes that the foundations of the autonomy concept can be traced back to philosophical traditions of notable thinkers such as Rousseau, Dewey, and Kilpatrick. While some scholars emphasize the European origins of the concept, others highlight its philosophical parallels in Eastern traditions. Pierson (1996), for instance, connects the principles of autonomy and self-education to classical Chinese thought dating back to the Sung Dynasty (Ivanovska, 2015).

Etymologically, the term "autonomy" is derived from the Greek *auto* (self) and *nomos* (law), suggesting a condition of self-governance, Voltz (2008, as cited in Dang, 2012). In educational discourse, this translates into an individual's ability to regulate and justify their actions across various disciplines, including language learning (Boud, 1981; Dang, 2012). However, the term is often misconstrued. Thus, Benson (2007) cautions against equating autonomy with concepts such as self-instruction, self-direction, self-access learning, or distance education. As Joshi (2011) explains, while these terms reflect different degrees of learner independence, autonomy itself refers to a set of attitudes and competencies necessary for managing one's learning.

Thus, learner autonomy is a multi-faceted, socio-cognitive construct that encompasses a range of elements, including attitudes, abilities, decision-making skills, planning, and self-assessment. It is not simply about learning in isolation but involves an ongoing interaction with one's learning environment—inside and outside the classroom. As such, it is widely regarded as a lifelong learning process, one that must be

nurtured through targeted pedagogical interventions.

Crucially, autonomy is not innate; it must be developed over time. It lies on a continuum between traditional, teacher-directed learning and fully self-directed education. Learners must be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, which involves active engagement, ownership of the learning process, and the ability to extend learning beyond the classroom context.

1.1.2 The Role of the Teacher in Promoting Learner Autonomy

If autonomous learners are considered the most successful in language learning, then the role of the teacher in cultivating such autonomy is vital. Teachers must first recognize the diverse learning styles and strategies employed by their students. Only through this recognition can they create differentiated, learner-centered environments conducive to autonomy. However, while the concept of learner autonomy has been extensively studied since the 1980s, the corresponding role of the teacher has received comparatively less attention in scholarly discourse.

Ehrman (as cited in Yan, 2012) uses a theatre metaphor to illustrate the teacher's multifaceted role: director, prompter, coach, scriptwriter, audience member, and actor. Yan further elaborates on this by identifying the teacher as manager, organizer, facilitator, guide, evaluator, and counselor. These varied roles demonstrate the complexity of the teacher's position in fostering an environment where autonomy can flourish.

According to Ustunluoglu (2009), teachers must create conditions that simultaneously encourage independence and provide necessary guidance. Suggested strategies include assigning open-ended tasks, offering choices in study topics, encouraging peer collaboration, and allowing students to synthesize and evaluate information. These

techniques not only develop linguistic skills but also enhance learners' ability to self-regulate.

Nonetheless, research by Yunus and Arshad (2015) reveals that many learners remain passive, relying heavily on teachers to introduce new concepts. This tendency reflects a broader cultural and systemic inclination toward "spoon-feeding" education, which inhibits the development of self-confidence and critical thinking. To counteract this, educators must explicitly teach students how to set learning goals, make informed decisions, and monitor their progress. Cotterall (2000) emphasizes the importance of goal-setting and direction; without it, learners can feel disoriented and disengaged from the learning process.

Teachers' beliefs and commitment to autonomy are also crucial. As Tuyen and An (2019) illustrate, the promotion of autonomy can be operationalized through two primary strategies as responsibility-informing activities and autonomy-enhancing classroom tasks. In their study, teachers routinely helped students set both long- and short-term goals, guided them in developing learning plans, and advised on the use of external resources—such as English books, newspapers, websites, and videos—to facilitate independent learning.

Additionally, classroom activities were designed to promote collaboration, with students encouraged to work in groups and reflect on their performance through peer feedback. Teachers also used various assessment techniques, shared personal learning experiences, identified learners' strengths and weaknesses, and discussed potential obstacles. These practices were found to be highly effective in cultivating an autonomous learning environment and enhancing learners' linguistic competence.

However, the practical realities in many ESL classrooms pose significant barriers to implementing these strategies. Large class

sizes, time constraints, and curriculum rigidity all limit the extent to which teachers can personalize instruction or support autonomy. As Yunus and Arshad (2015) argue, the prevailing "spoon-feeding" culture undermines students' ability to think independently and creatively, reinforcing dependency and passivity. In such contexts, fostering learner autonomy demands not only teacher initiative but also systemic change in curriculum design, assessment practices, and teacher training.

1.1.3 Sri Lankan ESL Context and Learner Autonomy

Language, as a tool of power and identity, plays a complex and often contested role within Sri Lanka's educational landscape. The English language, in particular, has long been associated with social privilege and colonial legacy. Wijesekera (2014) notes that English, due to its colonial origins, continues to exert a deep influence on the educational system, often with adverse socio-political implications. These outcomes stem largely from post-colonial egalitarian policies that sought to limit English's dominance but inadvertently bred resentment toward the language. Kandiah (1984 as cited in Wijesekera, 2014) famously referred to English as a *kaduwa*—a metaphorical sword—used to marginalize rural learners by limiting their access to higher education and employment opportunities. This historical narrative has fostered a psychological inhibition among many Sri Lankan students, particularly in rural areas, impeding their willingness and ability to engage with English learning, especially when they transition to higher education where English becomes the medium of instruction.

Batuwatta and Premarathna (2022) highlight that in most Sri Lankan classrooms, learners tend to adopt a passive role, relying heavily on teacher-directed instruction. This reliance discourages them from taking responsibility for their own learning processes, resulting in limited communicative competence despite

the completion of textbook activities. While many students successfully navigate the school curriculum by fulfilling the basic requirements—such as reading set texts and answering comprehension questions—they often struggle with tasks that require original thinking or real-world application of English.

Karunaratna (2003), in a study conducted across four schools in Colombo, observed that even in the Capital—generally regarded as one of the more privileged educational zones—English language teaching is focused primarily on syllabus completion rather than developing communicative competence or learner independence. Teachers prioritized completing the textbook in preparation for national examinations such as the GCE Ordinary and Advanced Level exams. This examination-driven mindset detracts from pedagogical practices that foster autonomy and interactive learning. The situation is even more problematic in rural schools, where shortages of qualified teachers and instructional resources exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult to complete the syllabus on time, let alone introduce autonomy-supportive strategies (Samaranayake, 2016).

This disparity in educational quality across regions becomes most apparent when students are assessed through standardized national examinations that assume a uniform level of English proficiency.

The resulting inequity disadvantages learners from under-resourced areas and creates further barriers at the tertiary level, where academic content is predominantly delivered in English. Thus, systemic inequities in ESL education contribute to long-term disparities in access to higher education and employment opportunities (Batuwatta and Premarathna, 2022).

Despite its relevance, the application of learner autonomy in Sri Lankan ESL contexts remains under-researched and under-implemented. While the term "learner

autonomy" is not unfamiliar within local educational discourse, there is a paucity of empirical studies exploring how it is understood and practiced, particularly in secondary school settings (Batuwatta and Premarathna 2022).

Research in this area has largely focused on student outcomes or generalized pedagogical strategies, with limited attention given to the role of teachers in cultivating autonomy. As a result, there is a notable gap in knowledge concerning teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and strategies regarding autonomy, as well as the practical challenges they face in fostering it within the constraints of the national education system.

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the significance of the role of English language teachers in fostering learner autonomy in the ESL context, specifically at the secondary education level. In light of the issues discussed above, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

- To what extent do English language teachers in secondary schools promote learner autonomy in their classroom practices?
- What are the key challenges faced by teachers in fostering learner autonomy within the ESL context, and how do these challenges vary across different school types?

Through this investigation, the study aspires to provide empirically grounded recommendations for integrating autonomy-enhancing strategies into the national ESL pedagogy, particularly in resource-constrained and examination-driven educational settings. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to more equitable and effective English language education in local context by addressing an essential but overlooked component of language acquisition.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Constructivist Learning Theory, Personal Construct Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Mediation Theory. The research was structured in two phases to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies: Phase 1 collected and analyzed quantitative data, while Phase 2 focused on qualitative data collection and analysis. This design allowed for both breadth and depth in exploring the role of teachers in fostering learner autonomy within the ESL context in Sri Lanka.

2.1.2 Phase 1: Quantitative Design

The quantitative component was designed using a deductive approach, with data collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 39 items divided into five sections. These included:

1. General information
2. Sense of Responsibility
3. Understanding of Teachers' Role
4. Constraints to Autonomy
5. Strategies for Fostering Autonomy

The questionnaire aimed to assess teachers' definitions and perceptions of learner autonomy, their role in promoting it, and the challenges they face in doing so. Each section was composed of 5 to 10 items measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, which is standard in behavioral and educational research due to its efficiency and reliability in capturing subjective perceptions.

2.1.3 Sampling and Data Collection

Simple random sampling was used to select 60 English language teachers (10% of the estimated population of 600 teachers) who teach Grade 8 students in the Galle Zonal Education Division. The participating schools

represented both national and provincial categories, all following the same government-prescribed syllabus. Data were collected through group distribution, where the researcher personally visited schools to administer the questionnaires, ensuring high response rates and clarifying any ambiguities in real time.

Pilot Study and Reliability

A pilot study was conducted in three stages:

1. Expert Review: The questionnaire was initially reviewed by five senior English teachers who were not part of the main sample.
2. Pre-testing: Five teachers from the actual sample completed the questionnaire, which was included in the main analysis.
3. Reliability Testing: Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine internal consistency using SPSS (version 21), and all questionnaires were validated for completeness and clarity.

2.2 Phase 2: Qualitative Design

The second phase employed a case study approach using multiple qualitative methods to explore the nuanced realities of fostering learner autonomy in real-life classroom settings. The tools included:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Stimulated recall interviews
- Classroom observations (video-recorded)
- Field notes

This phase adopted a purposive sampling strategy, selecting six "information-rich" participants from Phase 1 based on their willingness, school type, and relevance to get a close study of the research objectives. The selected teachers represented the three main types of schools as A-type (well-resourced),

B-type (moderately resourced) and C-type (under-resourced); as per the categorization of the ministry of education. These schools are demographically located in both urban and rural areas within the zone.

Each category included two teachers, reflecting diversity in teaching environments and institutional conditions.

2.2.1 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

To ensure qualitative validity, transcripts from interviews were shared with the participants for verification. Observational reliability was maintained through the use of a standardized observational protocol, and data were triangulated using field notes and video recordings. In line with Gibbs (2007) and Creswell (2014), procedures such as transcript checks, detailed note-taking, and confirmation of data accuracy were employed to enhance reliability and authenticity.

2.2.2 Sample Characteristics

The total sample consisted of 60 English teachers, who conduct English lessons for the grade 8 students (Phase 1), whose academic qualifications ranged from Advanced Level to Master's degrees. Teaching experience varied from 1 to 35 years, providing a balanced representation of novice and veteran educators. Phase 2 included six teachers (pseudonyms- Mashi, Meena, Ganga, Maali, Rasini, Lalani), selected to reflect varying institutional and demographic contexts across the Galle Zonal Division.

Rationale for Grade 8 Focus

Grade 8 was selected due to its strategic position in the local school system. At this stage:

- Teachers and students are not burdened by national exams (O/L or A/L).
- The students have already acquired foundational skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English.

- The students are considered developmentally capable of engaging with autonomous learning strategies.
- Teachers and learners at this level are more likely to exhibit and experiment with autonomy-supportive behaviors and practices.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, this methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of the ESL teachers' perceptions, roles, practices, and challenges related to learner autonomy within the unique context of Sri Lanka's education system.

3. Data Analysis

Phase 1: Analysis

The analysis of data from Phase 1 of the study, based on the questionnaire distributed among 60 English language teachers in the Galle Zonal Division, provides valuable insights into teachers' perceptions, understanding, and practical engagement with the concept of learner autonomy in ESL classrooms.

General Understanding of Teachers' Responsibility in the Learning Process

A significant majority of teachers (76%) expressed a strong belief that they bear substantial responsibility for all aspects of the students' learning process. This finding indicates a high level of teacher awareness regarding their influential role in shaping student learning experiences. It also reflects a teacher-centered perception of responsibility, suggesting that while teachers acknowledge their role, this may not always translate into promoting student independence.

Understanding of Autonomous-Friendly Practices

Concerning fostering learner autonomy through specific instructional strategies, 57.4% of respondents agreed that autonomy-

friendly practices can promote autonomy in their classrooms. This agreement suggests a generally positive disposition among teachers toward the potential of autonomy-oriented strategies, such as giving students choice, encouraging independent learning tasks, and promoting self-assessment.

However, the data also reveal a degree of ambivalence: 32.1% of teachers opposed this idea, and an additional 11% remained undecided. This implies that while there is support for the concept of autonomy in principle, implementation may be hindered by uncertainty or lack of clarity about what learner autonomy entails and how it can be practically applied in real classroom situations.

Perceptions of Constraints to Fostering Learner Autonomy

When asked about the constraints they face in fostering autonomy, 52.6% of the teachers acknowledged the presence of significant barriers ranging from large class sizes and limited resources to rigid syllabi and time constraints. An additional 13% of respondents were uncertain. These findings highlight a pressing need to address systemic and contextual challenges if autonomy-oriented teaching is to become a practical reality in the ESL context. The recognition of constraints by over half of the participants indicates that while theoretical acceptance of learner autonomy exists, practical application is often hindered by external and institutional limitations.

Teachers' Views on Effective Approaches to Fostering Autonomy

Encouragingly, a near-unanimous 96% of the teachers agreed that the strategies listed in the questionnaire can effectively promote learner autonomy. This high level of agreement demonstrates a strong willingness among teachers to adopt autonomy-supportive practices, provided they are equipped with the necessary knowledge,

resources, and institutional support. Despite some inconsistencies in conceptual understanding, the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards practical strategies suggests that many teachers are open to reforming their pedagogy in favor of more student-centered approaches.

Phase 2: Analysis of Teacher Roles

In Phase 2, qualitative data were analyzed to further explore how teachers' roles are enacted in real classroom settings. Table 1 maps the accepted pedagogical roles of ESL teachers, such as *facilitator*, *counselor*, *resource provider*, *evaluator*, *organizer*, *designer*, *manager*, and *monitor*, against the observed behaviors and self-reported perceptions of the six teachers selected for the case study.

This analysis revealed significant variation in how teachers interpreted and performed their roles. Some teachers demonstrated a strong alignment with autonomy-supportive roles, particularly as facilitators and counselors. Others remained bound to traditional roles, such as knowledge transmitters and syllabus enforcers. Notably, the more experienced teachers tended to adopt a broader range of roles, reflecting a more flexible and student-centered approach. The summary provided in Table 1 helps identify the gaps between theoretical teacher roles and actual classroom practices. It serves as a foundation for understanding how teacher identity, experience, understand and practice, institutional culture, and access to professional development influence the implementation of learner autonomy.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of both quantitative (Phase 1) and qualitative (Phase 2) data reveals a complex picture regarding the perceptions, understanding, and classroom practices among the selected ESL teachers towards learner autonomy (LA). Despite teachers' awareness of and positive attitudes toward

the value of learner autonomy, there remains a considerable gap between this understanding and its effective enactment in real classroom contexts, largely due to contextual, institutional, and conceptual barriers.

Teachers' Perceptions and Understanding of Learner Autonomy

Findings from Phase 1 show that although teachers conceptually acknowledge their

responsibility in the students' learning process (76% agreement), their understanding of learner autonomy is fragmented. Only 25% of respondents defined learner autonomy as learners having the *right to take control* of their learning. In contrast, 40% saw it as a *capacity developed with teacher support*, and 33.3% defined it as the *learners' responsibility*. These varied definitions reflect inconsistency and a lack of comprehensive understanding of autonomy.

Table 1. Comparison between the accepted teacher behavior and the teacher's actual behaviors and understanding

Teacher's Role	Accepted Behavior in Developing Learner Autonomy	Teachers' Actual Behaviors and Understanding Towards Learner Autonomy
Facilitator	Provides psycho-social support - <i>motivating learners and raising learners' awareness.</i> Technical support - <i>helping to plan and carry out their learning, evaluate themselves to acquire the skills and knowledge.</i>	Reachable teacher. Give support and advice. Not an authoritative figure. Provide opportunities. Provide extra materials and resources.
Counselor	Give advice and help learners to achieve more efficient learning. Help learners to become more self-monitoring and fulfill learners' aims and needs. Give feedback and support learners towards autonomous learning.	Explain the importance of ESL learning. Encourage them to speak and clarify their doubts. Buildup confidence.
Resource Supplier	Motivate learners to produce their language and advisably correct students' errors to help them develop their learning strategies and techniques. Teachers could also introduce learning materials such as English magazines, newspapers, and	Introduce the activities and other outside materials such as TV programs, books, and newspapers. Maintain WhatsApp group Be resourceful with experience, mentality, knowledge, methods, and approaches.

	valuable websites for learners. When the students had difficulty learning, teachers would prepare to provide information.	
Evaluator	Teachers should focus on students' success or progress to create a success-oriented learning atmosphere.	Evaluate the progress via term tests and assessments. Check the books of the students.
Organizer	Organizing various kinds of activities and games which are appropriate, effective, and relevant to classroom teaching will best meet the student's needs and expectations.	Design the lesson, mode of delivery, and type of activities. Organize English days. Maintain literary association.
Designer	Design tasks that are engaging to students.	Design the mode of teaching, homework, and extra activities like dramas and songs to improve learner skills.
Manager	Give clear instructions as to what is to be done. Respond to students' interests and abilities so that they will be highly motivated to perform in each stage of classroom activities.	Manage timing for activities, and decide homework, deadlines, rules, and regulations. Keep the overall authority to control the students. Self-managed, self-disciplined.
Monitor	The students' learning process includes learning methods, learning contents, learning progress, and identifying learners' strong and weak points.	Monitor how students complete the lessons. Walk around the classroom.

Table 2. compares the overall summarization of the teachers' understanding of being pro-autonomous in teaching

Name	Facilitator	Counselor	Resource Supplier	Evaluator	Organizer	Designer	Manager	Monitor
Maali	Gives support and advice. Reachable teacher.	Explain the importance of learning English. Encourage them to talk and clarify their doubts.	I introduce the activities and other outside materials such as tv programs, books, and newspapers.	Evaluate the progress via term tests. I check the books of the students.	I design the lesson and mode of delivery. But not the classroom setting.	I'm the designer of the mode of teaching, homework, and other activities.	Manage everything (timing for activities, decide homework, deadlines, rules, and regulations.	Monitor how students complete the lessons. Used to walk around the classroom.
Lalani	I help them according to their needs.	Considering their levels help to solve their problems. Special support for grammar and speaking.	Maintain a WhatsApp group, so the learners can showcase their skills and get exposure to other web-based activities.	Evaluate the progress through the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd term examination papers.	Organize English days, Maintain small literary association.	Design extra work like dramas and songs to improve the skills.	Manage classroom arrangement, efficiency, time, and rules and regulations in teaching.	I don't have time to go to every student but only random checks on weak students.
Maashi	Students can reach me at any time and help them whenever possible. Mainly in vocabulary development, follow the scaffolding method.	Raise confidence in speaking and encourage them to use the language	<i>I don't think I am a resource supplier.</i>	Give assessments and make evaluations during the three-term tests	<i>I don't think that I contribute to the role of an organizer.</i>	I design activities to make learners engaged with the lesson in an enthusiastic way.	In this traditional classroom, I keep the overall authority to control the students.	I do constant monitoring after assigning them activities to avoid idling.
Meena	Mainly in vocabulary development, follow the scaffolding method. I am an opportunity provider.	In ESL learning, there are fixed problems that hinder students. So, I am a counselor each day.	You should always be resourceful with experience, mentality, knowledge, methods, and approaches.	I evaluate both academic progress and moral values of the learners, as they both are essential in education.	Mentality and emotional levels should also be considered in organizing a lesson, along with choosing materials and advocating them.	It is challenging under the existing hard and fast rules. In designing I also add value to care, love, and kindness.	Getting everybody into one mentality. Self-managed, self-disciplined, controlled, and a little authoritative are also needed.	I do constant monitoring in a friendly manner.
Rasini	I provide the students with extra materials and bring technical aids to the classroom.	Encourage students to speak with correct pronunciation. I provide my phone to listen to them.	I bring additional resources to the classroom, like pictures, Objects.	Do assessments and evaluations during the term tests.	Except for the classroom arrangement, I organize all the others.	I design the mode of delivery of the lesson, homework, and extra activities.	I must keep most authority in the class and perform as overall manager.	Monitoring is essential on every hand.
Ganga	I sometimes provide additional lesson materials.	I solve their language problems and I guide them to improve their language skills.	<i>I don't think I am a resource supplier.</i>	I mark the term-end question papers and additional activities.	I organized the group activities and the teaching materials.	I design and assign their homework, teaching materials, and activities.	I'm only a manager sometimes. I mainly assign activities for the students.	Monitoring is a must. I monitor everything from the beginning to the end.

Observational and interview data from Phase 2 further validate this. Teachers who claimed familiarity with LA primarily recommended passive strategies (e.g., reading English newspapers or watching English films), rather than promoting active learning strategies such as self-monitoring, peer collaboration, or goal setting. The teacher was still widely regarded as the central figure of authority and information provider. Some teachers even expressed cultural resistance to the concept. For instance, Meena argued that classroom authority must lie with the teacher, citing cultural norms of respect and discipline. Milani resisted change due to fear of institutional pushback and uncertainty around accountability. These attitudes suggest that teacher-centered beliefs continue to dominate the classroom, limiting space for autonomy-supportive practices.

Challenges in Promoting Learner Autonomy

In both phases, teachers consistently reported multiple challenges in fostering learner autonomy. According to Phase 1, 52.6% of teachers acknowledged structural and pedagogical obstacles. These were further elaborated during Phase 2 and include:

- Institutional constraints: Teachers cited a rigid syllabus, time pressure, and pressure to complete textbook content ahead of national exams.
- Resource limitations: Many schools lacked basic infrastructure, let alone language laboratories or digital tools that support independent learning.
- Large class sizes and physical space issues: Overcrowded classrooms made group work and interactive tasks nearly impossible.
- Student demotivation and mixed ability levels: Students often saw English only as a subject for exams, not as a communicative tool, and many from

underprivileged backgrounds showed little intrinsic motivation.

- Lack of administrative support: School leadership often misunderstood active classrooms (e.g., during group work) as signs of teacher incompetence.
- Minimal teacher training: Teachers reported dissatisfaction with teacher training programs, which often lacked focus on autonomous teaching strategies.

These conditions contribute to a teaching environment in which promoting autonomy is difficult, if not infeasible, without systemic reform.

Nature of the Teaching-Learning Environment

The physical and cultural environment of classrooms was found to be a significant factor in hindering learner autonomy. Observations revealed:

- Traditional seating arrangements (rows, gender-separated) discouraged collaboration.
- Lack of student voice in arranging seating or participating in classroom decision-making.
- Absence of technology and authentic resources for language learning.
- Disruptive noise levels due to overcrowding and poor infrastructure.

These structural and pedagogical limitations reinforce the perception that ESL is just another content subject, rather than a dynamic language skill requiring student engagement, experimentation, and personal relevance.

Autonomy-Supportive and Non-Supportive Teaching Practices

Despite these challenges, some positive practices were observed, such as:

- Allowing student choice in responding to questions.
- Encouraging peer correction, which fosters self-awareness and collaborative learning.
- Providing scaffolding to support student problem-solving and answer formulation.
- Praising effort and participation, even when responses were incorrect, helps build learner confidence.

These practices, though sporadic, show that many teachers possess the inclination to support autonomy but lack the systematic training and conducive environment to sustain it effectively.

Conversely, non-supportive practices included:

- Emphasis on rote memorization of grammar rules.
- Lack of wait-time for student responses.
- Nomination-based questioning rather than open participation.
- Absence of strategy instruction or reflection on learning processes.
- Minimal interaction between teacher and learners, especially regarding student opinions or learning goals.

These findings affirm that autonomy-supportive behaviors are still peripheral rather than integral to ESL pedagogy.

Training and Institutional Support

Several teachers, such as Maashi and Rasini, acknowledged the need for ongoing, practical teacher training focused specifically on autonomous learning strategies.

However, even motivated teachers like Meena noted that what is learned during training sessions often fails to transfer into classroom practice due to contextual constraints like mixed-ability classes, lack of time, and curricular rigidity.

Moreover, Lalani highlighted the disconnect between school administration and pedagogical best practices, particularly in how active language learning is often misunderstood and penalized, further discouraging innovation.

Strategies Observed for Fostering Autonomy

Some promising autonomy-supportive strategies were noted:

- Encouragement of choice and self-expression.
- Scaffolded questioning techniques to promote problem-solving.
- Peer evaluation and correction to develop self-monitoring.
- Motivational reinforcement to support effort-based learning.

While these reflect the *potential* for autonomy development, they need to be systematized and embedded into daily practice. Most notably, teachers were not seen teaching learning strategies or involving students in reflective learning, which are central to autonomy development.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study reveal that while the teacher participants possess a *basic conceptual awareness* of learner autonomy (LA), the practical application of this understanding within classroom settings remains limited and largely ineffective. Despite occasional use of autonomy-supportive practices such as offering choices, scaffolding, or peer correction, the dominant pedagogical approach remains teacher-centered, exam-oriented, and reliant on rote learning.

A significant disconnect between teachers' stated beliefs and actual classroom practices was observed. Although some teachers claimed to support learner independence, their actions often failed to nurture true

autonomy. Learners were rarely engaged in reflective discussions, goal-setting, or strategic planning related to their learning. Instead, the focus remained on covering textbook content and preparing students for national examinations.

Several factors contributed to this dissonance:

- Teachers' perceptions of learner incapability discouraged them from involving students in decision-making.
- Minimal awareness of language learning strategies and how to teach them left students dependent on the teacher.
- Time constraints, large class sizes, administrative pressure, and lack of institutional support hindered individualized instruction.
- Many teachers were demotivated by structural challenges, including workload, lack of recognition, and inadequate training.

In some cases, teachers feared that promoting autonomy would undermine classroom discipline or challenge cultural norms that prioritize teacher authority. Furthermore, autonomy-supportive strategies were often reduced to encouraging better *recall*, rather than fostering *independent thinking*. As such, even when autonomy-oriented behaviors occurred, they did not lead to the kind of learner independence envisioned by the LA framework.

The research also confirms that teachers operate within systemic limitations, where success is measured primarily by students' performance in standardized exams. In such an environment, innovation in teaching is discouraged, and teacher effectiveness is narrowly defined by exam results.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to better

support the development of learner autonomy in the local ESL context:

Integrate Learner Autonomy into Teacher Training Programs

- Teacher training must go beyond content delivery and include practical modules on fostering learner autonomy.
- Specific focus should be placed on how to teach learning strategies, facilitate goal setting, promote self-assessment, and integrate reflective practices in ESL classrooms.
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should be offered through workshops, peer-sharing sessions, and mentorship.

Reorient Educational Priorities

- Educational stakeholders, including school administrators and curriculum designers, must shift the focus from exam preparation to holistic language acquisition.
- Assessment methods should value communication skills, critical thinking, and independent learning, not just memorized knowledge.
- Student-led peer feedback forms or choice boards as methods of evaluations and appreciation must be encouraged.

Create Autonomy-Conducive Classroom Environments

- Encourage flexible classroom arrangements (e.g., U-shape, group clusters) that support interaction and collaboration.
- Reduce class sizes where possible to allow for more individualized attention.

Foster a Culture of Shared Responsibility

- Promote a balanced teacher-student relationship, where teachers act as facilitators and learners take ownership of their learning.
- Develop classroom practices that include student input in lesson planning, activity choices, and learning goals.

Raise Awareness Among Stakeholders

- Educate parents and school authorities on the benefits of autonomous learning, emphasizing that student noise or group activity is not a sign of disorder but of engagement.
- School leaders must recognize that language learning is not linear and cannot be fully measured through test performance alone.

Promote Student Training in Learning Strategies

- Provide explicit instruction to students on how to learn effectively—e.g., through goal setting, using dictionaries, keeping learning journals, and planning revision schedules.
- Create student-led learning activities, such as peer teaching or project-based tasks, to build confidence and engagement.

For learner autonomy to thrive, it must be seen not as a threat to teacher authority, but as a collaborative process in which both teacher and learner evolve. Teachers must first experience autonomy in their own professional practice through institutional trust, support, and empowerment—before they can effectively foster it in their students.

Ultimately, language education in Sri Lanka must transition from a narrow, test-focused framework to a learner-centered paradigm, where autonomy, reflection, and strategic thinking are central. Only then can both teachers and learners unlock their full potential in the ESL classroom.

7. References

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