EFL Pre-service Teacher Development for Autonomy: Rethinking Future Autonomy Supportive Teacher

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Abstract. As learner autonomy has increasingly been recognized in language teaching-learning as an ideal educational goal, the existing scholarship on the topic has been focused on teachers and students. Rarely do scholars look at how pre-service teachers, as the future generation of teachers, value autonomy and therefore prepare them to become autonomy-supportive teachers. Against this tendency, this paper argues for the importance of pedagogical investment and initiatives to help pre-service teachers to play an influential role in the establishment of an autonomy-supportive learning environment. It revisits the underpinning theory, concepts, history, and seminal works on LA and TA construct, autonomy-supportive pedagogy, and pre-service teacher education initiatives for learner and teacher autonomy. The discussion has provided the rationales why pre-service teachers should be prepared to be teachers having sound TA and supporting to LA, the characteristics of autonomy supportive pedagogy, and some initiatives for learner and teacher autonomy including the principles, instruments, model of intervention, and the grounding theory. Finally, this paper offers a praxeological contribution to the development of EFL practices oriented to democratic and life-long learning in education. This elaboration might bring some insight for teacher educators and curriculum developers to consider and integrate the value of TA and LA in pre-service teacher education and for autonomy researchers to explore, conceptualize, and design some initiatives for TA and LA workable for pre-service teachers.

Keywords: EFL pre-service teacher · Learner autonomy · Pre-service teacher education · Teacher autonomy

1 Introduction

The advance of technology to mediate teaching-learning and the practical reflection on teaching-learning during an emergency such as the pandemic Covid-19 and natural disasters have emboldened the urgency for learner autonomy (LA) to establish sustainable quality education. The burgeoning literature on the nested field has empirically confirmed LA’s positive impacts on education, particularly in the English language teaching milieu.
In addition to its vantage points in students’ language development (e.g., [1, 2]), LA also benefits students’ development at the micro and macro level of education. In this respect, students’ capacity to take charge of their learning and be more self-directed, socially responsible, and critically aware in their community is advocated [3]. In the Indonesian context, the concept of LA has also gained more attention among scholars (e.g., see [4–8]). The government also disclosed its support for LA at the conceptual level and the LA endorsement in the classroom context [9]. The Indonesian government explicates the importance of LA as one of the six ingrained student profiles of the gold generation of Indonesia [10]. Even though in discussions of language education, the growth of autonomy is recognized as a key educational goal, it is scarcely a reality in many schools [11]. Manzano-Vázquez argues that autonomy articles have tended to focus on teaching and learning rather than teacher education, and more research-based accounts of methods for teacher education for autonomy are still needed. Moreover, it is evident that teacher support is a major determinant of Indonesian students’ intrinsic enjoyment, challenge, and excitement in studying, resulting in a high level of students’ autonomous motivation [8]. It, therefore, rationalizes the fundamental need to search for any possible and practical endeavour to foster LA by addressing the growth of teacher education.

A significant volume of literature has been devoted to scrutinizing multifaceted measures advocating LA. Most of them are framed from the perspectives of students or the teachers (e.g., [4–6, 11, 12]). Only a handful of literature, particularly in the Indonesian context, considers pre-service teachers to play a critical role in the arena. Most of the literature accentuates teachers as the central social context contributing to students’ LA development. The existing related literature is limited to the analysis of EFL pre-service teachers’ voices in a teaching practicum to better understand teacher autonomy, agency, and identity [13], their perceptions of teachers’ expectations of autonomy [14], and the impact of an autonomy-supportive intervention on pre-service teacher instruction [15]. The lack or absence of discussion on pre-service teachers’ role in contributing to the LA growth indicates a lack in the understanding of teachers’ development. Basri [16] asserts that the constructs of LA, teacher support, and teacher autonomy (TA) have a dynamic interaction, implying that they should be considered collectively rather than separately. Basri found that one of the antecedents hindering the application of autonomy construct in the classroom is the limited TA. In that very same, faculty who were autonomously motivated (better TA) were more autonomy-supportive [17].

However, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to have good autonomy (TA) and provide an autonomy-supportive learning environment without preparing them to do so. It is also groundless to expect teachers to understand LA and be skilled in supporting LA without initial education or LA-based learning experiences. In other words, prioritizing pre-service teachers is a capital investment for better future teachers’ development that every educator, teacher, and related educational stakeholder should jointly consider. On the same note, grounded in the Indonesian context, [4] emphasizes the importance of promoting understanding of the benefits of learner autonomy as well as an effective autonomy-based teacher education for the Indonesian environment. This current empirical conclusion warrants this discussion.

Given the shared understanding of the query to prepare pre-service teachers to understand and be knowledgeable about how to be autonomy-supportive, this article attempts
to revisit the underlying theory, concepts, history, and seminal works on learner and teachers’ autonomy, autonomy supportive pedagogy, and pre-service teacher education initiatives for learner and teacher autonomy.

2 Learner and Teacher Autonomy

The recognition of LA is not divorced from the role of teacher autonomy (TA) as one of the contributing factors to LA construction. The development of LA is argued to depend on the development of TA [18–22]. In many studies, the connection of those two constructs is more on an interdependence relationship that is likely impossible to expect one without another. To be more autonomous, students need teachers’ mediation or scaffolding [23]. Similarly, to be more autonomous, teachers necessitate prior experiences of being autonomous learners or being exposed to autonomy-supportive pedagogy. Practically, in the language classroom, teachers are supposed to exercise their skill sets to design and control a set of potential language discourses necessary by the autonomous classroom to enrich attempts in their pedagogical instructions. It is also premised on the idea that teachers should be able to possess TA as active learners in hopes of helping their students become effective individuals [21, 24]. Thus, we argue that pre-service teachers need to experience autonomy-supportive instruction to have better LA. They need to have better TA to deliver autonomy-supportive instruction in their future careers as in-service teachers.

The history of autonomy in language teaching has been intensively discussed by scholars [25–27]. In summary, it started with the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project, culminating in the publication of Holec’s critical study [28], which defined autonomy as the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (p. 3). Its postulation was inspired by humanistic expectations sparked by political unrest and ‘counter-cultures’ in late-1960s Europe [25, 28]. Self-directed learning has been the focus of practical applications, which resulted in the creation of self-access centres and learner training as primary programs. The value of autonomy was connected with a fundamental reorganization of language pedagogy that included rejecting the traditional classroom and adopting new modes of working [29]. To put this in context, many of the early experiments were created for adults who did not have the time, motivation, or opportunity to attend classroom-based courses.

Little [2, 21] contends that the LA concept has developed over time, from being heavily attributed to self-access learning (self-instruction) systems reflecting the significance of learners doing things on their own to the prevailing standpoint noticing LA as the premise of learners doing things not by but for themselves. This transformation indicates that students in LA are no longer the sole individuals determining all aspects of their learning. Other social factors, particularly teachers, have the potential to contribute to the process. LA is viewed as a product of power-sharing and dialogic interaction between learners and teachers rather than merely a learner’s competence. This is consistent with the psychological aspect of universal human needs what is so-called Self-determination Theory [30], which places the need for autonomy among the other two basic needs of relatedness and competence. Autonomy goes in tandem with the need for the social dimension of relatedness. In this regard, [18] defines LA as the “capacity”
of students to “control” their own learning. The term ‘capacity’ refers to a person’s ability to accomplish something or their potential to achieve something, and it is made up of three interrelated elements: ability, desire, and freedom. The ability to make choices, decisions, and actions in three dimensions: learning management, cognitive process, and learning content, is referred to as “control.”

Likewise, TA has also been a prominent focus in applied linguistics for language learning and teaching since the 1970s [31]. Its definition includes a manifold of interpretations. First, it consists of a definition of professional autonomy, which means that teachers have the ability to direct and limit their professional activities [32]. Second, it has been referred to in the literature as teacher-learner autonomy [33], which implies that teachers have the ability to govern their professional growth or learning on how to teach effectively [34]. The last strand sees TA as a linked part of LA that aims to develop instructors and students at the same time in order to create a more democratic education [3, 19]. Therefore, to develop LA, pre-service teachers need to be prepared to possess TA as the capacity and freedom to control their professional activities to support students’ LA and build their capacity both as learners and teachers. With a better TA, teachers have better autonomy support to students’ LA development [17].

3 Autonomy Supportive Pedagogy

Autonomy support is connected to the teacher’s interpersonal behaviours, such as providing options, encouraging students to take the initiative, and minimizing teacher pressure in pedagogical practices in order to nourish and foster students’ internal motivation [35]. Further, [36] asserts that an autonomy-supportive pedagogy will enable students to work based on their relevance, interests, and intrinsic motivation while also providing the necessary mediation to encourage efficacy. As a result, this viewpoint is consistent with the social constructivist and psychological views on LA. Similarly, [38, p. 56] postulate seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviours (ASIB) “1) taking the students’ perspective, 2) inviting students to pursue their interests, 3) presenting learning activities in need-satisfying ways, 4) providing explanatory rationales, 5) acknowledging negative feelings, 6) relying on invitational language, and 7) and displaying patience”. Another idea sees autonomy-supportive pedagogy as how teachers build dialogic pedagogy in the classroom atmosphere. Alexander [38] specifies six principles of dialogic pedagogy advocating LA: collective, supportive, reciprocal, deliberative, cumulative, and purposeful. From a similar perspective, [39] recommends some pedagogical strategies supporting LA: 1) Empowering students to participate in learning preparation, 2) Connecting to real-life (out-of-class) experiences, and 3) Using real-world materials and language, 4) Promoting autonomous inquiry (allowing students to investigate on their own), 5) Engaging students in the task design process, 6) Promoting student-student interaction, 7) Promoting peer teaching 8) Encouraging divergent learning outcomes and being open to them. 9) Promoting self-and peer evaluations and 10) encouraging reflective practices.
4 Pre-service Teacher Education Initiatives for Learner and Teacher Autonomy

The promotion of quality teacher support to particular educational agenda, such as establishing LA, requires quality teacher education. Teacher education does not suffice solely without concern for pre-service education. [22] argues that pre-service teachers are at a vital juncture in their development to be full-fledged teachers as they confront the prospects for positive change. In pre-service education, the core task is usually designed to develop their ability to learn how to teach [40]. Additionally, [41] found that pre-service teachers should not be only regarded as a sole entity in acquiring essential skills in learning to be a teacher but also as an agent who needs to take reflexive actions for making decisions for and about their teaching. Previous research has shown that one of the main reasons for teacher-centred instruction (less autonomy) is a dearth of teachers’ participation in teacher education programs.

The teacher educators, in this case, play a crucial role in assisting pre-service development in the teacher training process. Teacher educators should exercise their capacity to be as selective and sensitive as possible in seeing their pre-service teachers’ expectations. This is to aid pre-service teachers in becoming autonomous by creating more relevant, engaging, carefully chosen, and meaningful tasks, activities, and assignments [14].

Given the importance of both LA and TA, we argue that teacher education, such as professional development programs in which the teacher educators should be willing to engage, plays a vital role [24]. The programs should be designed to provide (pre-service) teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to encourage LA in the classroom [18, 42, 43].

Thus, it is pointless to expect (pre-service) teachers to play a central role in promoting LA in their classrooms if they have not received any prior training in this area [11]. Regarding this, supporting (pre-service) teachers’ development to provide autonomy-supportive instructions encompasses multidimensional aspects of both cognitive and behavioural changes [11]. Cognitively, (pre-service) teachers should be prepared to exercise positive beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes towards LA development. This explanation appeared to be the reason for a plethora of empirical studies scrutinizing teachers’ or students’ various LA cognitive aspects (e.g., [4–6]). Additionally, the intervention also should orient to support teachers’ behavioural changes, such as strategies or techniques supporting LA in the pedagogical practices.

There have been ample scientific works reporting the educational initiative to foster (pre-service) teachers’ capacity to deliver autonomy-supportive instructions. [11] reviewing work on teacher education for autonomy published over the past 25 years (1990–2015), highlights 20 initiatives implemented across educational levels and contextual settings. These initiatives cover workshops, group discussion, peer teaching, action research projects, exchange experiences, self-assessment, seminars/lectures, plenary sessions, reflective tools, etc. Although they were greatly distinctive in their mode of operation, they share common norms in which their workability lies within the principles of reflective practices and pedagogical inquiries. They encourage using instruments including questionnaires, diaries, portfolios, logs, journals, and cases for reflection on the teaching-learning process. These tools help (pre-service) teachers keep aware of
their own learning processes, reflect on their professional development as teachers, and constantly discover new connections in their teaching practice. The projects are also supported by a constructivist educational paradigm, which views participants as knowledge producers. They are predicated on the idea that professional knowledge is generated subjectively by the (pre-service) teachers through critical reflection and inquiry into their own classroom practice. Another feature of these efforts is that they emphasize personal theory development, self-regulation, self-direction, and teamwork as prerequisites for success.

[44] searched for a more personal initiative that every (pre-service) teacher can do to escalate their capacity to deliver autonomy-supportive instructions. From the think-aloud protocol and focus group discussions, they found that reading empirical articles could positively impact their TA development. Additionally, [45] emphasizes the value of case analysis and case construction in the development of TA, underscoring the interconnectedness of research and teaching, theory and practice, and case analysis and continuous assistance. Furthermore, experience-based teacher education may encourage (pre-service) teachers to challenge mainstream practices and investigate learner-centred teaching. It indicates the power of teacher education as the heart of quality education with the perpetual refinement from a series of reflective practices and self-inquiry initiatives from time to time. The concern to create a better teaching-learning environment with the deployment of innovative techniques, strategies, curriculum, and technology as learning mediating tools should go in congruence with nurturing sustainable teacher education.

Theoretically, after reviewing 51 autonomy supportive-based studies, [37] sum up that most scholars have employed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to construct teacher-focused professional growth interventions. They typically enact three aspects of the standard model intervention: 1) information-based, 2) skill-based, and 3) group discussion and personal reflection. [33] suggest that in instances that are stripped away from real-world classroom settings, it may be more pertinent for teacher educators to focus on developing a broad sense of willingness and capacity for self-directed teaching and learning. The endeavour should be linked to initiation into pedagogy for autonomy, while acknowledging and, to the greatest extent, preparing (pre-service) teachers to address the barriers that may function in practice in the development of their LA and TA.

Those curated empirical findings indicate that initiatives toward TA development to provide autonomy supports in the classroom instructions can be in the form of either collective endeavour or individual commitment, either institutional or personal measures. Even though the nature of above-mentioned studies was addressed more to in-service teachers, the insight and implications are likely workable for pre-service teachers. The lack of scholarly articles focusing on pre-service teachers, therefore, calls for related empirical investigation.

5 Conclusion and Implications

This article highlights the fundamental role of pre-service teachers’ education for autonomy. As the autonomy construction is shaped within an ecological context, we argue that
the support for teacher development supporting to autonomy should be started earlier in the pre-service teacher education. Even though the preceding scholarly conversation has provided ample space for autonomy in language learning, its conversation on pre-service development is underreported. This article aimed to contribute to the body of literature by revisiting the underpinning theory, concepts, history, and seminal works on LA and TA construct, autonomy-supportive pedagogy, and pre-service teacher education initiatives for learner and teacher autonomy.

The discussion has provided the rationales why pre-service teachers should be prepared to be full-fledged teachers having sound TA and supporting to LA, the characteristics of autonomy supportive pedagogy, and some initiatives for learner and teacher autonomy including the principles, instruments, model of intervention, and the grounding theory. This elaboration might bring some insight for teacher educators and curriculum developers to consider and integrate the value of TA and LA in pre-service teacher education. Further, this article calls for empirical investigation to explore, conceptualize, and design some initiatives for TA and LA workable for pre-service teachers.

References


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