

*Challenges Faced by English Teachers in Promoting Learner Autonomy Insights from
Secondary Schools in Lahore*

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges of English teachers in facilitating learner autonomy in the secondary schools of Lahore, Pakistan. Learner autonomy-the ability of learners to become responsible for their learning-is understood by many and has been acknowledged particularly as being essentially important in language learning. The traditional teacher-centered approach of Pakistani classrooms restricts skill development. This study aims at understanding specific barriers for teachers and provides recommendations on overcoming the barriers. Qualitative methodology was applied; semi -structured interviews were taken from 30 teachers of English in public and private secondary schools in Lahore. Institutional barriers, professional development, cultural resistance to autonomy, resource barriers, and teacher attitudes were established as follows. Recommendations were made regarding curriculum reforms, focused professional development opportunities, reducing classroom sizes, improvements in resource allocation, and transformation in attitudes and culture toward independent learning. It is against this background that this research posits the importance of systemic change to the education system of Pakistan in order to ensure learner autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, English language teaching, Teacher-centered approach, Secondary education, Professional development

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Introduction

Learner autonomy is an educational concept which has gained currency steadily, especially in language learning. It focuses on self-direction, through student empowerment, taking responsibility for one's own learning, and actively taking part in decisions regarding the learning process, as well as establishing skills and competencies in learning independence (Holec, 1981). Learner autonomy is defined most simply as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," meaning learners must have knowledge of their learning goals and the capacity to manage the learning strategies and resources necessary to attain these goals (Little, 2007). Learner autonomy is highly emphasized in the learning of the English language since through student involvement and autonomy, they can better learn the new language (Benson, 2011).

The conventional, teacher-centered approach-the predominant learning process of decades in Pakistani classrooms -pushes the teacher to the heart of the learning process while leaving the students nothing but passive recipients of knowledge (Yasmeen & Sohail, 2018). It not only confines the horizon of students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities but does not make them independent learners either. This is more of a critical concern in the case of secondary schools in Lahore, where the language teachers are caught between compliance with an inflexible curriculum and test system and the necessity to develop autonomous learning ability in the students. In such contexts, the promotion of learner autonomy is a tricky and complicated matter, where the teacher has to deal with institutional, cultural restrictions and his readiness to take on practices that promote autonomy.

The rationale for this research study will be in the light of the fact that the traditional, teacher-centered approaches mainstreamed in Pakistani schools have not well prepared students to deal with the challenges of higher learning institutions and the demands of the new world of work that require independent learning and critical thinking (Bashir, 2011). In many parts of the world today, new education reforms take a bent towards more learner-centered approaches that focus on developing independent learners (Little, 2009). However, in Pakistan, especially in Lahore, these reforms have not sprouted yet. Even the whole concept of learner autonomy has yet to take root in the system, especially the public schools (Yasmeen & Sohail, 2018). Therefore, this paper discusses the challenge of implementing learner autonomy among the senior secondary schools' English teachers while trying to foster learner autonomy in a very teacher-directed and exam-oriented context in Lahore.

Starting with an overview of issues encountered in the promotion of autonomy among learners in secondary schools in Lahore, structural constraints of the education system and socio-cultural expectations both on teachers and learners are quite prevailing. In fact, one of the challenges is that class sizes in public schools are large, which hinders the ability of the teachers to give time and attention individually to the students. Pakistan's curriculum and examination system do not permit the development of critical thinking skills and autonomy in learning because there is a very strong emphasis on rote memorization and quite a good amount of content coverage (Yasmeen & Sohail, 2018). Additionally, a considerable number of secondary school teachers in English are not adequately trained with the professional development in autonomy-supportive teaching methods, thereby dissuading their use with autonomy support strategies within their

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classes.

Among the cultural issues affecting teaching and learning in Lahore are autonomy of the learner. Students often await teachers for the source of all knowledge and instructions. Students wait to be instructed and guided by teachers, so lack of confidence or motivation to take responsibility for one's own learning. In fact, teachers are also handicapped by social expectation and parental pressure, which place a prize on passing exams over developing independent learning capability (Yasmeen & Sohail, 2018). In addition, most of the schools lack up to date teaching tools and ample technological resources that would prove useful in developing learners into independent learners themselves.

This research intends to uncover the particular challenges facing the English teachers at Lahore to implement learner autonomy and, accordingly, how they work through such challenges. It is in the context of the experience of secondary school teachers that this research will fill up some of the gaps toward understanding contextual barriers that prohibit the promotion of learner autonomy in Pakistan's educational setup. The findings of this study will advance the existing body of knowledge on learner autonomy and teacher roles in language learning by providing recommendations to policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators about how best to support teachers in fostering classroom autonomy.

Traditionally, in educational research, learner autonomy has been well established, but the context of Pakistan is worth investigating as it is seen that there is less research done on learner autonomy as traditional models of education remain dominant in Pakistan, relying much on teacher-centered teaching models. This research, in particular, is important as it points toward the urgent need for reforms in education regarding student autonomy and critical thinking approaches, other than the global trends of language teaching across the globe (Benson, 2011). This research study attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering practical solutions to improve teaching practices among the secondary schools of Lahore by addressing the challenges English teachers face in promoting learner autonomy. In doing so, it also contributes towards a broader discourse regarding reforming education in Pakistan because successful future academics and professionals depend on developing autonomous learners.

Literature Review

Learner autonomy had been one of the most widely discussed topics during the last decades in the field of language education. It describes the capacity of learners to take responsibility for their own learning process, direct their aims for learning, and make choices regarding the strategies used and the resources exploited (Holec, 1981). Since inception, learner autonomy has grown into a multiple-framework concept of pedagogy and learner-centered strategies. This literature review bases its arguments on the theoretical underpinning, teachers' role, learning strategy, and challenges related to learner autonomy in promoting learner autonomy, especially in the context of secondary school English language teaching.

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Theoretical Foundations of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy draws basically from constructivist learning theories, which argue that learners are able to construct knowledge actively through experience and interaction with the immediate world (Little, 2007). Vygotsky's social development theory helps describe learner autonomy by holding that inherent to any knowledge appears through social interaction. Vygotsky deems that through learning, a better level of understanding and cognitive development is achieved through collaborative learning with a "more knowledgeable other." This is in the context of autonomy because the educator helps the learner learn independently so that one can take control of the process of learning.

Later, several scholars have developed the concept of autonomy. The notable one is Little (1991), which defined that "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action," which emphasizes that the self-regulation and being in control of one's learning is the ability of a learner. On the other hand, Benson (2007) further asserts that autonomy refers to learners' capacity and willingness to take control of their decisions toward learning. This understanding has pointed out a dual dimension of both cognitive and affective in learning, for autonomy is not only the capacity to take decisions but also have the will and confidence to exercise that capacity (Benson, 2011).

Role of Teachers in Promoting Learner Autonomy

The role of the teacher in creating learner autonomy has remained a topic of broad discussion in the literature, whereas various studies have pointed to the shift from teacher-centered approaches to the learner-centered approach (Littlewood, 1996). Traditional teacher-centered classrooms also imply that the teacher is more or less a source of knowledge, where students are passive receivers of information. However, in the learning-centered classrooms, the facilitation role overrides the teacher's responsibility due to the fact that he or she will facilitate their action of taking control of their own learning. These roles call for teachers to incorporate new pedagogical skills to foster critical thinking, self-assessment, and decision-making skills in learners (Benson, 2011).

Riley points out that among the many roles of the teacher in encouraging learner autonomy, there are a facilitator, counselor, and resource person. In this regards, a facilitator is a teacher who presents a favorable learning environment that enables students to take responsibility for their own learning by offering them chances to engage in independent tasks and determining how best they will pursue their learning strategies (Yan, 2012). As counselors, teachers guide learners in their process of learning while providing them with feedback to help them question and reflect on how they learn. Teachers are resource persons because they equip students with information and also because students gain from the existing knowledge to open their eyes to instruments that will make them self-reliant learners (Benson & Voller, 1997).

However, changes from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction also create sets of challenges. Usually, such institutional factors as large classes, constriction of resources, strict curricula, often limit their ability to help foster autonomy in the classrooms (Yasmeen & Sohail, 2018). Moreover, many teachers are not trained to teach with autonomy-supportive practices,

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and thus they are in no position to apply strategies which help to make students adopt more autonomous learning.

Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

The learning strategies, which learners use are thus the core of the process of developing learner autonomy because they allow students to take responsibility over their learning process and make informed decisions about how they should go about their studies. O'Malley and Chamot further subdivide them into three types: cognitive, metacognitive, and social-interactive strategies. This also ranges from cognitive strategies such as analyzing and synthesizing information, to metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and regulating their learning, to socio-interactive strategies that involve collaboration and consideration of socio-cultural factors.

Metacognitive strategies, in this regard, appear to be important for enhancing learner autonomy. As Benson argues, they enable learners to control their learning by setting goals, choosing the appropriate strategy, and reflecting on how they have proceeded (Benson, 2001). According to Wenden, autonomous learners are ones who can monitor their learning and continuously evaluate, in terms of effectiveness, the various strategies applied in the learning process and make changes accordingly (Wenden, 1998). It is because this skill of self-regulating is one of the essential qualities of autonomous learners because autonomous learners are able to take control of the learning process and independently make choices pertaining to needs and preferences (Littlewood, 1996).

Inquiry-based learning is also another strategy where learners have proved to foster autonomy. This encourages learners to actively involve themselves in the learning process by means of questions, investigation in problems, or building knowledge through exploration and discovery (Duschl & Grandy, 2008). Learners become capable and responsible for their learning in the inquiry-based processes of learning which promote critical thinking (Jonassen, 1991).

Challenges in Promoting Learner Autonomy in English Language Classrooms

Although helping learners enjoy learner autonomy has many benefits for learners, some impediments await English teachers in the practice of the cultures in secondary schools in Pakistan to overcome them. The strongest among them is the teacher-centered approach dominant in educational policy, where students are socially conditioned toward their teachers for knowledge and guidance as well. This dependence on the teacher may make it difficult for learners to assume full responsibility for their own learning as they may not be confident or motivated enough to do so, according to Yasmeen & Sohail (2018).

Institutional constraints also pose vast barriers to learner autonomy. Large class sizes and poor resources prevail in many public schools, which serve as barriers to individualized teacher support or attention to students, an important function of developing learner autonomy. Moreover, the extremely rigid curriculum and examination system in Pakistan overemphasizes content coverage and rote memorization, with little space to develop critical thinking or independent learning skills (Yasmeen & Sohail, 2018). The pressure of standardized exams to

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prepare students again forces teachers to teach for content far from teaching for autonomous learning.

Most English teachers are not adequately prepared to promote learner autonomy. Professional development regarding the use of autonomy-supportive teaching approaches is often quite scarce, and the teachers themselves are not only unfamiliar with the meaning of learner autonomy but also how to use it in the classroom. This can make the teachers feel that they cannot prepare for autonomy or develop their students as autonomous learners in a conventional educational framework.

This literature, however, sets a condition where learner autonomy is found to encourage independent learning in promoting better students' outcomes in the language classrooms of English. Yet, promoting learner autonomy demands a shift from teacher-centric to learner-centric practices. This shift poses many challenges for the English teachers vis-à-vis the socio-cultural contexts of Pakistan. The reasons are institutional constraints, inability for professional development, and socio-cultural factors which resist the skills of students for their independent learning. Despite the challenges, inquiry-based learning and metacognitive strategies have tremendous promise in supporting learner autonomy. Barriers to implementing learner autonomy will be overcome with systemic change in teacher preparation, curriculum design, and assessment procedures that enable the effective provision of professional support for the teacher and the student as they learn to work at the skills base of autonomous learning.

Methodology

This section describes the methodology of research that this study adopted in order to address the problem by exploring the challenges of learner autonomy faced by English teachers in secondary schools in Lahore. The methodology includes the choice of research approach, and research paradigm, research design, population, sample size, sampling techniques, data collection tools, validation of tools, data collection method, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

The study used a qualitative research approach to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the teachers. This is because the qualitative approach suits well the investigation of experiences, perceptions, and meanings of participants toward a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). This approach allows for the generation of vast amounts of rich, detailed data that offer the essentials of very specific challenges faced by English teachers in learner autonomy promotion.

The paradigm of research that will inform this paper is an interpretivism. For such an approach, reality is socially constructed and people perceive meanings from their experiences and interaction (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Such a paradigm suits well the objective of this study, which targets understanding how English teachers experience and conceptualize matters regarding promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms. The interpretivist paradigm allows for the acknowledgment of the complexity of human behavior and its exploration within terms of how teachers interpret and navigate the problems of practice.

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The research design of this study was descriptive qualitative in nature. A descriptive design was selected in preference because it allows researchers to delve deeper into an issue within its natural context without manipulating variables (Sandelowski, 2000). Essentially, the goal of this design was to descriptively outline the experiences and perceptions that the teachers have about learner autonomy and, therefore, the challenges they face while promoting it. A qualitative descriptive design will, therefore, enable the researcher to allow a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the issue at hand. This study has included the population of English language teachers from secondary schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The secondary education period is an important time in a learner's life. In fact, English being a compulsory subject needs to be taught by its teachers, and the dynamic autonomy in teaching is considered a significant factor during this time. Teachers from public and private schools of Lahore were targeted for this study to have a better perspective of the challenges that they face.

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique to conduct the research. Purposive sampling is most done in qualitative research where people are chosen based on who might provide the richest, most relevant information concerning the research questions in particular (Patton, 2002). The sample size adopted for this study was 30 English teachers from different secondary schools in Lahore. Participants were selected and approached to take part in the study according to their experience as a teacher, experience with learner autonomy, and willingness to take part in the study. This number of participants was relatively sufficient to attain data saturation, whereby no new information or themes any more emerge from further data collection (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The principal tool for data gathering was a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews have been favored since they permit flexibility in the possibility of discussions on diverse topics without losing sight of the research questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The interview guide contained mostly open-ended questions for the purpose of gaining an insight into how the teachers view learner autonomy, the ways in which they try to encourage it, and the problems they face. These questions were set in the context of a literature review and drawn up in relation to the particular context of teaching English in Pakistani secondary schools.

Validation of Tools

To warrant the validity and reliability of the interview guide, content validation was carried out. A draft of the interview questions was conducted in a review by two experts working in the field of education, with knowledge on learner autonomy and ELT. Experts made some suggestions on clarity and relevance. In addition, a pilot study was conducted using two English teachers to test the interview guide. The pilot study helped clear out ambiguities and potential problems in the questions to be asked during interviews. Minor adjustments were made based on the pilot participants' responses to ensure that the final tool was effective in capturing the intended data.

Data Collection Method

Interviews were a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews held with selected participants. The total duration of the interview took about two months. Depending on the availability and preference of participants, interviews were held either in person or through online platforms,

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such as Zoom. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The participants gave their consent so that their interviews could be audio-recorded and be adequate in transcription and analysis. Field notes were recorded during the interviews to note the non-verbal cues and further observations. The participants were interviewed in English, though sometimes words in Urdu were used when the participants lacked proper words for specific concepts.

The thematic analysis was used for the interpretation of widely applied data in discovering, coding, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen because it accepts flexibility in the aspect of data analysis. This enabled the broad understanding of experiences of participants. The process of the analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis.

The researcher first transcribed the audio recordings verbatim and then read the transcripts several times, carefully getting familiar with the data. The data were coded systematically during this process; focus was on meaningful segments related to the challenges that teachers had to face in promoting learner autonomy. Codes were regrouped under broader themes and headings designed to capture the key ideas and patterns emerging from the data. The themes were finalized and improved to capture what the data was representing and how much it gave response to the research questions. After finalizing, the themes were defined and named to provide a clear representation of the findings of the research. Finally, the report was prepared by presenting the findings in a coherent narrative connecting the themes to the research questions and relevant literature.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were included in the research process, and several measures were taken to maintain the integrity of the study based on sound ethical principles. All respondents were well informed regarding the purpose of the study, their role, and the fact that it was voluntary, and consent was sought in written form prior to conducting the interviews. All the transcripts and the final report were kept under pseudonyms to keep the participants' privacy intact. Further, data was collected and stored securely and thus was kept solely within the researcher's access. Participants were further informed of the right to withdraw the consent for participating in the research at any point without any pressure and further against future consequences. The final report, therefore, ensured anonymity because the identifying information that was carried out from participants made it impossible to trace data regarding any participant.

Results

This paper presents the study's findings based on data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 teachers of English language in secondary schools of Lahore. The results are presented thematically in order to address the major challenges which the teachers face while promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms. Every theme is supported by a direct quotation of the participants illustrating the experience and perspective. The findings articulated the management of the promotion of learner autonomy in the context of secondary education in Pakistan, which happens to be both institutional and individual-based.

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Theme 1: Institutional Constraints Hindering Learner Autonomy

Amongst the most important challenges identified by the respondents, one is the inhibiting capacity of the very institutions within which they carry out their work. Therefore, they have to severely leash themselves in learner autonomy approach. The elaboration by teachers states that a rigid curriculum, large classes and exam-oriented education system severely restraints their capacity for implementing a learner-centered model in the classroom. Those factors formed the environment where rote learning is given importance over critical thinking and independent learning, challenging a teacher to bring about autonomy in learners.

Several respondents noted that rigid curricula are a major obstacle. The inbuilt rigidity of syllabuses and timetables leaves next to no latitude for creative teaching and little latitude for activity that stimulates the learner to take over control of the learning process. As one teacher remarked:

"The curriculum is so packed, and we are expected to cover everything within a limited time. There is no flexibility. How can we promote autonomy when we are just rushing to complete the syllabus?"
(Participant 4)

Another major limitation in the development of learner autonomy support was a large class size, where teachers often complained about not being able to provide individualized attention to students, one of the basic conditions facilitating independent learning, according to one participant:

"In a class of 50 to 60 students, it's impossible to give individual attention. I cannot focus on every student's progress or allow them to take ownership of their learning because there simply isn't enough time or resources." (Participant 12)

Among these, the biggest reasons for not enhancing independence were cited as emanating from the exam-oriented system of Pakistani secondary schools. The whole purpose of education under this system is to get a student ready for standardized exams; it encourages rote learning and the mantra of "rote-training" of students; that is, students are trained to memorize rather than to learn more profoundly, reflectively, and critically. Thus:

"Our education system is all about exams. Students don't care about learning skills; they just want to pass the exam. There is no room for autonomy when everything is about getting good grades."
(Participant 9)

Theme 2: Lack of Professional Development and Training

Another difficult factor reported to exist by the participants is the lack of good professional development that deals with learner autonomy. Many teachers confessed to not having been adequately prepared to deal with autonomy-supportive teaching and lacked an idea of how they might better support the autonomy of their learners. The inadequacy in preparation can be partly blamed for the shambolic confidence in the adoption of autonomous learning-friendly strategies.

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Some of the respondents felt that professional development programs regarding learner autonomy are still in need of being done. One respondent noted:

"We have never been trained on how to promote autonomy. Most of us were trained in traditional methods, so we just stick to what we know. If there were workshops or training sessions on autonomy, I think more teachers would try to implement it." (Participant 17)

A good professional development has lacked, for instance, teachers with sufficient change towards transitioning from teacher-centered practice to learner-centered ones. Such a skill gap leads to teachers being unable to implement learning environments through which students empower themselves to take charge of their learning.

Theme 3: Student Dependency on Teachers

Another critical challenge that participants showed is that of dependency among students towards the teacher in terms of how to facilitate learner autonomy. Most of the students are used to looking and following their guidance and instructions at the same time; therefore, it creates a passive learning setup. This is deeply ingrained with the traditional teacher-centered model of education where the teacher is seen as the main source of knowledge.

Several teachers have reported that students rarely have the confidence or motivation to take responsibility of their own learning. For example, one teacher explained: "It's hard enough making the students take more independence on the self to do anything as simple as read for themselves.

"Students here expect the teacher to do everything for them. They don't want to think critically or solve problems on their own. It's very difficult to change their mindset and get them to take control of their learning." (Participant 20)

This dependency on teachers is further supported by expectations from society and parents. In most cases, parents expect a teacher to be responsible for their children's learning and make all the necessary adjustments in teaching strategies to ensure students meet set goals. This further discourages student autonomy. As one teacher explained:

"Parents don't understand the concept of autonomy. They want us to teach in the traditional way, where the teacher controls everything. This makes it harder for us to encourage students to be independent learners." (Participant 8)

Theme 4: Resource and Technological Limitations

The lack of access to resources and technology remains another significant challenge as identified by the participants. A number of participants were frustrated with teaching aids, including computers and projectors that could easily facilitate learner autonomy in schools. In schools that have limited means, it becomes very challenging to introduce new methods of teaching because students find it harder to take responsibility for their own learning.

One respondent has said that the lack of resources influences the promotion of autonomy:

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"We don't have access to modern teaching tools. If we had computers or even a reliable internet connection, we could encourage students to explore topics on their own and become more independent. But in these conditions, it's very difficult." (Participant 22)

Moreover, even if the technological resources are available, both teachers and students do not use them effectively because they could not learn about its effective application. Lack of digital literacy also makes more challenging any other bid for autonomy in the classroom.

Theme 5: Cultural Barriers to Learner Autonomy

The participants have also discussed the cultural challenge of promoting learner autonomy in the Pakistani classrooms. Many teachers comment that, for example, the concept of learner autonomy is a relatively recent concept in Pakistan and met with resistance by students and parents. In a respectful authority-oriented culture, students are less likely to take ownership of their learning since the teacher is an authority whom she or he will not want to confront.

One teacher summarized how cultural pressures shape students' desire for independence:

"In our culture, students are not used to questioning the teacher or taking responsibility for their learning. They expect the teacher to guide them every step of the way, and they feel uncomfortable when asked to work independently." (Participant 15)

Teachers also mentioned that parents tend to demand much more in the lines of a traditionally teacher-centric education, which further loads teachers with the burden of performing in light of such expectations rather than helping develop and promote autonomy.

Theme 6: Teachers' Own Beliefs and Attitudes

Finally, the participants clarified for themselves that problems they themselves had faced were in part due to their own beliefs and attitudes toward learner autonomy. Some teachers said they did not really believe in the value of encouraging autonomy, especially in an education system very strongly focused on exams. Others expressed worries about the possibility of promoting autonomy when all the factors outside their control in the classroom seemed to be at the disempowering edge.

One participant said the following about their hesitancy in the matter of learner autonomy promotion:

"I understand the idea of learner autonomy, but in our system, I don't see how it can work. We have so many limitations—exams, large classes, no resources. It's hard to believe that autonomy can be successfully promoted in these conditions." (Participant 25)

However, attitudes raise a serious question about the fact that teachers themselves need to change with the mind-set and more support be required from the educational system for learner autonomy promotion in Pakistani schools.

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Conclusion

This paper undertakes an investigation of problems the English language teacher faces in promoting learner autonomy in secondary schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The research utilized the methodology of in-depth interviews with 30 secondary school teachers to uncover this complex array of barriers hindering effective promotion in a classroom. Critical findings made for the very first time are related to the contribution of institutional, cultural, and individual factors to limited autonomy-supportive practices in schools in Pakistan.

The most important problem identified by the participants was the rigid institutional framework of the educational system of Pakistan. Teachers are tied by a prescriptive curriculum that emphasizes more on content coverage and preparation for exams than on stimulating independent thinking and learning. There is hardly any space left in such an atmosphere for autonomous types of approaches, which, as a necessity, have to be introduced there to forge independence. Large class sizes make it hard for the instructor to pay a personal touch to the learner, which is the cornerstone of learner autonomy. The content-coverage education system supports rote learning and memorization, wherein success, for example, may be described in terms of the ability of the students to reproduce contents in exams, rather than show their comprehension or application skills. Therefore, teachers face the force to implement examination-centered rather than autonomy-based activities for students.

Learner Autonomy and Professional Training The second important finding was the little use of professional development and training that may be useful in enhancing teachers' capabilities to promote learner autonomy. Most of the respondents reported less and no training at all on learner autonomy-promoting skills in their classrooms. Many of the professional development programs to which they are exposed consist of traditional teaching techniques focused on teachers and undermining the base principles of autonomy. Thus, they do not feel prepared for school change into new instructional approaches that inspire students to be independent thinkers without adequate education and preparation. This gap in professional development calls for educational authorities to establish targeted training programs meant to equip teachers with the skills and strategies necessary to establish autonomy in classroom.

Other than institutional barriers, the study had a problem of student dependence on teachers. Many students in Pakistani secondary schools are generally accustomed to receiving guidance and, in the process, little more than a reader's role from the teacher. This is the prerogative of their respective cultures as it were, for the teacher is supposed to be the central figure in most classrooms. Many students have neither the initiative nor the incentive to take responsibility for their own learning and teachers, by and large, do not seem even to hope to change them. Parental expectation also contributes to this dependence, as most parents prefer that education should be delivered in the same traditional, teacher-centered style they themselves had experienced. Some may not be interested in or supportive of learner autonomy. This cultural characteristic is one of the major stumbling blocks for the teachers in their effort to transition into a learner-centered approach.

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The scarcity of resources and low level of technology was another main obstacle indicated in the research report. Modern teaching tools like computers, internet connectivity, and other types of digital systems that can help the students achieve independent learning are inaccessible to many schools, especially public institutions. Even in the case of provision of such technology, the teachers themselves and their students often lack the necessary skills to appropriately use the tools to enhance independent learning. In particular, technology enhances modern students' access to exploration, research, and self-management of learning. On the other hand, inadequate resources exacerbate the lack of implementation of technology in teaching practices and autonomy encouragement for teachers.

Furthermore, some teachers' own beliefs and attitudes about learner autonomy also contributed to the failure. Most of the members were in support of autonomy, but some were in doubt about whether autonomy was possible in the existing education system with all its constraints. For example, in the discussion few contributors put forward that autonomy may not be very feasible, considering the constraints they face, like large classes, time constraint, and pressures to make students exam-ready. These are not only an expression of a professional need but even more, a call for a change in attitude on the part of teachers. To allow real success in promoting autonomy, it needs the belief of teachers in the value and their confidence to execute the autonomy-supportive practice in classrooms.

The finding of this research highlights the complexity of the task involved in the promotion of learner autonomy in the secondary schools of Lahore. With these institutional constraints combined with the effects of cultural expectations, resource constraints, and individual teacher beliefs, the environment is sufficiently complex to bring hurdles in supporting autonomy. In that sense, findings have major implications for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher educators in the context of Pakistan, since a significant systemic change seems necessary to back the process of promoting learner autonomy at school.

There is an urgent need for curricular reforms since teaching and learning should be flexible. The conventional curriculum still emphasizes rote memorization and content delivery with no or little opportunity to think and reflect, much less focusing on the students learning. In addition, the assessment system should be reformed in order to abolish standardized exams that narrow the assessment down to content reproduction and instead focus on assessing problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and self-learning abilities.

Moreover, a present-day requirement is for teacher professional development programs that would orient teachers in autonomy-supportive approaches. Professional development programs would equip teachers with immediate practical strategies on how to foster learner autonomy, that is, self-assessment, working independently, and using technology in the classroom. Professional development would also focus on matters concerning teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward autonomy and ultimately teach them the value that autonomy lends to student engagement and learning.

Lastly, filling the resource and technology gaps in school is equally important. Provision of

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modern tools for teaching and digital resources can have a significant impact on autonomy. Schools should, therefore be equipped with basic infrastructure while both teachers and students are adequately trained to use the digital tools for their independent learning. Investment in smaller sizes will further enable meaningful personalized instruction--another essential ingredient of learner autonomy.

Finally, learning autonomy will require a broader cultural shift in attitudes toward education within Pakistan. There should be a rallying effort to sensitize both parents and society at large to the significance of autonomous learning and the dividends that can be gained with regard to both student outcomes and lifelong learning. Cultural change is subtle. But by very gradual changes in the classroom environment, while still recruiting parents into this learning process, one can start building a supportive environment for autonomy.

In conclusion, learner autonomy amongst the users of the English language in Lahore is constrained and facilitated by a complex mix of important institutional barriers, including professional development for teachers, dependence on students, acute resource shortages, and teachers' beliefs. All these obstacles will take coordinated responses at curriculum reform, teacher training, resource provision, and even cultural transformation to reverse. Therefore, by elimination of such barriers, the education system of Pakistan can be able to create more openings for learners to develop the autonomy that they need to succeed in today's dynamic world.

Discussion

The findings of this study are useful to expose the challenges facing the teachers of English while demanding learner autonomy in secondary schools of Lahore, Pakistan. The discussion section will analyze implications of such findings, relate them to relevant literature and hence discuss what they offer toward our understanding of learner autonomy in the context of teaching the English language. It also informs recommendations on ways to strengthen the existing weaknesses that the study reveals.

Institutional Constraints and Rigid Curricula

The most prevailing theme to be derived from the empirical findings of this study was the constraint imposed by the boundaries of the institutional setup. The very rigid structure of the curriculum and an exam -oriented system in Pakistan seems to not permit any flexibility in the classrooms, which had a very decisive impact on learner autonomy. This finding is absolutely in line with the past research because they consistently tend to indicate that the traditional teacher-centered education system does not offer enough scope to encourage learner autonomy (Yasmeen

& Sohail, 2018; Bashir, 2011). The curriculum of Pakistani secondary schools primarily focuses on content delivery, and accordingly, the students' open and student-centered approaches are considered relatively less in pursuit of autonomy. High-stakes standardized exams over-emphasize rote memorization; therefore, for students, these high-stake exams tend to further emphasize content than skills.

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These findings suggest that the current design of Pakistan's educational system may be working against the needs for which it aims to fulfill - making critical thinkers and independent learners out of students. The stress from standardized testing and the rigidity of the curriculum create an environment in which both teachers and students are more concerned with being successful on the exams than with developing autonomous learning skills. This is not a challenge unique to Pakistan; rather it mirrors challenges posed in many developing countries where education systems are heavily focused on exam performance (Benson, 2011).

Curricular reforms must address this, bringing flexibility to the process of teaching and learning. More than anything, this kind of curriculum reforms would focus more on critical thinking and problem-solving skills in the classroom, coupled with a healthy dose of independence. Such curriculum reforms would give teachers room to promote independence. On the assessment front, reforms are required on assessment practices. Stepping away from exams that test for content memorization towards ones that evaluate higher-order thinking skills might help shift the attention away from rote learning toward more meaningful learning experiences.

Professional Development and Teacher Readiness

The study revealed that inadequate professional development activities associated with learner autonomy was one of the main challenges. Respondents emphasized that they were not confident in utilizing such practice as autonomy support since they are not appropriately prepared, showing a radical contrast with the argument of Littlewood (1996) that teachers' ability to nurture autonomy strictly depends upon the professional development they attain. Without proper training, the teachers should basically revert to more traditional, teacher-centered approaches to teaching, which are more accessible to them.

Professional development programs in Pakistan are also reported to be emphasizing traditional pedagogy, which is not aligned with the idea of students' autonomy by participants. Teachers must be trained in some practice that may facilitate autonomy such as how to promote learning in a student-centered way, how to implement an inquiry-based process, and how to create opportunities for students' decisions in class (Yan, 2012).

This calls for an integrated training system that develops the notion of autonomy-supportive teaching strategies. Teachers need practical tools and approaches in developing such autonomy in a classroom setting. Professional development should not only be directed toward building up the teaching strategies but also with converting teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward learner autonomy. The literature research has confirmed that to the extent to which teachers realize the importance of autonomy, they are more effective in encouraging it (Benson, 2007). In this context, professional development programs need to tackle the practical and theoretical issues associated with autonomy to make the change in teaching practices sustainable.

Student Dependency and Cultural Barriers

Another significant observation from the current study is the huge dependence of students on teachers. This dependency is rooted quite deep in the traditional teacher-centered model of

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education prevalent in Pakistan. The students have become so accustomed to relying on their teachers for guidance and instruction that their independence and the ability to develop learning skills are severely strait-jacketed. This is a reflection of the cultural aspects of education in Pakistan since the teacher has dominated most of the time as the highest authority figure, and pupils are never encouraged to ask questions or take charge of what they learn.

Student dependency is complicated further by parental and societal expectations. In Pakistan, many parents expect teachers to play a central role in the education of their children and are, therefore, resistant to approaches that encourage student autonomy. Instead, the broad cultural expectation is placed high on teacher-led instruction and on success at examinations rather than on independent learning or critical thinking. Similar trends can be found in other countries still adopting more conservative approaches to education in models such as China and India (Littlewood, 1996; Li, 2017).

It should be debated in both education culture and the general society by altering cultural perceptions. Coaches, thus, shall collaborate with the students and the parents to introduce them to the value of learner autonomy and all that it puts as worth into meaningful advancements within the process of learning. It is possible through programs such as parental engagement, where parents are incorporated into the learning process and equipped with a better understanding of autonomy. Another is that teachers would eventually introduce students to autonomy-supportive practices in their learning settings so that their morale in taking charge of their own learning will be strengthened.

Resource and Technological Limitations

Resource and technological access was also mentioned by the respondents as another critical barrier. Many teachers reported that schools lacked the necessary tool technology which include computers, projectors or internet facilitation in order to support autonomous learning. This is detrimental in a digital age where high-functioning systems, with a central role to technology, are preconceived to support independent learning and allow learners accessibility to exploration and research outside and beyond the classroom walls.

The literature suggests that technology can effectively enable learner autonomy. Digital resources provide students with opportunities to master the ability to manage their own learning through finding interesting topics on which to do research, self-assessing, and collaborating with peers. Absent the appropriate infrastructure and access to technology, however, it is difficult for the teacher to embrace technology in teaching practice, and to promote autonomy.

This is a premise for the need for more investment in educational resources and technology in Pakistani schools. First, the governments and school administrations should consider making available modern teaching tools and digital resources for the teachers as well as the students. Also, teachers and students should both be adequately trained on digital literacy to ensure that they would effectively use technology for autonomous learning. Schools can ensure the creation of an environment that would support learner autonomy by giving the needed infrastructure and training, and thus adequately equip students for the challenges of the 21st-century workplace.

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Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Learner Autonomy

Some teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward learner autonomy also came out as a hindrance to its promotion in the study. While several teachers exhibit a highly positive attitude toward the concept, others would express scepticism about its applicability in the context of the currently prevalent Pakistani education systems. This is in line with the findings of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), who highlighted that the beliefs of teachers are critical parameters of whether they do or do not adopt autonomy-supportive practices in their classrooms.

Such teachers are less likely to implement those strategies that support autonomy if they are not convinced that autonomy has worth or think that it is inappropriate with their teaching context. It therefore indicates that, besides equipping teachers with the appropriate tools and resources, learner autonomy also demands a belief and attitude shift on the side of the teacher. Instructors need to perceive the potential payoffs of learner autonomy not only in terms of boosting student engagement but also in terms of long-term academic and personal success.

This will entail a collaboration between teacher education and systemic reform. Education reforms that focus on learner autonomy concurrently with professional development interventions that would help to validate it can change the perceptions of the teachers themselves. It may also be effective to provide teachers with the opportunities to experiment with autonomy-supportive practices in their classrooms under the auspices of supportive school leaders and colleagues that can have beneficial effects on the feasibility of promoting autonomy even within challenging educational contexts.

Recommendations

Taking into account the findings from this study, a number of key recommendations have emerged to address the challenges that face the English teachers in learner autonomy promotion at the Lahore secondary school level. Recommendations aimed at initiating a knowledge feedback loop-informative impact on policymakers, school administrators and educators-will be discussed later to help promote an autonomy-supportive learning environment for Pakistani schools.

Curriculum Reform: Transition to competency-based instruction by gradually increasing project and inquiry work that encourages independence. The focus for these assessments needs to shift from rote memorization to more critical thinking and problem solving.

Professional Development: Implement targeted professional development training in autonomy-supportive approaches, which would include a package of digital literacy and self-directed learning strategies with ongoing support structures in the form of mentoring and professional learning communities.

Class Size Reduction: Advocate for policy reforms that will reduce class size, thus allowing for individualized instruction and more room for the exercise of autonomy.

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Technological Investment: Allocate additional funds for educational technologies and facilities to support autonomous learning. Teachers as well as students should be offered training in digital literacy for effective use of technology.

Cultural Changes: Create parenting programs that will make parents aware of the development of learner autonomy. Strategically bring about change in teacher support practices at school; let students as well as parents adapt to a new model of learning.

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