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Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Iranian EFL Classrooms: Exploring Teacher Perceptions and the Impact of Reading Strategy Instruction

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the role of learner autonomy (LA) in Iranian EFL high schools, focusing on both teacher perceptions and the effects of strategy-based reading instruction on students' language proficiency. The primary objectives were: (1) to examine Iranian EFL teachers' understanding and attitudes toward learner autonomy, and (2) to assess the impact of a structured reading strategy intervention on fostering autonomy and improving reading comprehension among learners. A mixed-methods design was employed, consisting of two phases. In Phase 1 (qualitative exploratory), purposive sampling was used to select three EFL teachers and 12 student participants for semi-structured interviews. In Phase 2 (quantitative intervention), convenience sampling was used to assign 28 students to an intervention group and 30 to a comparison group. The intervention consisted of a 10-week strategy-based reading program designed to promote autonomous learning. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic coding with NVivo, while quantitative data from reading tests (pre-, post-, and delayed) were analyzed using SPSS (version 26), applying MANOVA to evaluate performance differences over time and between groups. Findings indicated that teachers generally valued learner autonomy and supported its integration into classroom practices. Moreover, students in the intervention group demonstrated significantly greater improvement and retention in reading proficiency compared to the comparison group. The study recommends integrating strategy-based instruction into EFL curricula to promote learner autonomy and enhance reading performance. However, limitations include the small sample size, the study's restriction to one geographical context, and the short intervention duration, which may affect the generalizability of results. Future research could expand to other skills and educational levels, or adopt a longitudinal design for deeper insights.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; Strategy-based intervention; Reading strategies; Teacher Perceptions; EFL education

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy (LA) is a critical concept in contemporary educational theory and practice, particularly in the context of language learning. It refers to the ability of students to take control of their own learning, a skill that is essential in environments where learners have limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom. In foreign language education, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL), autonomy becomes even more crucial, as students often have fewer chances to engage with the target language in daily life [1]. This concept has been widely recognized for its positive impact on learning outcomes, as it encourages students to become active participants in their educational processes, taking responsibility for setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and reflecting on their progress [2].

The importance of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms is particularly relevant in countries like Iran, where the majority of students lack frequent exposure to English outside of formal educational settings. Factors such as large class sizes, limited class time, and a lack of immersive

language environments further complicate the development of language proficiency. As a result, fostering autonomy is seen as a potential solution to these challenges, allowing learners to compensate for the lack of external language practice [3,4].

Despite the growing interest in autonomy in language learning, most research has focused on adult learners or university-level students. There is relatively limited exploration of how learner autonomy can be fostered at the high school level, especially in non-Western contexts like Iran. Moreover, much of the existing research on autonomy has been theoretical, with a lack of practical interventions that demonstrate the benefits of autonomy in real-world classrooms [5]. In this context, teachers are seen as key facilitators who can help students develop the skills necessary for autonomous learning. Teachers can guide students in using effective learning strategies, setting personal learning goals, and promoting self-reflection, all of which are essential for fostering autonomy [6].

One area where autonomy can be particularly beneficial is in reading instruction. Reading proficiency is a critical skill in language learning, and strategies that enhance students' ability to learn independently can have a profound impact on their reading development. Research has shown that strategy-based instruction can improve learners' reading skills by helping them become more engaged and independent in their learning process. This study, therefore, explores the impact of a strategy-based intervention on the development of learner autonomy and reading proficiency in an Iranian EFL classroom.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the development of learner autonomy (LA) in Iranian EFL high school classrooms, with particular attention to teacher perceptions and the role of reading strategy instruction. Specifically, the study aims to explore how Iranian EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy and the ways in which they facilitate its growth through classroom practices. It also seeks to examine how instructional activities contribute to preparing students for autonomous learning. Furthermore, the study aims to design and implement a strategy-based reading intervention to enhance both learner autonomy and reading proficiency. Through the use of pre-, post-, and delayed reading assessments, the study evaluates the effectiveness of this intervention and compares the performance of students who received the strategy-based instruction with those who followed the standard curriculum. Ultimately, the research intends to provide practical insights and recommendations for promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms and for integrating reading strategies into language instruction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite being regarded as a crucial element for effective language acquisition, there remains no universally accepted definition of LA and its components. The absence of a definitive authority and the complex structure of LA render its application in language learning and instruction challenging [7]. Learner autonomy (LA) is defined in various ways by different scholars. For example, Holec [8] describes it as learners' ability, while Little [9,10] and Benson [5] view it as learners' capacity. Dickinson [11] defines it as an attitude, and Breen and Mann [12] describe it as learners' attributes. Additionally, LA's potential components are frequently used to understand it.

According to Wenden [13], LA is a construct that encompasses learners' attitudes, metacognitive knowledge, and strategies that enable them to use their information and techniques independently, flexibly, and confidently. Dam [6,14,15] characterizes learner autonomy in LA as the preparedness of learners to assume responsibility for their education, further elucidating that this preparedness is determined by their ability and willingness to engage both independently and collaboratively with accountability.

According to Benson [1], LA entails giving students authority over the managerial, cognitive, and content components of their education. LA is still a concept that can be studied and interpreted in relation to language learning [16]. This has prompted arguments regarding various forms of autonomy and their suitable application in diverse pedagogical contexts.

Two principles of autonomous learning identified by Little et al. [2]—learner involvement and self-evaluation—are closely related to the concept of learning techniques. The idea of strategies has gained considerable attention in the discussion of learner autonomy, particularly in the context of autonomous language learning. Oxford [17] argues that strategies "reflect the learner's level of autonomy and function as mechanisms through which the learner develops further autonomy" (p. 111).

Research has consistently shown a strong correlation between autonomous language learning and the use of strategies [18-21]. Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that the effective execution of strategies correlates with language proficiency [22-24,17].

Benson [16] classifies learner autonomy (LA) into three distinct variants: technical, psychological, and political. The technical definition focuses on learners' ability to independently manage their learning without relying on instructor support [16]. Learner training and instructional approaches are part of LA's technological development. The psychological component of LA places a strong emphasis on students taking charge of determining their own learning objectives and selecting the strategies to meet them.

A crucial method for promoting learner autonomy in a psychological context is assisting students in cultivating skills and mindsets that enhance their ability to make informed educational choices. Benson [16] describes the political dimension of learning as the degree of learners' autonomy in their educational journey, influenced by social, cultural, and political factors within their learning environment. The political perspective of learner autonomy focuses on empowering learners, helping them develop their own voice, and enabling them to navigate and challenge the existing power dynamics within the educational system.

Kumaravadivelu [25] presents two distinct perspectives on language autonomy, referred to as narrow and broad viewpoints. The limited perspective of autonomy pertains to acquiring the skill of self-directed learning. The primary objective of this perspective is to cultivate learners' abilities and suitable strategies for independent learning and attainment of their educational objectives. Kumaravadivelu [25] argues that the promotion of either the narrow or broad conception of autonomy depends on the collaborative efforts of both learners and teachers in determining the appropriate level of autonomy for their specific learning context. The effectiveness of practice to promote LA is contingent upon the willingness and capability of teachers to relinquish control in the learning process to their students. The promotion of either the narrow or broad interpretations of autonomy is contingent upon learners' readiness and capacity to assume responsibility for their education.

The interactional dynamics between educators and students play a crucial role in fostering learner autonomy [26,27]. Educators are seen as facilitators who support the development of learner autonomy in their students [28,29]. In an autonomous language classroom, the emphasis shifts from teaching to learning. As a result, educators act as active collaborators in the learning process, engaging in meaningful dialogue with students and reflecting on the most effective ways to provide support [30-32]. In summary, many iterations of LA provide complementary viewpoints for theorizing LA within the realm of language acquisition and pedagogy. It is proposed that the notion of LA can be implemented with varying emphases based on the learners, educators, and the setting in which LA is advocated.

The teacher's position is vital in autonomous language acquisition, making their attitudes and perceptions about this technique essential for its implementation [33,34]. Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that educators hold favorable perspectives and convictions concerning learner autonomy [35-39]. Educators in this research have emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for autonomous learning and involving students in decision-making processes.

To become true facilitators of learner autonomy, educators must first be introduced to autonomous behaviors [40,41]. According to Little [42], educators who seek to promote student autonomy must "develop the skills to generate and manage the various forms of target language discourse required in the autonomous classroom" (p. 27).

Learning in LA occurs with the presence of educators. LA is frequently misunderstood as the total elimination of teachers' authority and accountability or the substitution of teachers' functions with self-access centers [11]. The development of LA entails interaction and collaboration between teachers and learners. As learners typically lack advanced knowledge and abilities for informed decision-making, they require foundational training and initial direction from educators to facilitate their progression towards greater autonomy.

It is proposed that in the development of LA, educators may assume the roles of facilitator, counselor, and learning resource [43]. A prevalent misperception regarding LA is that it is an entity that educators may impart to students [9,10]. While social interactions with educators are essential for the development of LA, Little [9] argues that learner autonomy (LA) also entails an internal process.

Consequently, although educators play a vital role in fostering learner autonomy, they cannot merely impart it to their students.

The primary instruments utilized in studies that use quantitative approaches to evaluate learning achievement are rating scales and questionnaires. Based on two conceptual elements, process control and self-direction. Lai [44] created two rating measures to assess learning autonomy. The ability of learners to establish learning objectives, track and evaluate their progress, and put methods into action is referred to as process control. Self-direction refers to learners' management of their overall learning process. Despite Lai's assertion, based on statistical analyses, that these rating scales are a viable and trustworthy instrument for evaluating LA, the interpretation of the derived scores from these scales remains ambiguous.

In a recent endeavor to assess LA, Murase [45] created a 113-item questionnaire encompassing the technical, political-philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural elements of language learning. The items in the questionnaire exhibited substantial correlations, indicating, as per Murase, the interrelatedness of these characteristics of LA. Murase finds that her instrument can effectively quantitatively quantify LA, based on the findings of the reliability and validity analyses.

A questionnaire was employed as a research tool in Lin and Reinders's [46] investigation of Chinese university instructors' and students' preparedness for autonomy. Learner autonomy (LA) was described in their study as a term that encompasses learners' attitudes toward autonomy, their behaviors linked to autonomous learning, and their capacity to govern their learning. In contrast to earlier questionnaire-based research, this study's questionnaire had both open-ended and closed-ended Likert scale questions. However, the average scores from the closed-ended scale were used to assess the learners' levels of autonomy preparedness, which were divided into three categories: ready, approaching readiness, and building readiness.

Ushioda [47] presents I-statement analysis, a discourse analysis technique intended to methodically monitor students' development of learner autonomy (LA). This method can be used to evaluate students' first-person accounts or declarations regarding their feelings, objectives, pursuits, and dispositions.

This technique allows for the classification of large volumes of qualitative data derived from learners' verbal expressions or reflective writing, aiming to identify patterns in the development of their thoughts and perceptions about their learning experiences. The growth of learners' LA is observed through changes in their ongoing reflections. According to Gao [48], the main elements promoting effective and independent language acquisition are agency, motivation, beliefs, and strategic efforts. The study offers a compelling narrative of a Chinese student with a physical limitation who proactively created opportunities to develop her English language skills.

Over the course of the one-year transition, the students developed their own methods for improving their English skills outside the classroom. They were able to promote their advancement by the year's end. The results of this case study demonstrate how learners become strategic and independent language learners in an unstructured setting, highlighting the role that context and agency play in LA development. All things considered, these investigations offer empirical support for the connection between strategic learning and LA, notwithstanding variations in research methodologies and settings. The favorable results imply that improving students' capacity to direct their own learning can be accomplished through strategy training or strategy-based instruction.

Empirical Studies

A growing body of research has investigated the role of pedagogical practices and teacher perspectives in fostering learner autonomy in EFL contexts. While much of this work originates from global settings, several findings are transferable to the Iranian context, particularly regarding how reading strategy instruction and teacher beliefs shape autonomous behavior.

In an online learning context, Kong [49] emphasized that structured collaborative activities on Zoom led to students taking ownership of their learning and contributing their own interpretations and meanings to the task. This aligns with autonomous learning characteristics such as self-direction and reflection. Similarly, Widiati et al. [50] found that online collaborative writing pushed learners to manage their time, divide responsibilities, and critically reflect skills central to learner autonomy.

Closer to the Iranian EFL context, Putra [51] explored learner perceptions of independent learning in Indonesia, revealing that conventional education systems often foster dependent learning habits. This insight parallels the situation in Iran, where exam-oriented instruction may discourage autonomy. Their findings suggested that strategic instruction, particularly in reading, can gradually recondition learners toward more independent learning behavior.

Additionally, Kusmana [52] showed that young learners developed autonomous behaviors through naturalistic exposure and implicit strategies for learning English outside formal education. While this study focused on children in non-native contexts, its implications are relevant to Iranian EFL learners who similarly benefit from informal learning environments and strategy instruction.

In Algeria, Fedj [53] and Lakehal [54] conducted classroom-based studies that noted student reluctance to engage and take responsibility for their own learning. Their findings pointed to a general misunderstanding of learner autonomy and its reliance on contextual variables, such as teacher beliefs and institutional culture. These observations are echoed in Iranian studies where learner autonomy is often constrained by teacher-centered instruction and rigid curriculum standards.

Teacher perceptions play a pivotal role in the success of autonomy-enhancing practices. Arib and Maouche [55] found that while many teachers valued autonomy, their implementation often conflicted with cultural expectations and institutional demands. These insights are applicable to Iranian EFL classrooms, where the teacher's role is traditionally more authoritative. As Bendebiche [56] noted, autonomy cannot flourish without acknowledging the sociocultural and institutional constraints that shape classroom dynamics.

Moreover, Senouci [57] introduced a tutoring program aimed at enhancing learner autonomy in Algeria, with results indicating that structured but student-centered support can promote gradual independence. Such structured strategy instruction, particularly in reading, may have similar potential in Iran, where learners are often passive recipients of information.

By first examining the current situation of learner autonomy (LA) in Iranian EFL classrooms, taking into account the viewpoints of both teachers and students, this study seeks to close gaps in the research literature. The objective is to enhance the capacity for autonomous learning among Iranian EFL school learners by implementing a strategy-based intervention program. Three study objectives are formulated to investigate the active promotion of LA in the classroom and to assess the extent to which strategy-based education can enhance learners' language competency.

1. In what ways do teachers in Iranian EFL classrooms perceive and facilitate the development of learner autonomy (LA)?
2. How do classroom activities and experiences contribute to preparing students for autonomous learning in the context of Iranian EFL education?
3. What impact does the instruction of reading strategies have on the improvement of students' reading proficiency?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the evolution of LA in the context of Iranian high schools. This study had two parts. Phase 1 is the exploratory stage that primarily examined the research context and the promotion of LA within that framework. Subsequent to the exploratory phase, the study's second phase executed a strategy-based intervention to investigate its effects on reading proficiency.

During Phase 2 of the study, to encourage learner autonomy, a 10-week strategy-based education method was put into place in an English classroom. Research Question 3 investigated whether this intervention not only enhanced autonomy but also had a measurable impact on learners' reading proficiency. To evaluate changes in reading performance, data were gathered through assessments conducted at three distinct points: at the beginning of the semester to establish baseline proficiency, immediately after the conclusion of the intervention to assess immediate outcomes, and five weeks later to examine the retention of progress and long-term effects.

3.2. Participants

The study participants comprised Iranian EFL teachers and learners involved in educational activities at the school. Participation in all aspects of the study across both phases was voluntary. During Phase 1, three Iranian EFL teachers (one male and two female) participated. Additionally, 98 learners were involved in piloting the reading assessments, and 12 learners participated in group interviews. In Phase 2, 58 learners took part, with 28 assigned to the intervention group and 30 to the comparison group. All participants were evaluated using the school's internal midterm and final examinations to assess their performance and progress.

3.3. Instruments

The research instruments employed in this study are semi-structured interviews and reading tests.

3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a method employed to gather qualitative data. They enable researchers to explore pertinent themes within the research framework while simultaneously elaborating on participants' comments or emerging concerns during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the research. Teachers participated in individual interviews, while learners were interviewed in groups. Open-ended interview questions were used to guide each session, encouraging participants to express their teaching and learning-related viewpoints and experiences.

3.3.2 Reading Tests

In Phase 2 of the study, pre-, post-, and delayed reading tests were administered to assess changes in learners' reading performance following the intervention. The reading component aimed to assess learners' abilities in reading comprehension, information retrieval, pronoun reference identification, inferential vocabulary understanding, and main concept summarization.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

This study advocates for strategy-based education to enhance learner autonomy in an Iranian EFL classroom. This intervention was designed to foster learners' autonomy in learning while simultaneously enhancing their reading proficiency. Strategy-based education offers learners the opportunity to progressively develop critical information and skills necessary for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, with initial direction and ongoing assistance from educators.

The intervention consisted of 10 lessons delivered over a 10-week period to students in the intervention group. These strategy-focused lectures' main objective was to give students methods for organizing, tracking, and assessing their English reading proficiency. The course material, learning objectives, and results from learner group interviews done during the study's exploratory phase were taken into consideration while choosing the intervention's tactics. At the conclusion of the class, the researcher offered homework and urged students to apply the tactics acquired during the session to reinforce their comprehension of those strategies.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative data collected from the reading tests were analyzed statistically using SPSS version 26. The purpose of the analysis was to look at how students' reading test scores changed before, after, and after the delays, as well as to compare the performance of learners in the intervention and comparison groups following the intervention. To achieve this, a MANOVA was conducted in SPSS to evaluate differences in test scores between the two groups. Subsequent to data collection, audio transcripts of teacher and learner interviews were processed prior to coding in NVivo.

In the data preparation phase, the researcher meticulously reviewed all transcripts multiple times to develop overarching insights on the research data prior to coding. The validity of this research is further augmented by the researcher's extended involvement in the research context. During the data collecting and analysis phases, the researcher reviewed all recorded interviews and re-examined all transcripts to ensure their accuracy. This procedure enabled the researchers to become acquainted with the data.

4. FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the thematic coding for question 1.

1. In what ways do teachers in Iranian EFL classrooms perceive and facilitate the development of learner autonomy (LA)?

Table 1. Thematic Coding for Question 1

Theme	Sub-themes	Teacher Perspectives	Key Quotes/Examples
Perceptions of Learner Autonomy (LA)	Definitions of LA	- Ali: Learning styles and individual competence levels.	"Each learner has their own learning style."
		- Maryam and Ahmad: Personal attributes like curiosity and motivation.	Maryam: "Learning comes from determination and curiosity."
Teacher Roles	Guidance Providers	- Teachers emphasize supporting learners' independence and accommodating diverse needs.	Ahmad: "Learners should have the freedom to build their own pathways."
	Motivators	- Encouraging engagement and participation rather than focusing on accuracy.	Maryam: "I instructed them to talk more fluently in class."
	Knowledge Designers	- Teachers design tasks and activities to enhance learning.	Ali: "In order to help our students learn more efficiently, we also present them with assignments."
Learner Roles	Initiative and Responsibility	- Learners are urged to accept accountability for their own instruction.	Implicit in all teacher responses.
	Curiosity and Motivation	- Learners should have curiosity and personal goals to drive their learning process.	Ahmad: "They must have that eagerness to know."
Challenges and Strategies	Teacher as Facilitator	- Balancing guidance with allowing freedom in learning.	Ahmad: "Students ought to be capable of creating their own routes to success."
	Promoting English Use	- Classroom time is used to build confidence in speaking English.	Maryam: "I made the most of the time I spent in class."
Shared Perceptions	Importance of LA	- All teachers believe LA is critical to education.	"Important for their learners' education."

1) Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

The teachers expressed varied but complementary definitions of LA:

Ali emphasized learning as shaped by individual competence levels and learning styles. He defined LA as the ability of learners to adapt their learning approach based on their skills. Maryam and Ahmad focused on learners' personal attributes, such as curiosity and intrinsic motivation, as key drivers of autonomous learning. Despite their different emphases, all teachers agreed on the educational importance of LA for fostering independent and motivated learners.

2) Teacher Roles in Promoting Learner Autonomy

The teachers identified three primary roles they adopt to promote LA:

Teachers viewed their role as facilitators rather than traditional instructors. They highlighted the importance of supporting learners by being sensitive to their diverse needs and allowing them freedom in learning. Encouraging learners to engage with English through active participation was a common strategy. The focus was on building confidence rather than prioritizing linguistic accuracy. Teachers also design and assign activities tailored to their learners' needs to promote better learning outcomes.

3) Learner Roles in LA

The teachers emphasized the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning, reflecting a shift toward learner-centered education. Learners were expected to demonstrate initiative, sustain motivation, and actively pursue their learning goals.

4) Challenges and Strategies in Fostering LA

Promoting LA involved several strategies:

Teachers aimed to provide guidance while allowing learners independence in shaping their learning pathways. Teachers used classroom time to create opportunities for learners to build confidence in speaking English.

5) Shared Perspectives

All teachers agreed that LA is vital for educational success. While their approaches varied, their shared belief in autonomy as a collaborative process where learners take initiative and teachers provide support emphasizes the evolving role of teachers in facilitating LA. Table 2 shows the thematic coding for learner autonomy development.

Table 2. Constraints on Learner Autonomy (LA) Development

Themes	Sub-themes	Details/Examples	Key Quotes
Curriculum-Related	Pressure to Meet Standards	Curriculum standards create pressure on teachers, limiting flexibility in promoting LA.	<i>Maryam</i> : “The trouble is that these rules are hovering over my brain.”
	Lack of Clear Guidelines	Curriculum does not specify practical strategies to promote autonomous learning skills.	<i>Ahmad</i> : “The course of study did not properly instruct teachers on how to construct assignments for autonomous learning.”
Learner-Related	Unclear Learning Objectives	Many learners lack clarity about their goals, affecting initiative and motivation.	<i>Ali</i> : “Most learners may not perceive the relevance of learning.
	Limited Awareness of Learning Processes	Students do not understand their roles and responsibilities in managing their own learning.	<i>Ahmad</i> : “Very few students understood what English language instruction entails...”
Teacher-Related	Reliance on Traditional Teaching Methods	Teacher-fronted approaches limit opportunities for learner participation and engagement.	<i>Maryam</i> : “The traditional approach limits their active participation... Sometimes I act like a lazy teacher.”

	Limited Professional Development	Teachers lack exposure to alternative teaching techniques that encourage autonomous learning.	<i>Ahmad</i> : “Teachers do not always excel at every teaching style.”
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1) Curriculum-Related Constraints

The curriculum was identified as a major factor limiting the promotion of LA. Teachers expressed that curriculum requirements create significant pressure and hinder flexibility in fostering autonomy. Teachers are constrained by the need to meet standardized objectives, which reduces opportunities to incorporate autonomous learning strategies. While promoting life-long and autonomous learning is an educational goal, the curriculum does not provide practical guidance for achieving these objectives.

2) Learner-Related Constraints

Teachers highlighted various learner-related challenges that hinder the development of LA: Many students lack clarity about their learning goals, which affects their ability to take initiative. Students often lack an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in managing their learning, which is essential for autonomy.

3) Teacher-Related Constraints

Teacher-related factors, including traditional teaching methods and limited knowledge of alternative strategies, were also identified as barriers to fostering LA: The teacher-fronted approach restricts opportunities for active learner participation and autonomy. Teachers admitted their exposure to alternative and innovative teaching techniques is insufficient, which affects their ability to promote LA effectively.

The interplay of curriculum, learner, and teacher-related constraints significantly impacts the development of LA: Teachers feel pressured to prioritize curriculum goals over autonomy-building strategies. Learners’ lack of awareness and engagement diminishes the effectiveness of LA-focused initiatives. Traditional teaching practices and limited exposure to alternative methods hinder the active involvement necessary for autonomy. Table 3 shows the thematic coding for strategies to foster learner autonomy.

Table 3. Strategies to Foster Learner Autonomy (LA)

Themes	Sub-themes	Description	Example Quotes
Strategies for LA	Encouraging Learner Decisions	Learners making decisions for activities inside and outside class to develop ownership and responsibility.	<i>Maryam</i> : “Allowing pupils to think for themselves is, in my opinion, one approach to help them become honest and autonomous.” <i>Ahmad</i> : “I wanted them to do a few tasks, including conversing with foreigners online.”
	Promoting Self-Evaluation	Learners reflecting on their learning process to identify challenges, assess progress, and plan future actions.	<i>Maryam</i> : “They will understand themselves and what works best for them according to of learning.” <i>Ahmad</i> : “When students have to chose something for their own, they need to know their degree of proficiency.”

	Teaching Problem-Solving Skills	Encouraging learners to independently solve problems through challenging activities.	<i>Ahmad</i> : “I encourage my students to think and answer issues on their own. ”
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1) Encouraging Learner Decisions

Teachers emphasized the importance of enabling learners to make decisions. They believed that decision-making promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility in learning, which in turn benefits overall class management. Maryam noted that fostering autonomy requires “letting learners think for themselves,” which helps them become more responsible. Ahmad shared an example of assigning students tasks like “online chatting with foreigners,” providing learners opportunities to practice decision-making and self-management outside the classroom.

2) Promoting Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation was identified as a critical skill for fostering autonomy. Teachers believed that learners need to reflect on their learning progress, identify areas of difficulty, and set future learning goals. Maryam emphasized that self-evaluation enables learners. Similarly, Ahmad argued that understanding one’s proficiency level is essential for making appropriate learning choices. Teachers acknowledged their role in guiding learners through the self-evaluation process, as evaluation is traditionally seen as the teacher's responsibility.

3) Teaching Problem-Solving Skills

Teachers considered the development of problem-solving skills an essential component of learner autonomy. They noted that challenging tasks encourage learners to think independently and overcome difficulties without constant teacher intervention. Ahmad highlighted her approach which fosters resilience and independence in learning.

Table 2 shows the thematic coding for question 2.

2.How do classroom activities and experiences contribute to preparing students for autonomous learning in the context of Iranian EFL education?

Table 4. Thematic Coding for Question2

Category	Theme	Example Quotes
Learners' Attitudes Towards English	Positive perceptions of English as useful for personal growth	P1: “I enjoy English because it allows me to discover new things. It broadens my horizons and increases my knowledge.” P2: “Because there are so many applications for English, I enjoy learning it. It can help us discover more about topics we were previously unaware of.”
Learners' Perceived Proficiency	Learners’ self-assessment of proficiency as low, limited communication skills	P2: “I do not think the way I speak English is good enough.” P3: “I think I don't speak English very well. I find it hard to understand foreign lecturers when they talk to me.”
Learning Needs	Focus on reading and vocabulary improvement	P4: “For now, I'd like the tutor to give me some reading strategies.” p6: “I usually hate English tests, particularly

		vocabulary and reading sections.”
Classroom Learning Experiences	Grammar-focused curriculum, limited exposure to advanced language content	P4: “There have been the present simple tense and past simple tense since kindergarten. We only learn these two important things.” P5: “In reality, my primary school teachers just taught fundamental vocabulary and grammar rules.”
Learners' Roles and Responsibilities	Self-directed learning, efforts to improve independently	P4: “We ought to schedule practice time. Reading, listening, and vocabulary are all part of many activities.” P6: “I had to put in more effort when I switched to this high school in order to comprehend the English lectures.”

1) Learners' Attitudes Towards English

Most learners expressed positive attitudes toward English, citing its usefulness in exploring new experiences, broadening their knowledge, and connecting with the world. Learners appreciated English as a tool for personal growth and exploration. They saw learning English as valuable for accessing global knowledge and opportunities.

2) Perceived Proficiency and Challenges

Despite their enthusiasm, most learners rated their English proficiency as low and lacked confidence in using the language for anything beyond basic communication. Many learners emphasized the need to improve reading skills and vocabulary due to their importance in examinations and academic success.

3) Classroom Learning Experiences

Learners reported that their English classes focused primarily on grammar and sentence structures, which they found repetitive and unchallenging. Heavy emphasis is on grammar, especially simple tenses, across all school levels. Limited exposure is to diverse or advanced language content.

4) Learners' Roles and Responsibilities

Learners demonstrated an understanding of their responsibilities in learning and shared examples of their efforts to improve English independently. Dedication of time and effort is to practice specific skills like vocabulary, reading, and listening. Taking initiative is to engage in self-directed learning activities.

1. What impact does the instruction of reading strategies have on the improvement of students' reading proficiency?

The following sections offer in-depth evaluations of each test, where the intervention class is denoted as IC and the comparison class as CC. To investigate differences between the CC and IC's pre-, post-, and delayed reading test scores, a MANOVA was performed. The results of the multivariate tests showed a statistically significant difference between the test scores: Wilks' $\lambda = .643$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$, $F(3,54) = 5.48$, $p = .001$ (Table 5).

Table 5. MANOVA Test Results

		Value	F	Hypothesis Df	Error df	Sig	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent Parameter	Observed Power ^c
	Pillai's Trace	0.824	235.845 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.824	695.744	1.000
	Wilks' Lambda	0.069	235.845 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.824	695.744	1.000

	Hotelling's Trace	11.664	235.845 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.824	695.744	1.000
	Roy's Largest Root	11.664	235.845 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.824	695.744	1.000
Class	Pillai's Trace	0.142	5.478 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.242	18.839	0.893
	Wilks' Lambda	0.643	5.478 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.242	18.839	0.893
	Hotelling's Trace	0.254	5.478 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.242	18.839	0.893
	Roy's Largest Root	0.254	5.478 ^b	3.000	54.000	0.000	0.242	18.839	0.893

Table 6. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects Results

Type III									
Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^d
Corrected Model	Pre_Test	23.602 ^a	1	23.602	3.562	0.053	0.047	3.435	0.448
	Post_Test	19.650 ^b	1	19.650	4.165	0.052	0.074	4.008	0.506
	Delayed_Test	6.543 ^c	1	6.543	1.564	0.302	0.019	1.432	0.229
Intercept	Pre_Test	2104.530	1	2104.530	318.930	0.001	0.786	308.895	1.000
	Post_Test	3342.534	1	3342.534	686.409	0.000	0.896	674.345	1.000
	Delayed_Test	2950.493	1	2950.493	671.793	0.001	0.843	665.706	1.000
Class	Pre_Test	23.602	1	23.602	3.472	0.053	0.047	3.497	0.448
	Post_Test	19.650	1	19.650	4.234	0.057	0.052	4.095	0.506
	Delayed_Test	6.543	1	6.543	1.674	0.301	0.041	1.435	0.229
Error	Pre_Test	406.270	56	6.855					
	Post_Test	276.102	56	4.751					
	Delayed_Test	263.708	56	4.485					
Total	Pre_Test	2534.000	58						
	Post_Test	3609.000	58						
	Delayed_Test	3231.000	58						
Corrected Total	Pre_Test	424.806	57						
	Post_Test	308.764	57						
	Delayed_Test	275.742	57						

Based on Table 6, there was no statistically significant difference between the pre-test scores of the two classes, $F(1, 58) = 3.47$, $p = .053$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. This indicates that learners in both the CC and IC performed similarly on the pre-intervention reading test. Nonetheless, there was a statistically significant difference between the two classes' post-test results, $F(1, 58) = 4.23$, $p = .057$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, on the post-intervention reading test, where the IC performed better than the CC. Even though the IC outperformed the CC on the delayed test, the difference was not statistically significant (partial $\eta^2 = .04$, $F(1, 58) = 1.67$, $p = .301$).

The length and intensity of the intervention may have contributed to the modest decline in the IC's delayed test scores as well as the absence of a statistically significant difference between the two classes' results. One hour of scaffolded strategy practice per week may not have been enough for learners with little experience in strategic learning to completely grasp and maintain the use of these

strategies, even though the strategy-based instruction probably helped students' reading test scores improve right away. Furthermore, some students may have forgotten or stopped using the skills they had acquired as a result of the five-week interval between the post-test and the delayed exam.

After taking part in the strategy-based sessions, students in the intervention class demonstrated a notable improvement in their reading performance, according to the statistical analyses of the reading test results. Additionally, they fared better on the post-intervention and delayed reading exams than the students in the comparison class. Therefore, it can be said that the strategy-based training had a beneficial impact on the intervention class students' reading gains.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings from Phase 1 reveal that the teacher participants in this study had varying conceptualizations of learner autonomy (LA). For instance, Ali emphasized learner preferences and learning modalities, while Maryam and Ahmad associated LA with personal traits such as curiosity and motivation. Despite these differences, all teachers acknowledged the importance of LA in fostering independent and lifelong learning, which is consistent with previous studies that have underscored the value of autonomy in education [5]. Teachers viewed LA as a key factor in enabling students to take control of their learning and set personal goals.

Interestingly, while some educators worry that promoting LA could challenge their authority in the classroom [58], the teachers in this study did not perceive autonomy as a threat to their role. Instead, they viewed it as an opportunity to support students by encouraging active participation in decision-making, reflection, and problem-solving, which aligns with the findings of Benson and Huang [59], who emphasize the importance of fostering independent learners. These insights suggest a positive attitude towards learner-centered approaches, highlighting teachers' willingness to engage students more actively in their learning process.

However, several challenges were identified in promoting LA. The teachers reported feeling constrained by the need to adhere to curriculum requirements, limited instructional time, and a lack of professional training, which is consistent with findings from Swatevacharkul [60] and Phipps & Borg [60], who identified similar barriers to implementing learner autonomy in language classrooms. These constraints often resulted in a focus on content delivery rather than fostering student engagement, self-assessment, and problem-solving skills, supporting the notion that high-stakes exams and rigid curricula can hinder the development of autonomy [62].

The students' readiness for autonomous learning also emerged as a key issue. Previous research (63,64) has shown that Iranian learners often struggle with self-regulation and independent learning. However, this study found that students were capable of pursuing independent learning opportunities outside the classroom, despite their challenges. Their efforts to continue learning, despite limited success, align with research by Sinatra & Kardash [65] and Feucht & Bendixen [66], who noted that learners' persistence in the face of difficulties is a key indicator of their potential for autonomy.

Moreover, students in this study expressed a desire for more involvement in the learning process. This finding contrasts with earlier studies by Rukthong [67] and Rungwaraphong [64], which suggested that students often expect teachers to take the lead in setting learning objectives and managing the classroom. In contrast, the students in this study preferred a more collaborative approach, where teachers facilitated learning rather than dictating it. This reflects a shift towards shared responsibility for learning, which is consistent with the work of Benson [5], who highlighted the importance of collaboration between students and teachers in fostering autonomy.

The results from the intervention phase also support the benefits of strategy-based instruction in enhancing reading skills. Students in the intervention group significantly outperformed their peers in the comparison group on both the post-intervention and delayed tests, reinforcing the findings of Martz & Shepherd [68] and Sun et al. [69], who found that strategy-based instruction improves students' reading abilities. These results suggest that teaching reading strategies not only enhances language proficiency but also promotes autonomous learning by encouraging students to apply the strategies independently.

Finally, the discrepancy between teachers' and students' perceptions of autonomy highlights the need for a more collaborative approach to fostering learner autonomy. While teachers saw the lack of

clear learning objectives as a barrier to autonomy, students identified teacher-directed methods as the primary obstacle. This suggests that a more balanced approach, where teachers share responsibility with students, could help overcome these barriers and support the development of learner autonomy in the Iranian EFL context.

In conclusion, the study highlights both the challenges and potential of promoting learner autonomy in the Iranian EFL classroom. While factors such as curriculum constraints and a lack of professional development impede the promotion of LA, the findings suggest that with the right support, both teachers and students can embrace autonomy to improve learning outcomes. This aligns with the findings of previous studies that emphasize the importance of teacher support and learner engagement in fostering autonomy [5,70]. The study's results underscore the need for further research into the practical strategies for promoting learner autonomy in high school contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the potential for promoting learner autonomy (LA) in Iranian high school classrooms through strategy-based instruction. The findings provide classroom-based evidence that LA is both a feasible and beneficial goal within the Iranian educational context. The intervention not only led to significant improvements in students' reading proficiency, but also helped foster autonomous learning behaviors, such as goal-setting, strategy use, and reflective thinking. Additionally, both teachers and students expressed a positive orientation toward learner-centered approaches, even though their understandings of autonomy varied. Teachers acknowledged LA as a valuable educational goal and were willing to support it by involving students in decision-making, teaching learning strategies, and encouraging self-evaluation.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study relied on intact classes and a non-random sampling method, which limits the generalizability of the results. The scope was confined to a small number of high school classrooms within a single region, and the short duration of the intervention may not have been sufficient to create long-term behavioral change. Additionally, the constraints of an exam-driven curriculum and limited teacher training in LA-oriented pedagogy were significant barriers to implementation.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies that track the sustained impact of strategy-based instruction on learners' autonomy and academic achievement. It would also be valuable to explore how contextual variables, such as school resources, leadership, and community support, affect the promotion of LA in different regions or school types. Moreover, as technology becomes increasingly integral to education, future studies could investigate the role of digital tools and online platforms in fostering independent learning beyond the classroom. Comparative studies between rural and urban schools, or public and private institutions, may also shed light on how environmental and institutional factors shape learner autonomy.

The implications of this study are significant for both research and practice. For educators, the findings highlight the importance of adopting a facilitative teaching role that supports learners in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own progress. Teachers should model these practices and gradually share control of the learning process with students to cultivate a sense of ownership and self-direction. For curriculum developers and policy-makers, the study underscores the need to create more flexible curricula and provide teacher training programs that emphasize learner-centered instruction.

Encouraging peer collaboration, promoting metacognitive awareness, and integrating strategy instruction into everyday lessons can further support learners' development of autonomy. At the research level, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how LA can be cultivated in secondary education settings, offering empirical evidence from a context that is often underrepresented in the autonomy literature.

In conclusion, this study affirms that learner autonomy can be effectively nurtured in high school settings through structured, strategy-based interventions. While challenges remain, particularly in rigid, exam-oriented systems, both educators and learners have the capacity to adapt and thrive when given the tools and support to engage actively in the learning process. Continued exploration of autonomy across diverse educational contexts will further enrich our understanding of its role in shaping successful, lifelong learners.

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