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TEACHER AUTONOMY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IRANIAN ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Considering the importance of teacher autonomy in terms of its interrelationship with teacher empowerment, motivation, burnout, job satisfaction, professionalism, etc., it seems that this concept has not received due attention in the context of Iranian English language teachers, especially those who teach at private language centers. Therefore, the present study intends to explore the perception of English language teachers teaching at private language institutions in a number of cities in Iran. To this end, a questionnaire devised by Pearson and Moomaw (2006) is adopted and distributed among 120 Iranian English teachers online. The degree of perceived autonomy of the participating teachers in two categories of 'general teaching autonomy' and 'curriculum autonomy' is elicited and discussed throughout the study. Suggestions for further research are also provided.

Keywords: Teacher autonomy, Curriculum autonomy, General teaching autonomy.

Introduction

From Little's (1995) point of view, a successful teacher is one who has obtained autonomy in personal responsibility as regards his/her teaching, who exercises cognitive and affective control over the process of teaching through constant reflection and analysis, and explores the freedom conferred by these activities. It is believed that 'teacher autonomy' is as challenging as 'learner autonomy' and lacks transparency (McGrath, 2000; Smith, 2000). To clarify the concept of 'teacher autonomy', Smith and Erdogan (2008) distinguish between notions of teaching (professional action) and teacher-learning (development) or, in other words, between teacher autonomy and teacher-learner autonomy. They have also made a distinction between freedom and capacity. A fundamental conceptualization of the term 'teacher autonomy' is indicated by the amount of the teachers' ability to improve themselves in terms of teaching throughout research-oriented or reflective approaches. Moreover, freedom in teaching in the way one desires manifests teacher autonomy. However, Pearson and Moomaw (2006) contend that literature does not offer a clear definition of teacher autonomy. What is considered autonomy from the point of view of one teacher might be viewed as isolation by another. For one teacher, autonomy might be gaining freedom from supervision or interference, while another interprets it as being free in developing relationships with colleagues and doing tasks out of the context of classroom (Frase & Sorenson, 1992).

Lack of a certain definition does not diminish the significance of teacher autonomy as an influential factor on motivation, burnout or stress, job satisfaction, empowerment, professionalism, etc. of teachers (Blase & Kirby, 2000; Brunetti, 2001; Cedoline, 1981; Davis & Wilson, 2000; Dymoke & Harrison, 2006; Gnecco, 1983; Helgøy & Homme, 2007; Khmelkov, 2000). Therefore, the degree of perceived

autonomy by teachers can be interpreted as an indication of their positive or negative reaction to the profession of teaching (Pearson & Hall, 1993).

Aim of the Study

Considering the importance of autonomy in the professional life of teachers and the fact that this concept has rarely been addressed in the context of the present study, the researchers intend to investigate the perception of participating teachers towards their autonomy in two categories of 'curriculum autonomy' (CA) and 'general teaching autonomy' (GTA) as well as the relationship between the addressed demographic factors (gender, age, education, experience) and the perceived teacher autonomy of the participating teachers. 'Curriculum autonomy' includes items that address selection of materials and activities, instructional planning as well as sequencing. On the other hand, 'general teaching autonomy' covers items concerning standards of classroom conduct and personal decision making on the job (Pearson and Moomaw, 2006). The hypothesis is that those who are younger, hold lower degrees and/or have less teaching experience are (or perceive themselves) less autonomous.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The target population of the current study consists of 120 teachers (female= 69, male= 51) who teach English language in private language centers in a few cities of Iran (Semnan, Garmsar, Tehran, Bandar Abbas, Mashhad, and Ghaem Shahr). The participating teachers fit into two age ranges as a) 20-29 years old (55%) and b) over 30 years old (45%). Moreover, 47 participants (39.2%) hold a Bachelor's degree and 73 of them (60.8%) are Master's or PhD graduates who are defined as postgraduate participants. Regarding the years of experience, 61 teachers (50.8%) have been teaching English for a range of 1-5 years and 59 participants (49.2%) have teaching experience of 6 years or more. To implement the survey, a questionnaire called 'Teaching Autonomy Scale' (TAS), devised by Pearson and Moomaw (2006) is adopted and sent to the participants online through GoogleDocs application.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire consists of two sections: A) Background Information and B) Teaching Autonomy Scale. Seeking the profile of the respondents, the first section includes questions about their gender, age, education, and teaching experience. The second section which is an exact copy of the original questionnaire mentioned above consists of eighteen Likert-scale items which investigate perception of the participating teachers towards their own autonomy as English teachers in different areas such as classroom conduct standards, materials and activities selection, and personal discretion on the job. The respondents are required to rate the degree of their autonomy by choosing one of the four Likert-type points offered as: 'Definitely True', 'More or Less True', 'More or Less False', and 'Definitely False'. It should be noted that the scale does not contain a neutral response.

Data Analysis

To facilitate analysis of data, items of the questionnaire are assigned to two categories of 'curriculum autonomy' and 'general autonomy' as shown in the table below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Items of Curriculum Autonomy and General Teaching Autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006, p. 48)

Item #	Curriculum Autonomy
5	In my teaching I use my own guidelines and procedures
6	In my situation I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching
8	My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself
12	What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself
14	The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by myself
18	The content and skills taught in my class are those I select
	General Teaching Autonomy
1	I am free to be creative in my teaching approach
2	The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control
3	Standards of behavior in my classroom are set primarily by myself
4	My job does not allow for much discretion on my part
7	The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control
9	I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching
10	I follow my own guidelines on instruction
11	In my situation I have only limited latitude in how major problems are solved
13	In my class I have little control over how classroom space is used
15	The evaluation and assessment activities used in my class are selected by people other than myself
16	I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students
17	I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom

In order to figure out the degree of perceived autonomy of the participating teachers and its relationship with respondents' gender, age, education and experience, the data is analyzed using SPSS software by performing t-test and Pearson product moment correlation coefficient. For the purpose of easier analysis of data, certain values are assigned to each Likert-scale point as: Definitely true:3, More or less true:2, More or less false:1, Definitely false:0.

Results

Analysis of data shows that 'general teaching autonomy' (mean: 1.90) scored higher than 'curriculum autonomy' (mean: 1.29) as far as respondents' perceptions of teaching autonomy are concerned (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TAS	120	0	3	1,53	,564
CA	120	0	3	1,29	,965
GTA	120	0	3	**1,90**	,438

Analysis of each individual item reveals that items 6, 8, 12, 14, 15 and 18 obtained the least autonomy scores. Among the mentioned items, only item 15 belongs to GTA sub-scale and the rest are categorized under CA sub-scale. As illustrated in Figure 1, item 15 which addresses the degree of

autonomy of the participating teachers in selection of evaluation and assessment activities has scored the least among others in GTA sub-scale. On the other hand, Item 7 which is concerned with having control over scheduling of use of time has scored the highest.

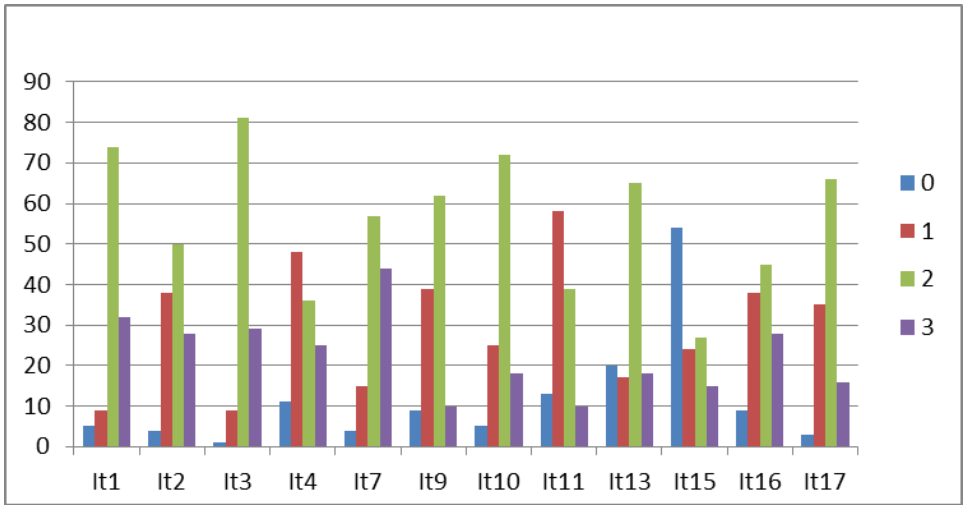


Figure 1. Distribution of autonomy scores in GTA sub-scale

The distribution of scores in CA sub-scale shows a higher degree in lack of autonomy perceived by the respondents in comparison with the scores in GTA sub-scale, which is summarized in Figure 2. The results clearly indicate that the respondents have the lowest autonomy when it comes to the selection of and control over the content, materials and skills taught (items 6, 12, 14 & 18) and making decision about goals and objectives of the course taught (item 8).

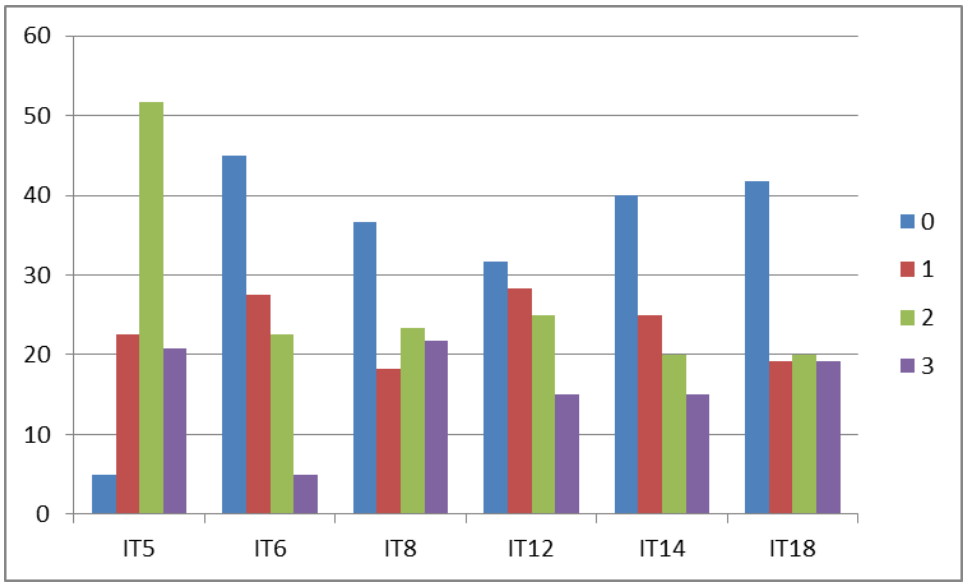


Figure 2. Distribution of autonomy scores in CA sub-scale

In order to find out if there is any difference in the degree of perceived autonomy gender-wise, a t-test is performed. The result indicates that there is no significant difference between males and females on the scores of neither of the sub-scales (see Table 3).

Table 3. T-Test of Autonomy Score by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CA	Female	69	**1,2440**	,80266	,09663
	Male	51	**1,2810**	,86377	,12095
GTA	Female	69	**1,7464**	,36950	,04448
	Male	51	**1,7582**	,30104	,04215

Similarly, no significant correlation is found when perceived teaching autonomy scores are correlated with age and years of experience (see Tables 4 & 5).

Table 4. T-test of Autonomy Score by Age

	Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CA	20-29	66	**1,3207**	,79384	,09771
	30+	54	**1,1852**	,86492	,11770
GTA	20-29	66	**1,7727**	,31472	,03874
	30+	54	**1,7253**	,37149	,05055

Table 5. T-test of Autonomy Score by Experience

	Experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CA	1-5	61	**1,2295**	,82449	,10556
	6+	59	**1,2910**	,83310	,10846
GTA	1-5	61	**1,7473**	,31986	,04095
	6+	59	**1,7556**	,36386	,04737

The last factor correlated with teaching autonomy scores is participants' educational background. Analysis of data indicates that undergraduate and postgraduate degree holders perceive the same degree of autonomy considering 'general teaching autonomy' and 'curriculum autonomy' sub-scales (see Table 6).

Table 6. T-test of Autonomy Score by Education

	Education	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CA	Undergraduate	47	**1,0745**	,88861	,12962
	Postgraduate	73	**1,3790**	,76541	,08958
GTA	Undergraduate	47	**1,7713**	,30765	,04487
	Postgraduate	73	**1,7386**	,36200	,04237

However, as mentioned earlier, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient is performed in addition to t-test and an insignificant correlation is found between participants' educational background and their perceived 'curriculum teaching' autonomy (see Table 7).

Table 7. Correlation of Autonomy Score by Education

		CA	GTA	Education
Education	Pearson Correlation	**,181***	-,047	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,048	,610	
	N	120	120	120

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Discussion

Based on the results, it can be inferred that the participating teachers have low autonomy in the areas dealing with selection of materials, contents, and skills as well as evaluation and assessment. This result conforms to centralized and top-down approaches of policy makers and administrators in which teachers are considered as class performers and presenters and have little say in making major decisions. It is believed that autonomy is a pivotal element in any genuine profession and imposing any kind of decision in which teachers are not engaged would have a reverse impact (Blasé & Kirby, 2000; Khmelkov, 2000). In the same vein, Ingersoll and Alsalam (1997) argue that teachers are the best decision makers in terms of educational issues and continue that top-down decision making is prone to fail because it might not be supported by those people whose responsibility is implementing a certain decision, that is, the teachers.

Although the results show no high autonomy in any of the items, comparing the scores of the two sub-scales proves a fairly higher autonomy in 'general teaching autonomy' especially in the areas such as class management in terms of use of space, time scheduling, and setting behavior standards. In addition, participating teachers report a relatively high autonomy as far as use of creative teaching approaches and instructional guidelines are concerned. This finding is in line with the idea that in order to assure creativity and critical thinking, teachers are required to have autonomy in general teaching issues (Pearson & Hall, 1993, Pearson & Moomaw, 2006). Moreover, since autonomy and teacher burnout are correlated, this measure would provide principals and administrators with an opportunity to identify less satisfied teachers and take due measures to prevent frequent job turnover (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006).

Earlier, we hypothesized that the participating teachers who are younger, hold lower degrees and/or have less teaching experience are (or perceive themselves) less autonomous. Similar to a study carried out by Pearson and Hall (1993), it is observed that age and years of experience are not correlated with teaching autonomy which is against findings of a number of prior studies such as Burden (1981) and Simpson and Rosenholtz (1990). Pearson and Hall (1993) further found that teaching autonomy perception does not differ by educational degree held. However, the present study shows that there is a minimal correlation between these two variables though very insignificant when Pearson product correlation performed. This finding suggests that the level of education affects perceived curriculum autonomy.

Conclusion

Because of the discrepancy between the findings of the present study and some other surveys conducted previously and to come up with a more solid conclusion, this survey can be replicated with a larger target population accompanied with a number of interviews with the participants to elicit in-depth data for further analysis.

Throughout the conduct of the survey, it has been noticed that the distinction between Likert-type points of 'More or Less True' and 'More or Less False' in response to some items is difficult to make. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion and to enable respondents to report their perceptions more confidently, instead of 'Definitely True, More or Less True, More or Less False, and Definitely

False, another set of Likert-type points can be offered as: 'Never True, Rarely True, Usually True, and Always True'.

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