

Rural EFL teachers' perceptions of promoting learner autonomy in Indonesia's independent curriculum

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Abstract - As Indonesia's education system adopts the Independent Curriculum, the promotion of learner autonomy has attained renewed importance, particularly in English language education. While the theoretical advantages of learner autonomy are well-established, empirical research examining how EFL teachers in rural Indonesian contexts perceive and implement this concept remains limited. This study examined the views and self-reported practices of 40 in-service EFL teachers from rural schools in Kupang Regency within the framework of the Independent Curriculum. Data were obtained through structured questionnaires and open-ended reflections. The findings indicated that although teachers generally expressed positive attitudes toward the value of learner autonomy, many participants demonstrated limited theoretical understanding and lacked the pedagogical strategies necessary for fostering autonomy in their classrooms. While a majority believed that promoting learner autonomy was feasible, their justifications often relied on general assumptions. These assumptions included potential improvements in language proficiency rather than a concrete understanding of how autonomy can be integrated into classroom practice. These findings highlight the need for targeted professional development that equips teachers with both conceptual knowledge and practical tools aligned with the goals of the Independent Curriculum.

Keywords: EFL teachers' perceptions, Independent Curriculum, Learner Autonomy, Rural Schools

1. Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy was initially proposed by Holec (1981) has become a cornerstone in contemporary language education. Described as the learners' capacity to independently regulate their learning activities through goal-setting, strategy selection, tracking and assessing ones' own learning. It is widely endorsed not only for its pedagogical effectiveness but also for its alignment with humanistic educational values. It emphasizes learners' active role in directing their learning processes and is increasingly seen as essential for cultivating self-directed, reflective, and lifelong learners.

Beyond its function as an instructional strategy, learner autonomy is also conceptualized as a fundamental educational right (Spratt et al., 2002) grounded in the principles of independence, self-determination, and personal responsibility (Cotterall, 1995; Crabbe, 1993; Little, 2006). This perspective regards learners as active agents, instead of being passive recipients of knowledge, who are capable of making well-informed decisions about their learning pathways. By encouraging learners to take ownership of their educational journey through setting goals, choosing strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes, autonomy fosters a sense of agency and control that goes beyond in-class learning contexts.

Research has shown that autonomous learners are more efficient and reflective, leading to improved academic performance (Benson, 2011; Murphy & Hurd 2011; Rebenius, 2003). This efficiency is attributed to learners' heightened motivation and competence to regulate and control their own learning, characteristics that are especially valuable in contexts where teacher support may be limited or inconsistent. Furthermore, when learners experience success through autonomy, it enhances their self-efficacy, reinforcing their long-term commitment to learning.

Another significant advantage of fostering learner autonomy is its positive relationship with learner motivation. Motivation and autonomy are reciprocally linked, as autonomy enhances motivation, and motivated learners demonstrate greater willingness to explore opportunities for autonomous learning (Murphy & Hurd, 2011; Ushioda, 1996). This correlation has been supported by empirical data. For example, Liu (2015) provided evidence of significant positive link between learners' motivation and their autonomy among non-English majors. Similarly, Spratt et al. (2002) demonstrated that Hong Kong-based university students who perceived themselves as more responsible for their learning reported higher motivation levels. Additional studies affirm this connection (Günes, S., & Alagözlü, 2020; Lamb, 2009), emphasizing that promoting learner autonomy contributes to prolonged and self-regulated learning.

Furthermore, learner autonomy has been linked to improved language proficiency. Numerous studies have shown that learners who exhibit higher autonomy often perform more successfully in language proficiency examinations (Apple, 2011; Hashemian et al., 2011; Karataş et al., 2015; Mohamadpour, 2013; Myartawan et al, 2013; Ng et al., 2011; Phuong & Vo, 2019). In the Indonesian context, Myartawan et al., (2013) reported a significant direct relationship between students' autonomy in learning and their English proficiency in the context of first-year university students in Bali. Similarly, Mohamadpour (2013) found that students with higher autonomy scored better on standardized English proficiency tests. Phuong and Vo's (2019) study in Vietnam mirrored these findings, concluding that students who demonstrated greater autonomy in learning strategies and self-awareness of their learning styles achieved higher levels of English proficiency.

Given its numerous pedagogical benefits, learner autonomy has been widely embraced in educational systems around the world. Its significance has grown in tandem with global shifts in educational paradigms that emphasize the development of 21st-century competencies. In this evolving context, learner autonomy plays a vital role in supporting pedagogical innovation by fostering student-centered learning environments that encourage inquiry, creativity, and reflective thinking. These skills, such as adaptability, analytical problem solving, and digital competence, are increasingly recognized as essential for learners to navigate competently within a rapidly changing and networked global community. Therefore, the integration of autonomy-oriented approaches into second and foreign language educational instruction not only develops language learning outcomes but also aligns with broader educational objectives aimed at cultivating responsible, motivated, and self-regulated learners.

In Indonesia, cultivating learner autonomy has been formally embedded in recent educational reforms, most notably through the introduction of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*). This curriculum aligns with Ki Hadjar Dewantara's philosophy of *merdeka belajar* or independent learning emphasizing learners' freedom and responsibility to develop their potential within a supportive environment. Dewantara's principles, *ing ngarso sung tulodo*, *ing madyo mangun karso*, and *tut wuri handayani*, highlight a balance between teacher guidance and learner independence, positioning teachers as facilitators rather than mere transmitters of knowledge (Dwiarsro, 2010; Witasari, 2022). The

Independent Curriculum also represents a significant pedagogical shift, designed to address the demands of globalization and cultivate 21st-century skills among Indonesian learners, promoting student agency, autonomy, and active participation in the learning process (MoECRT, 2022). A central feature of this curriculum is the greater autonomy granted to schools, teachers, and students in designing, managing, and evaluating learning. This flexibility allows instructional strategies to be tailored to learners' individual needs and contextual realities, encouraging differentiated instruction, fostering critical thinking, and supporting the meaningful integration of digital technology to enhance learning outcomes (MoECRT, 2022).

At the heart of this reform is the promotion of learner autonomy, commonly defined as learners' ability to assume responsibility for their learning by setting objectives, employing suitable strategies, monitoring progress, and assessing outcomes (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). The curriculum's focus on project-oriented learning, formative assessment, and student agency aligns with internationally recognized principles of autonomous learning (MoCERT, 2022). While learners are encouraged to take initiative, teachers play a fundamental role in guiding learners toward autonomy by designing supportive learning environments, scaffolding student decision-making, providing timely feedback, and gradually transferring responsibility to learners. These approaches aim to foster self-regulated, reflective learners who are prepared for lifelong learning and capable of navigating complex, dynamic learning environments.

Empirical studies have examined various aspects of the Independent Curriculum's implementation. For instance, Hunaepi and Suharta (2024) provide a comprehensive analysis of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, evaluating its progression, pedagogical applications, and challenges in the Indonesian education system. Similarly, Rahmadhani et al. (2022) investigated the curriculum's impact on improving numeracy literacy, highlighting its positive effects on learning processes. Collectively, these studies underscore the curriculum's potential to enhance educational outcomes by emphasizing learner autonomy and allowing for contextual adaptability in teaching practices.

Despite these insights, empirical research examining how Indonesian EFL teachers, particularly those working in rural areas, understand and implement learner autonomy within the Independent Curriculum remains limited. While the curriculum explicitly promotes student agency and autonomy as central pedagogical goals, its successful enactment depends heavily on teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and competencies, as well as the constraints and affordances of their teaching contexts. Prior research has consistently demonstrated that teacher cognition, including beliefs, prior experiences, and professional knowledge, plays a pivotal role in shaping classroom practices that support learner autonomy. (Borg, 2017; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camilleri, 2007; Phipps & Borg, 2009). In many rural Indonesian contexts, systemic and situational constraints, including limited access to learning materials, high student teacher ratios, and varying levels of professional support, may impede the full realization of autonomy-oriented instruction. These challenges highlight the need for context sensitive approaches to curriculum implementation. These constraints include limited access to professional development opportunities, insufficient teaching resources, outdated classroom infrastructure, and linguistic diversity resulting from the widespread use of local dialects, low student motivation and the socio-economic disadvantages of many learners (Amalo & Petraki, 2024; Febriana et al., 2018; Ramos- Holguín & Morales, 2016) and lack of authentic opportunities for language use outside the classroom also limits learners' ability to develop autonomy (Fonseka, 2003). Such conditions complicate the delivery of interactive and autonomous learning experiences in English, as they limit opportunities for student-centered engagement and the integration of technology or project-based tasks. Moreover, these constraints often force teachers to rely on traditional, teacher-centered methods that may hinder the advancement of students' critical thinking and self-regulated learning skills.

In light of the specific constraints, particularly the inadequate accessibility to resources, students' socio-economic disadvantages, students' low motivation and a lack of exposure to authentic English use of rural education, promoting learner autonomy under the Independent Curriculum requires careful consideration of the contextual challenges faced by EFL teachers in this disadvantaged setting. Such challenges may undermine learners' inclination and capacity to take initiative and assume responsibility for their own learning, both of which are fundamental to the fostering of autonomous learning (Benson, 2011; Dam, 2011; Sinclair, 2000). As Sinclair (2000) emphasizes, learner autonomy is not merely a set of instructional strategies but a psychological readiness that must be nurtured over time. Therefore, the inclination toward autonomous learning should be understood as a developed competence rather than an automatic tendency; it must be supported by a conducive environment and particularly scaffolding from teachers, and the gradual transfer of responsibility.

The effective integration of learner autonomy within the Independent Curriculum necessitates a critical examination of teachers' belief systems and prior experiences. This is because teachers are

instrumental in fostering autonomy through encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning. (Benson, 2011). Borg (2003) emphasizes that teacher cognition, defined by what educators understand, believe, and reflect upon, has a major influence on their professional decision-making and classroom actions. These beliefs are shaped by a combination of personal learning histories, professional development experiences, and broader socio-cultural influences. As Levin (2014) highlights, teachers' beliefs extend beyond pedagogy and learners to encompass broader societal concerns such as poverty and inequality, all of which can shape their teaching practices. A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates that teacher beliefs are instrumental in determining the extent to which pedagogical innovations, including autonomy-supportive approaches, are adopted and sustained (Borg, 2017; Camilleri, 2007). In rural and resource-constrained educational contexts, teachers may be more inclined to believe that students require constant supervision, often resorting to rigid routines to ensure academic performance. Such assumptions can pose significant barriers to the shift toward learner-centered instruction and the meaningful development of learner autonomy.

Given the important roles of teacher beliefs, research in the field of learner autonomy has consistently demonstrated that EFL teachers' attitudes toward autonomy are shaped by a range of contextual factors, including institutional policies, student readiness, curriculum demands, and the availability of teaching resources. Across various international settings, teachers generally express support for the concept of learner autonomy but often face systemic and pedagogical barriers when implementing it in the classroom. Studies from Turkey (Balçınanlı, 2010; Doğan & Mirici, 2017), Iran (Salimi & Ansari, 2015), and Oman (Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014; Al-Shaqaqi, 2009) reveal that while teachers value autonomy, centralized curricula, limited flexibility in instructional approaches, and a tendency toward learner dependence limit its practical application. Similar issues have been observed in Saudi Arabia (Al Asmari, 2013; Asiri & Shukri, 2018), where low language proficiency and limited instructional time contribute to skepticism about students' readiness to learn independently. In Pakistan and Iraq, researchers (Alzeebaree & Alzeebaree, 2016; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018) have identified additional barriers such as rigid, exam-oriented curricula, socio-cultural expectations, and hierarchical classroom structures that inhibit autonomy-supportive teaching.

Although these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily focus on urban or semi-urban educational contexts where provision of learning resources and continuous professional development are relatively more available. Rural areas, where infrastructural limitations, socio-economic constraints, and teacher isolation are more pronounced, remain significantly underrepresented in the literature. This urban-centric focus limits the generalizability of findings and leaves critical gaps in understanding how autonomy is conceptualized and practiced in under-resourced environments.

In the Indonesian context, a similar trend is evident. Existing scholarship on learner autonomy has predominantly concentrated on urban or more developed regions such as Java, Sumatra, and Bali (e.g., Agustina, 2017; Daflizar, 2017; Lengkanawati, 2017; Mardjuki, 2018; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020) studies report generally favorable teacher attitudes toward autonomy, yet also point to challenges such as high-stakes examinations, low student proficiency, and limited classroom autonomy. For instance, Agustina (2017) discovered that although teachers acknowledged the significance of autonomy development, they struggled to balance this goal with the demands of national assessments. Similarly, Wiraningsih and Santosa (2020) identified structural and policy-related limitations, such as the school zoning system and inadequate institutional support as key obstacles.

However, minimal emphasis has been placed on teachers' experiences within rural and remote educational environments, where such challenges are often intensified by infrastructural deficits, limited access to professional development, and socio-economic disadvantages. The lack of empirical research on learner autonomy in rural Indonesian EFL classrooms leaves a critical gap in the literature, particularly at a time when the Independent Curriculum called for more learner-centered and autonomy-supportive teaching approaches.

This research seeks to fill a significant void in existing studies by examining how high school EFL teachers in rural areas of Kupang Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, perceive and promote learner autonomy within the framework of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The region is characterized by geographical isolation and limited educational infrastructure. As Indonesia undergoes a significant curriculum reform aimed at fostering learner agency, autonomy, and 21st-century skills, rural educators are expected to implement these changes despite facing persistent constraints including restricted availability of resources, minimal professional development, and rigid institutional structures.

By focusing on this under-researched context, the study aimed to inform the implementation of inclusive and contextually grounded, and evidence-based insight of learner autonomy in Indonesian EFL education. Specifically, it explored how rural EFL teachers conceptualize, interpret, and translate autonomy-supportive pedagogies into their teaching practices. These educators play a pivotal role in

bridging national curriculum reforms and the realities of the classroom, yet their perspectives remain largely underexplored. Understanding how they navigate the pedagogical, institutional, and socio-economic constraints that shape their teaching is essential to informing more equitable and effective curriculum implementation strategies.

The research is informed by two key theoretical frameworks: (1) Benson's (2011) three-dimensional model of learner autonomy which highlights learner control over the content, process, and evaluation of learning and; (2) Borg's (2003) concept of teacher cognition emphasising the interplay between teachers' beliefs, past experiences, and the teaching contexts in shaping their instructional decisions. These frameworks provide a lens for analyzing how teacher-held conceptions, together with situational constraints, offer empirical insights into classroom-level practices of learner autonomy in rural EFL classrooms. In line with these objectives, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the general perceptions and beliefs of Indonesian rural EFL teachers about learner autonomy (RQ1)?
2. To what extent are Indonesian rural EFL teachers prepared to enact autonomy-supportive approaches in their classrooms (RQ2)?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study explored the perceptions rural EFL high school (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, regarding the promotion of learner autonomy. A survey-based design was adopted in this study, employing a standardized questionnaire to acquire quantitative data from teachers. A survey is an effective method for examining teachers' beliefs, learner motivation, and teaching strategies as it offers a numerical summary of patterns, perspectives, or viewpoints within a population by examining a representative sample of that group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By utilizing a questionnaire, the study aimed to document diverse teacher perspectives on learner autonomy alongside the teaching methods utilized in their classroom practice.

2.2 Data collection instrument

This research utilized an adapted form of the questionnaire originally developed by Yildirim, (2008) to explore teachers' perspectives and self-reported practices regarding learner autonomy. Yildirim's original instrument, which examined student-teacher beliefs about autonomy in a specific educational setting, provided a valuable foundation for this research due to its clear structure and relevance to language education. The adapted questionnaire consisted of three sections: (i) a demographic section gathering respondents' background information; (ii) a modified Likert-scale section to assess their views about promoting learner autonomy; and (iii) an open-ended question inviting their opinions on the applicability of cultivating learner autonomy in their pedagogical contexts. The questionnaire was administered to 60 Indonesian EFL teachers, and a total of 40 completed questionnaires were returned. The collected data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Data collection was conducted through a one-phase survey approach, utilizing a combination of closed- and open-ended items to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of teacher beliefs and practices. The closed-ended items, formatted using a five-point Likert scale, aimed to measure the degree of agreement with various statements related to the concept and implementation of learner autonomy. In contrast, the open-ended questions were designed to elicit richer, more nuanced insights into how teachers encourage autonomy within their teaching practices and the barriers they encounter in doing so.

2.3 Research Setting and Participants

The study involved 40 Indonesian EFL teachers from 12 public high schools situated in rural areas of the Kupang Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. These schools are classified as rural based on their remote geographical locations, limited accessibility, and underdeveloped educational infrastructure—characteristics that align with common definitions of rural schooling (Lu, 2024; Wood, 2023). Compared to their urban counterparts, rural schools in Indonesia often operate under significant structural and resource-related constraints. These include inadequate school facilities, a lack of qualified English

teachers and restricted availability of current teaching and learning resources. Further, in these contexts, children are frequently expected to assist with household chores or contribute economically to support their families, which reduces the time and energy available for school-related tasks, such as homework, reading, or autonomous language practice (Amalo & Petraki,; Pramesty et al., 2022)

2.4 Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis

Sixty questionnaires were circulated to EFL teachers serving in rural high schools in the Kupang Regency area. Of these, 40 completed responses were received, yielding a response rate of approximately 67%. The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted through two primary methods: in printed form through direct delivery to schools, and electronically, with the Google Forms link distributed through WhatsApp, alongside dissemination via other online platforms. To ensure maximum accessibility and participation, both digital and physical formats were made available. Prior to the distribution process, the researcher conducted school visits to seek formal permission from school administrators and to offer a concise summary of the study's aims. These visits also functioned as a means of establishing rapport with the participants, address potential concerns, and underscore the significance of their contribution to the research.

In the course of these visits, participants were provided with detailed directions for completing the questionnaire, encompassing both Likert-scale items and open-ended responses. To foster honest and thoughtful responses, assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were clearly communicated. Moreover, teachers were made aware that participation was optional and that the collected data would be used only for academic inquiry.

To maintain the validity and reliability of the collected data, the questionnaire was piloted with several teachers and reviewed by two English language specialists and two lecturers, who provided feedback on item content, format, and wording (Bryman, 2016; Cohen, et al., 2018) This process ensured that the questionnaire was clear, relevant, and appropriate for the target participants. After data collection, 40 completed questionnaires were analyzed using percentages to synthesize responses to the Likert-scale items to provide a clear and concise overview of teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy and associated instructional practices.

3. Results and Discussion

Answering Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the general perceptions and beliefs of Indonesian rural EFL teachers about learner autonomy?

Participants' Perception of Students' Engagement in the Pedagogical Process

Table 1 reports the percentage distribution of responses to 12 Likert-scale statements, each measured on a five-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' These items were designed to capture teachers' perceptions of students' involvement in teaching and learning, an essential dimension of learner autonomy.

Table 1. Participants' Perception of Learners' Engagement in The Pedagogical Process

How would you rate your level of agreement on students' participation during the educational process?	SD	D	U	SA	A
1. Learners should participate in selecting classroom learning activities	20	43	18	13	6
2. Learners should participate in selecting homework tasks.	25	45	15	10	5
3. Learners should participate in determining learning objectives in class.	18	42	25	10	5
4. Learners should participate in determining learning objectives outside class.	15	40	20	17	8
5. Learners should participate in selecting instructional material.	22	43	20	10	5
6. Learners should participate in choosing classroom learning resources.	23	45	10	15	7

7. Learners should have the capacity to choose learning resources independently outside the classroom.	10	18	6	45	21
8. Learners should have the ability to evaluate their own learning.	7	13	8	48	24
9. Learners should be able to evaluate the course.	10	20	10	40	20
10. Learners should have the capacity to recognize their strengths and weaknesses in English.	6	12	6	48	28
11. Learners should actively participate in selecting what to learn next in their English studies.	20	45	12	15	8
12. Learners should be able to manage the time allocated for each learning activity.	8	14	8	48	22

Note: SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; U = Undecided; SA = strongly agree; A = agree

The findings in Table 1 highlight the varying levels of support among rural EFL teachers for student involvement in the course of teaching and learning activities. Teachers showed strong support for autonomy in evaluation-related activities. To illustrate, 76% of respondents (48% strongly agree, 28% agree) believed that students should identify their own English language strengths and areas for improvement. Similarly, 72% (48% strongly agree, 24% agree) supported the notion that students are responsible for assessing their own learning progress. These findings align with the views cited by scholars such as Holec (1981) and Little (2007), who argue that autonomy is grounded in learners' responsibility for their own progress. Furthermore, 76% of teachers (48% strongly agree, 28% agree) indicated that students should determine how much time to allocate to tasks, further highlighting the role of learner reflection in fostering autonomy in language acquisition.

Teachers showed moderate support for learner autonomy outside formal classroom settings. A total of 66% (45% strongly agree, 21% agree) indicated that students should have the capacity to select their own learning resources. Similarly, 60% (40% strongly agree, 20% agree) of teachers supported students' involvement in course evaluation. This supports Borg & Al-Busaidi's (2012) view that student input in less structured areas can boost motivation and ownership. However, support was much lower for learner autonomy within the classroom. Only 20% of teachers (15% strongly agree, 5% agree) favored student involvement in choosing in-class activities. Likewise, just 15% (10% strongly agree, 5% agree) supported involving students in selecting homework or setting learning objectives. This reflects a reluctance to share control over instructional content, often influenced by centralized curricula, hierarchical classroom dynamics, and doubts about students' capabilities (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Lengkanawati, 2017). These findings also align with broader patterns in Asian educational contexts, where learner autonomy tends to be reactive, limited to teacher defined boundaries, rather than proactive or student driven (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Bui, 2018; Lengkanawati, 2017). In Indonesia, although the new curriculum promotes independent learning, the persistent focus on national examinations restricts flexibility (Agustina, 2017). As a result, teachers often follow the prescribed syllabus closely, leaving little room for student input or independent learning strategies.

Interestingly, while autonomy in evaluation received strong support, there was considerably less agreement regarding students' involvement in setting learning goals. Only 15% of teachers (10% strongly agree, 5% agree) endorsed students' participation in setting in-class goals and 25% (17% strongly agree, 8% agree) supported student involvement in establishing out-of-class learning goals. This reflects a traditional view that goal-setting is primarily the teacher's responsibility, potentially limiting students' opportunities to actively engage with their learning journey (Little, 2004).

These findings can be understood through the lens of Benson's, (2011) three-dimensional framework of learner autonomy. Teachers were more open to promoting learner's control over evaluation, encouraging self-assessment and reflection, than over content or process. This aligns with autonomy scholars' contention such as Benson (2011) and Little (2007), suggesting autonomy in evaluation fosters metacognitive awareness and independent learning. Teachers also showed some receptivity to promoting learner control over the learning process, particularly in managing time and tasks, but this was largely confined to informal or supplementary activities rather than core instruction.

Overall, the research results indicate that while rural EFL teachers are increasingly willing to foster learner autonomy in particular areas, especially evaluation and process, they remain reluctant to allow students greater agency in content decisions. This indicates that teachers held partial understanding

of learner autonomy indicating that learner autonomy in rural contexts is not fully realized across all dimensions of Benson's (2011) framework. To support the development of learner autonomy, professional development initiatives should encourage teachers to view autonomy as a holistic pedagogical approach rather than isolated strategies.

Participants' Perceptions of the Nature of Autonomous Classrooms

Table 2 presents participants' perceptions of the nature of autonomous classrooms based on 10 Likert-scale statements. Respondents evaluated each item on a five-point agreement scale extending from 'Strongly Disagree' (SD) to 'Strongly Agree' (SA). The distribution of responses provides insights into how teachers conceptualize learner autonomy in classroom contexts, particularly regarding roles, responsibilities, and the balance between teacher control and student participation.

Table 2. Participants' Perceptions of the Nature of Autonomous Classrooms

Nature of Autonomous Classrooms	SD	D	U	SA	A
1. In the classroom, I talk more than my students as I play a role as a transmitter of knowledge	25	15	20	10	30
2. My role in the classroom is more as a facilitator than a model and controller	20	15	5	25	35
3. In the autonomous classroom, teachers can join in an activity as a teacher and also as participants	10	5	10	40	35
4. Teachers should not position themselves as the only resource in classrooms	6	4	5	50	35
5. Teachers should encourage students to exercise greater autonomy in directing their own learning processes	15	10	5	30	40
6. Teaching should be student-centred rather than teacher-centred to promote autonomous classrooms	10	5	5	45	35
7. In autonomous classrooms, teachers should allow students to choose to work with other students they like	20	15	10	20	35
8. Working in groups and pairs helps students build their learning autonomy	12	8	15	30	35
9. Autonomy involves learner independence within collaborative and supported environments.	3	2	5	57	33
10. Students learn best when they do not depend entirely on their teachers for knowledge and information	18	12	10	22	37

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; U = Undecided; SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree

Table 2 provides insights into participants' perceptions of the characteristics that define an autonomous classroom. The responses reflect a general acknowledgment of the need to redefine teacher roles and to embrace learner-centered approaches that foster autonomy. A notable majority of participants endorsed characteristics consistent with the principles of learner autonomy. For example, 80% of teachers (45% strongly agree, 35% agree) affirmed that the classroom should center on the learner's role rather than the teacher's dominance, a view that resonates with Benson's (2011) notion of learner control over the learning process. Learner-centered teaching involves designing activities that allow learners to direct their own engagement, make choices, and develop critical thinking skills (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Little, 2007). This finding suggests that the respondents recognize the importance of shifting pedagogical strategies to support learner initiative and participation.

The findings further revealed that 85% of teachers supported a more distributed role in knowledge construction, with 50% strongly agreeing and 35% agreeing that teachers should not position themselves as the sole source of knowledge in the classroom. This aligns with both control over content and process, as it reflects a belief in diversifying sources of knowledge and encouraging students to explore beyond the teacher's input (Benson, 2011). This notion is well-supported in the literature, where the teacher's role in fostering autonomy is described as moving from a "transmitter of knowledge" to a facilitator and co-learner (Benson, 2011; Dam, 2003). This is also in line with previous study in this context, where teachers defined learner autonomy in terms learners' engagement in independent knowledge discovery, while teachers serve as facilitators rather than mere providers of information (Amalo, 2023).

A large majority of participants (90%) supported the statement that ‘autonomy involves learner independence within collaborative and supported environments,’ with 57% strongly agreeing and 33% agreeing. This reflects a substantial and accurate comprehension of the principles underlying learner autonomy. This challenges a common misconception that autonomy equates to solitary learning. As Little (1995) asserts, autonomy involves interdependence, where learners exercise choice and agency while also engaging collaboratively with others. Similarly, Benson (2011) emphasizes that learner autonomy includes important social dimensions, particularly through interaction and cooperation with peers in shared learning tasks.

This high level of agreement suggests that participants recognize the value of promoting autonomy by assuming active roles in their learning, think independently, and engage in meaningful peer interactions (Jang et al., 2010). Such an understanding aligns with Little's (1995) argument that collaboration is essential to the development of autonomy as a psychological skill or capacity. Collaborative learning not only supports academic progress but also enhances students' learning strategies, creativity, and self-reliance. Importantly, the teacher's role in this context does not diminish but shifts. Rather than acting as the primary source of information, teachers are now expected to function as facilitators who foster autonomous and active learning environments.

The agreement (40 strongly agree and 35% agree) with the statement that teachers can join classroom activities “as both teachers and participants” also points to a redefinition of traditional hierarchies. This egalitarian approach fosters a more collaborative learning community, in which students and teachers mutually learn from each other. As Dam (2003) suggests, teachers in autonomous classrooms model learning behaviors and support students in becoming reflective and independent thinkers. However, some responses indicate lingering tensions. For instance, only 55% (20 strongly agree and 35 agree) expressed agreement that students should have the freedom to choose their peers to collaborate with which may suggest hesitancy to fully implement learner choice. While collaborative learning was generally viewed positively (with 30% strongly agree and 35 agree), full control over peer interaction remains a delicate issue for many teachers, likely due to concerns about classroom management or equitable participation.

Interestingly, opinions were evenly divided on the statement that the teacher talks more than the students. While 40% of respondents expressed agreement (10% strongly agree, 30% agree), an equal proportion (40%) expressed disagreement (25% strongly disagree, 15% disagree). This division suggests that many educators are still negotiating their professional identity between the roles of knowledge transmitter and learning facilitator. This ambivalence reflects the complexity of changing classroom dynamics and the deeply ingrained roles teachers have historically held (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

The findings from Table 2 demonstrate that teachers are beginning to adopt a more autonomy-supportive stance in their classrooms, especially in terms of shifting control over content, process, and evaluation to learners. While most respondents showed a theoretical comprehension of the epistemological bases of learner autonomy, particularly the role of collaboration, facilitation, and student responsibility, some uncertainty remains. This uncertainty centers on relinquishing teacher control and providing full learner choice.

These insights indicate a need for ongoing professional development and reflective practice as a means to align pedagogical beliefs with classroom application, particularly in shifting from traditional, teacher-led instruction to student-focused approaches in the Indonesian EFL context.

Participants' Perceptions on Supporting Learner Autonomy through Out-of-Class Practices

Table 3 presents teachers' perceptions of how they support learner autonomy through out-of-class practices. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they promote specific activities for their students when learning English. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Never’ (N) to ‘Always’ (A), with options for ‘Occasionally’ (O), ‘Sometimes’ (S), and ‘Usually’ (U). The distribution of responses provides insight into the strategies teachers encourage in out-of-class contexts to facilitate learner autonomy.

Table 3. Participants' Perceptions of Supporting Learner Autonomy through Out-of-Class Practices

To what extent do you promote the following practices when teaching English?	N	O	S	U	A
1. Engage in self-directed grammar learning	3	5	42	20	30
2. Engage in reading English-language news articles	0	2	42	15	40
3. Engage in letter and email writing using the English language	6	10	34	27	33

4. Read printed media such as books and magazines written in English	8	50	12	5	25
5. Watch English TV program	0	3	40	37	20
6. Listen to English program (podcast/radio)	0	6	36	40	18
7. Listen to English songs	0	0	5	15	80
8. Practise using English with friends.	0	2	20	30	48
9. Do English self study in a group	0	10	25	20	45
10. Do grammar exercises on their own	0	2	34	12	52
11. Watch English movies	0	12	45	20	23
12. Write diary or journal in English	1	17	27	40	15
13. Practise speaking English with native Speakers	12	36	43	9	0

Note: N= Never; O=Occasionally; S= Sometimes; U=Usually; A= Always

Table 3 demonstrates that participants are generally in favor of encouraging the development of learner autonomy through a range of extracurricular English language practices. A strong majority of respondents reported encouraging students to listen to English songs, with 15% selecting ‘usually’ and 80% ‘always.’ This suggests recognition of the value of authentic and enjoyable content in enhancing learner motivation. Similarly, high levels of endorsement were observed for other practices, including practising English with peers (30% usually, 48% always), undertaking self-study in groups (35% usually, 40% always), and completing grammar exercises independently (12% usually, 52% always). This finding aligns with Amalo's (2023) research conducted in a comparable setting, which reported that teachers actively promoted various out-of-class autonomous learning by encouraging students to participate in self-initiated language activities, including peer interactions in English and engagement with English-language media content. This result supports Little's (1995) view that autonomy is significantly enhanced through collaborative engagement.

Notably, 50% of participants reported encouraging students to engage in grammar learning (20% usually, 30% always). In addition, 60% promoted writing letters and emails in English (27% usually, 33% always), while 45% encouraged reading English-language news articles (15% usually, 30% always). These practices suggest a balanced view that values both formal and informal learning modes, supporting Benson's (2011) notion of *content autonomy*, in which learners engage with varied materials that serve their learning goals. However, extensive reading activities (e.g., reading books or magazines) received less support, with 50% of respondents rarely encouraging this practice. This may reflect contextual challenges such as limited access to engaging texts or students' low reading motivation.

Personal writing practices, such as journaling, received moderate support: 45% of participants reported ‘usually’ encouraging it and 5% ‘always,’ while 27% indicated ‘sometimes’ and 17% ‘rarely’ promoting this activity. This may stem from uncertainty about how personal writing contributes to language development or how to guide students in reflective writing, a key feature of *evaluation autonomy* as described by Benson (2011).

The findings show relatively limited support for promoting interaction with native speakers, with only 9% of participants encouraging it frequently, compared to 36% who rarely and 12% who never encouraged it. This hesitation may arise from the scarcity of native speakers in the local context or concerns over learner confidence. However, with the advancement of technology, learners could access this opportunity to speak with native speakers through social media as Reinders and White (2011) contend that technology offers learners the means to accept more responsibility for managing their own learning, thereby fostering autonomous learning behaviors. Furthermore, Tyers (2013) points out that advancements in technology are empowering motivated learners in developing countries to engage in autonomous learning practices, such as communicating with native speakers.

The responses indicate that participants tend to favor practical, accessible, and socially-oriented activities, which is consistent with the sociocultural dimension of autonomy (Oxford, 2003). However, certain practices such as extensive reading and self-reflective writing remain underutilized. This signals areas where teacher training could play a crucial role in bridging belief practice gaps and expanding teachers' understanding of how to support autonomy through diverse learning pathways, including the use of technology.

Participants' Familiarity with the Learner Autonomy Concept

Table 4 presents participants' self-reported comprehension of learner autonomy, defined in the questionnaire as learners' capacity to take responsibility for their own learning, specifically by setting

educational objectives, selecting strategies, monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes. This was assessed using a five-point scale ranging from 'Not at all' (NA) to 'Very Much' (VM)

Table 4. Participants' Conceptual Knowledge of Learner Autonomy

Knowledge of the principles underpinning learner autonomy	NA (%)	L (%)	P (%)	M (%)	VM (%)
Learner autonomy refers to an individual's capacity to assume control over various aspects of their own learning process. This includes the ability to independently establish learning objectives, select and apply suitable learning strategies, track their progress throughout the learning journey, and critically evaluate the outcomes of their efforts.	20	22	20	18	20
How much are you familiar with this concept?					
<i>Note: NA=Not at all; L=little; P=Partly; M=Much; VM=Very Much</i>					

The results indicate that only 38% of participating EFL teachers (18% very familiar, 20% familiar) demonstrated a clear understanding of the principles of learner autonomy, while 22% reported partial familiarity and 20% acknowledged having no familiarity. These findings highlight a notable knowledge gap among English teachers concerning a key aspect of modern language teaching. This lack of familiarity is particularly concerning since the implementation of Independent Curriculum places a strong emphasis on student-centered, autonomy-supportive instruction. Without a solid understanding of learner autonomy, teachers may face challenges in creating environments that effectively foster student independence and self-directed learning.

As Benson (2011) argues, teachers are not merely facilitators of learner autonomy; they are key agents who shape its practical enactment through classroom design, task choices, and interactional styles. Without a solid conceptual understanding of autonomy, particularly its dimensions of control over content, process, and evaluation, teachers may unintentionally reinforce conventional, teacher centered approaches that restrict learners' active participation and ownership of their learning. This concern is also reflected in Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) findings, which revealed that while many language teachers agree with the concept of autonomy in theory, they often lack the pedagogical knowledge, training, or confidence to implement it systematically in their classrooms.

Furthermore, through the lens of teacher cognition theory (Borg, 2003), it argues that teachers' beliefs, prior experiences, and knowledge significantly influence how pedagogical innovations are interpreted and implemented. Without a well-defined, research-informed conceptualization of learner autonomy, educators may be hesitant to implement it effectively or may adopt inconsistent practices in its application (Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014). This misalignment between policy intentions and teachers' readiness to adopt autonomy-focused practices can undermine both teacher agency and student development.

In light of these findings, urgent attention is required for context-specific professional development and curricular enhancements both before and during professional practice. Training programs should go beyond promoting general awareness of autonomy to include concrete strategies, such as goal-setting, self-assessment techniques, collaborative learning structures, and reflective dialogue. Teachers also need support in navigating the challenges of applying these strategies in diverse contexts, particularly in under-resourced rural areas where structural constraints and traditional educational norms may pose additional barriers.

Participants' Perceptions of the Prospects for Developing Learner Autonomy

Table 5 presents participants' perspectives on the feasibility of fostering learner autonomy within their current educational contexts, indicating whether they perceived it as possible ('Yes') or not feasible ('No').

Table 5. Participants' Perceptions of the Prospects for Developing Learner Autonomy

The Prospects for Developing Learner Autonomy	Yes	No
Do you consider it feasible to encourage learner autonomy in your current educational setting?	88	12

The data in Table 5 reveals strong optimism among participants concerning the practicality of fostering learner autonomy with 88% agreeing it is achievable in their teaching contexts, while only 12% expressed doubt. This positive outlook is further supported by qualitative responses, in which participants associated autonomy with improved English proficiency, heightened motivation, increased learner ownership of the learning process, greater students' responsibility for their own learning, and the development of independent learning habits. Notably, 81 percent of respondents, representing 26 teachers, reported that learner autonomy significantly enhanced English proficiency and academic performance. This finding is supported by numerous studies in EFL contexts (Alrabai, 2021; Karataş et al., 2015; Mohamadpour, 2013; Myartawan, 2013; Ng et al., 2011; Phuong & Vo, 2019; Soodmand Afshar & Jamshidi, 2022). Additionally, 22% of participants highlighted enhanced memory and retention through active, hands-on learning as another advantage of learner autonomy.

However, while the belief in its feasibility was widespread, participants did not provide clear, context-specific justifications for this view. Rather than citing practical factors such as institutional support, teaching strategies, or cultural alignment, they emphasized the benefits of autonomy in general terms. This lack of concrete pedagogical reasoning suggests a superficial understanding of how to implement autonomy-supportive practices. As Ahmadianzadeh et al., (2020) argue, awareness of learner autonomy's value alone is insufficient to ensure its effective integration into teaching practice.

This disconnect between belief and practice is further evidenced by earlier findings (see Table 4), which show that 42 % of participants had a basic or incomplete grasp of what learner autonomy entails. According to Borg's (2003) theory of teacher cognition, such inconsistencies are common, as beliefs, experiences, and professional training significantly shape classroom implementation. Similarly, as reported by Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012), although the concept of autonomy is generally accepted by teachers in theory, they often struggle to apply it, particularly in systems still dominated by traditional, teacher-centered approaches. Lee et al., (2011) further echoed this in their study on curriculum reform in China, where many teachers expressed support for new policies but lacked the pedagogical depth to implement them effectively, resulting in surface-level compliance. Likewise, in the current study, participants' endorsement of learner autonomy appears more aspirational than grounded in practical understanding or actionable strategies. Overall, these findings indicate that rural EFL teachers view learner autonomy positively, particularly in its reflective and motivational aspects, but their understanding remains limited to the evaluative dimension of Benson's (2011) autonomy model. They support the concept ideologically but not yet methodologically, revealing a belief-practice gap shaped by contextual barriers such as centralized curricula, exam-oriented teaching, and scarce professional development opportunities (Lengkanawati, 2017; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). Addressing these gaps through sustained, context-sensitive professional training will be critical for enabling teachers to translate their favorable perceptions into autonomy-supportive classroom practices aligned with Indonesia's Independent Curriculum (MoECRT, 2022).

Answering Research Question 2 (RQ2): To what extent are Indonesian rural EFL teachers prepared to enact autonomy-supportive approaches in their classrooms

Building on the findings from Research Question 1, which revealed teachers' generally positive but partial understanding of learner autonomy, the results of Research Question 2 indicate that rural EFL teachers' readiness to implement autonomy-supportive practices remains limited. Although 88% of participants believed that fostering autonomy is feasible in their teaching contexts (see Table 5), their explanations were largely aspirational rather than grounded in pedagogical reasoning. This pattern echoes Borg's (2003, 2017) theory of teacher cognition, which emphasizes that teachers' beliefs, shaped by experience and training, often diverge from classroom reality when not supported by sufficient professional competence. Similar findings have been reported by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014), who found that many EFL teachers endorse learner autonomy conceptually but lack confidence and strategies to operationalize it.

The limited conceptual understanding identified in Table 4, where fewer than 40 percent of teachers reported being familiar with the principles of learner autonomy, further explains this gap. As Benson (2011) and Little (2007) argue, promoting autonomy requires teachers to transfer control gradually over content, process, and evaluation, which demands both theoretical grounding and practical techniques. In the rural Indonesian context, however, teachers face constraints such as limited resources, exam-driven curricula, and entrenched teacher-centered norms (Amalo & Petraki, 2024; Lengkanawati, 2017; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). These conditions restrict opportunities to experiment with learner-centered instruction and reduce teachers' confidence to facilitate independent learning.

Thus, while teachers express strong support for the *idea* of autonomy, their preparedness to enact it remains underdeveloped. This misalignment between belief and practice, also noted in studies by Camilleri (2007) and Lee et al. (2011), suggest that policy reforms alone are insufficient; sustained, context-sensitive professional development is essential. Such training should integrate theoretical models of autonomy (Benson, 2011) with concrete classroom strategies, such as goal-setting, peer collaboration, and self-assessment to help teachers internalize and apply autonomy-oriented pedagogy effectively within Indonesia's Independent Curriculum framework (MoECRT, 2022).

To bridge this gap, pre-service teacher education programs must go beyond promoting awareness of learner autonomy's benefits. They should provide explicit training in autonomy-supportive pedagogy, including theoretical frameworks such as Benson (2011) practical strategies for learner-centered instruction, and classroom management techniques that empower student agency.

4. Conclusion

This study, among the limited research available on this topic, employed a survey to examine rural EFL teachers' beliefs and readiness to support learner autonomy in Indonesia. Drawing on Benson's (2011) framework of autonomy and Borg (2003) teacher cognition theory as the theoretical lens, the findings reveal that rural EFL teachers largely display encouraging perspective of learner autonomy. Many participants of this study believed that fostering autonomy can improve students' English proficiency, enhance motivation, and cultivate habits of lifelong learning. Teachers commonly linked autonomy to extracurricular activities such as tuning in to songs in English listening, engaging in conversations in English with fellow students and consuming English-language audiovisual content. a. These perceptions are in line with the vision of Indonesia's Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes flexible, student-centered learning and encourages students to independently regulate and take charge of their learning journey. Overall, the findings from both research questions reveal that while rural Indonesian EFL teachers hold positive attitudes toward learner autonomy (RQ1), their readiness to implement autonomy-supportive practices remains limited (RQ2). Additionally, many participants reported limited familiarity with the theoretical foundations of learner autonomy. This lack of grounding presents a critical barrier, especially when considering that the Independent Curriculum initiative calls for adaptable, learner-driven teaching approaches.

To address this gap, professional development efforts should be prioritized. Training programs that integrate theoretical insights on learner autonomy with practical teaching strategies would align teachers' pedagogical beliefs with their instructional practices in the classroom. By aligning such training with the principles of Independent Curriculum, rural teachers can be better equipped to foster student-centered learning environments. This is especially critical in resource-limited contexts, where autonomous learning can serve as a means of overcoming limitations in instructional support. By providing targeted, context sensitive professional development, educational stakeholders can help ensure that learner autonomy becomes a reality in rural classrooms. This support can foster both linguistic development and the attainment of broader educational aims, including the goals of educational reform in Indonesia.

However, this study is subject to certain limitations, particularly its use of self-reported measures, which may not precisely represent teachers' actual classroom practices. The sample was also limited to rural teachers in a specific region of Indonesia, which restricts the the applicability of the results to other educational settings. In addition to this, this study did not include classroom observations or interviews, which could have provided a deeper understanding of how learner autonomy is interpreted and implemented in real classroom settings. It is recommended that future investigations involve a larger and more varied sample of rural EFL teachers across Indonesia and explore regional variations in their perceptions and practices. Longitudinal studies could track how teachers' beliefs and pedagogical approaches evolve over time, particularly in response to professional development aligned with Independent Curriculum. Incorporating qualitative methods involving interviews and classroom-based observations would offer richer data on the complexities of implementing learner autonomy.

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