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Developing Learner Autonomy: Novice and Experienced EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Strategies

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Abstract

Teachers' beliefs play a determining role in the decisions they make and the strategies they employ to foster learner autonomy. Therefore, their beliefs and the strategies they use to foster learner autonomy merit empirical evidence. To this end, the present study investigated the beliefs of 85 Kurdish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers about learner autonomy and examined the influence of their experience on the strategies they employed to promote learner autonomy. The data was collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire addressing learner autonomy from eight dimensions. The findings indicated that teachers generally had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. Experienced teachers placed significantly greater emphasis on several aspects of learner autonomy, including the psychological and political factors, the contributions of learner autonomy, and the learning materials. Both novice and experienced teachers stressed the importance of promoting autonomy through learner-centered teaching methods and student engagement. Experienced teachers employed more varied teaching methods and assessment techniques to promote learner autonomy. While novice teachers preferred direct observation of their students when they were completing tasks and activities, experienced teachers adopted a more hands-off approach which allowed more space for learner autonomy. The differences in beliefs and strategies between novice and experienced teachers highlight the transformative impact of teaching experience on the promotion of learner autonomy. The findings imply that professional development programs should focus on developing teaching strategies that foster autonomy.

Keywords: experienced teachers, learner autonomy, novice teachers, strategies, teachers' beliefs.

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INTRODUCTION

For over thirty years, the concept of learner autonomy has become increasingly important in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning. It is a critical factor in fostering effective, adaptable, and personalized language education (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Little, 1991). Learner autonomy refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Researchers emphasize the importance of learner autonomy, highlighting how it empowers students to take responsibility, overcome challenges, and effectively manage their learning (Dickinson, 1987; Egel, 2009; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Lengkanawati, 2016; Little, 2007; Sinclair, 2000). According to Benson (2016), "learner autonomy is both a desirable characteristic of language learners and an important consideration in the practice of language teaching" (p. xxxiii). Despite its recognized importance, research suggests a potential disconnect between researchers' theories of learner autonomy and teachers' understanding and practice of it in their classes (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Raya & Vieira, 2020). Therefore, given the potential influence of teacher beliefs on their actual practices (Skott, 2014), a closer examination of their understanding of learner autonomy is essential (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

A common thread in examining the extent to which learners take responsibility for their learning is that teachers bear the primary responsibility for establishing a pedagogy that fosters autonomy (Duong, 2014; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011). Given the importance of teachers' beliefs for their classroom practices and their potential role in managing these practices, exploring teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and how they use opportunities to employ strategies that promote autonomy is of paramount importance (Duong, 2014; Nakata, 2011; Wang & Wang, 2016). Researchers (e.g., Benson, 2013; Voller, 1997) have argued that teachers' perception of their classroom environment and their role within it determines the strategies they implement to either support or hinder student autonomy. Although teachers'

accumulated experience significantly influence their cognition and the role they and their students play (Crookes & Arakaki, 1999; Nunan, 1996), the way teachers' experience influence their beliefs about learner autonomy and strategies they employ for developing it has remained unexplored. Therefore, a central question is how teachers' accumulated experience shape their beliefs and the strategies they implement to promote learner autonomy. Investigating the differences between novice and experienced teachers could reveal a developmental trajectory in their beliefs and practices. This agenda is significant since the principal features distinguishing novice and experienced teachers lie in their cognitive processes (Crookes & Arakaki, 1999). Although studies (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Nakata, 2011; Wang & Ryan, 2023) have investigated teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, exploring novice and experienced teachers' beliefs has received scant attention, particularly in the context of Kurdish EFL teachers. To this end, the present mixed-method study explores novice and experienced teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and the strategies they employ to develop learner autonomy through shifting control to their learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomy in Language Learning

The concept of learner autonomy has received considerable attention in educational research, especially in language teaching (Benson, 2013). Because it is an elusive construct and difficult to delineate, researchers have used various terms to refer to learner autonomy, including "self-directed learning" (Holec, 1996), "self-regulated learning" (Raya & Vieira, 2020), "self-instruction" (Benson, 2013), "independent learning" (White, 2008), "self-regulation" (Brown, 2009), and "self-access learning" (Reinders, 2000). The L2 literature largely defines learner autonomy as the learners' ability to take charge of their own learning (e.g., Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Holec noted that taking charge means having responsibility towards essential aspects of learning, including identifying learning objectives, defining

learning contents, selecting learning methods, monitoring learning procedures, and evaluating what has been learnt. Autonomous learners control every decision impacting their learning and implement those decisions independently (Dickinson, 1987).

A wide range of approaches have been used to develop learner autonomy (Teng & Teng, 2019). These approaches are often associated with learner-centered education, emphasizing the importance of placing the learner at the center of the educational process. Benson and Voller (2013) highlighted three aspects of autonomous learning: Firstly, "an autonomous approach to learning requires a transfer of control to the learner" (p. 113). Secondly, teachers should engage in a process of negotiation with learners to ensure that instructional methods and activities are tailored to meet their needs and preferences. Finally, teachers should engage in self-monitoring and reflective practices through which they can analyze their practice and use better teaching strategies. These aspects highlight the crucial role of teachers in implementing strategies that promote learner autonomy. To make learners autonomous, teachers need to ease the transition of learning ownership towards students in a democratic classroom environment. This democratic environment empowers students to become active participants in the learning process and helps creating a more engaging learning experience (Beh-Afarin et al., 2021; Burns et al., 2015; Dickinson, 1987; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Pineda & Frodden, 2008; Teng, 2019).

Given the importance of shifting control to language learners and reflecting on strategies employed to achieve this goal, it is important to explore teachers' roles in fostering learner autonomy. Richards and Rodgers (2001) highlighted the diverse assumptions about language learning that shape teacher's roles, ranging from being a source of knowledge and direction to acting as a catalyst, consultant, guide, and model for learning. In response to these roles of teacher, learners should be interdependent, meaning that they should rely on each other for support, collaboration, and shared problem-solving. This involves understanding their responsibility within a social setting, developing the ability to collaborate, and finding solutions to learning

problems. According to Nakata (2011), encouraging students to become autonomous depends on establishing a supportive classroom culture. However, whether and how teachers play a role in encouraging control shift and what strategies they employ to foster autonomy has remained open for further investigation.

Teacher Cognition on Learner Autonomy

Teacher cognition refers to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). Early studies on teacher cognition were motivated by advances in cognitive psychology, particularly in the information processing model (Borg, 2003). In an attempt to explain teaching behaviour, cognitive psychology exclusively focused on determining how the mind represents the world and how these representations are used to dominate thinking (Ellis, 2019). A central principle of early classical information processing was the idea that perception, cognition, and actions are distinct processes. This model posits that perception begins with receiving input from the world; cognition then processes this input to form representations, which ultimately drive actions. This view of cognition, proposed by Ellis (2019), had only focused on internal mental processes and overlooked the multifaceted nature of learning; in other words, it failed to adequately address social, emotional, and environmental dimensions of learning. This focus on internal mental processes also disregards the way teachers' experience shape their cognition. Experience plays a crucial role in shaping classroom practices, as evident in the way "teachers with differing degrees of teaching experience … presumably adopt different solutions to instructional problems and tasks" (Richards et al., 1995, p. 4). Generally, there is a tendency to presume a direct, linear correlation between teachers' years of teaching experience and teaching quality (Brandenburg et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to explore whether and how teaching experience influences teachers' perception of learner autonomy and the strategies they employ to promote it.

Prior studies on teachers' beliefs have yielded important insights into the nature of their perspectives on learner autonomy. For example, Nakata (2011) investigated Japanese high school EFL teachers' perceived importance and the use of strategies for promoting learner autonomy. The findings indicated that the teachers were not fully prepared to promote autonomy in their students. In another study, Wang and Ryan (2023) examined how language teachers in a Chinese private school facilitate or hinder the shift of control to their learners. They found that teachers fostered learner autonomy through involving language learners in selecting tasks, providing feedback, monitoring their progress, and managing the classroom. While highlighting the value of teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) examined teachers' understanding of autonomy mainly from psychological, political, social, and technical perspectives. They found that teachers have positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. Despite these insights into teachers' beliefs and the value they see in autonomy, the influence of teachers' experience on their beliefs regarding learner autonomy and the strategies they employ to foster it has yet to be explored.

Purpose of the Study

A growing body of literature demonstrates that learner autonomy is a desirable goal of language teaching (Benson, 2013), and autonomous learners tend to achieve better outcomes in language acquisition (Ushioda, 2011). Despite this, research on learner autonomy has not addressed the role of factors such as teaching experience in shaping teachers' belief and the way teachers release control to their learners. Therefore, the present study investigates the understanding and pedagogical practices of EFL teachers regarding learner autonomy. More specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1. What does learner autonomy mean to Kurdish EFL teachers?
2. Is there any significant difference between novice and experienced

teachers regarding their beliefs about learner autonomy?

3. What strategies do novice and experienced teachers employ to encourage learner autonomy and shift control to their students?

METHOD

This study adopted Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design, which involves a two-step process of quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by a subsequent qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the quantitative survey findings.

Participants

A total of 85 English language teachers (male = 22, female = 63) from language institutes and universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq voluntarily participated in the study. The participants were native speakers of Kurdish, teaching English in Sulaimani and Erbil. They were selected through convenience and snowball sampling which allowed for identifying potential participants and aimed to reach a diverse range of English teachers (Emerson, 2015). In the quantitative phase, a learner autonomy questionnaire was distributed to the participants via Google Forms. Additionally, hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed at participants' workplaces to ensure a wider reach. Each questionnaire was reviewed; improperly filled or incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the sample.

Following Graham et al. (2020), teachers with 0-3 years of experience were considered as novice and those with more than three years were regarded as experienced. Based on this criterion, the participants fell into two categories of 44 novice teachers and 41 experienced teachers (Table. 1).

Table 1: Distribution of the participants

Gender		Age		Experience	
Male	22	Twenties	68	0-3 years	44
Female	63	Thirties	14	3-5 years	24
		Forties	1	6-9 years	12
		Fifties	2	Over 10 years	5
Total					85

After filling out the questionnaire, the teachers were invited to participate in an interview. From those who agreed to participate in the interview, based on Graham et al.'s (2020) criteria, ten teachers (5 novice, 5 experienced), all holding Bachelor's degrees in English language, were interviewed.

Instruments

A learner autonomy questionnaire developed by the researchers was employed to collect the data. Compared to previously published questionnaires on learner autonomy, this one is more comprehensive, covering a broader spectrum of dimensions related to learner autonomy; the development of the questionnaire progressed through multiple stages, including creating an item pool and conducting focus group and individual teacher interviews to explore various dimensions of learner autonomy. This was followed by three major piloting phases.

Prior to conducting Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the suitability of the data was confirmed with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The strong KMO value (.83) and statistically significant Bartlett's test indicated that the questionnaire items were appropriate for factor analysis. The EFA performed using Principal Component Analysis revealed eight distinct factors contributing to learner autonomy. The questionnaire exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87, indicating a high level of reliability.

The questionnaire consisted of 47 items with five-point Likert scales

ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' exploring learner autonomy from eight perspectives: social perspective (7 items), psychological perspective (8 items), political perspective (6 items), technical perspective (4 items), teachers' role in promoting learner autonomy (5 items), the contributions of learner autonomy to language learning success (7 items), strategies for fostering learner autonomy (6 items), and the importance of materials selection and use in promoting learner autonomy (4 items).

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with teachers to delve into the strategies they used to foster learner autonomy and to facilitate control shift to language learners. While a prepared set of questions guided the interviews, the interview format allowed for probing and exploring themes that emerged during the interviews. When teachers' responses were succinct, the interviewer posed follow-up questions to encourage insightful answers. Prior to the interview, the interviewees were assured that the data would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes.

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining consent from the participants, they were given a brief overview of the general purpose of the study. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants directly in face-to-face meetings or via a Google Form shared through email or social media messaging apps. After collecting the questionnaire data, 5 novice and 5 experienced teachers were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring teachers' responses to the questionnaire in more depth. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes on average and continued until data saturation was achieved. Throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, respecting the rights and privacy of the participants.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 24. Initially, descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize and interpret the data. Subsequently, an Independent Sample T-test was conducted to compare novice and experienced teachers' beliefs and examine the differences in their viewpoints on learner autonomy.

With regard to the qualitative data, the interviews were transcribed in their entirety. The transcriptions were then subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the data, revealing patterns and themes that might not have been immediately apparent.

RESULTS

Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

The first research question addressed Kurdish EFL teachers' beliefs towards learner autonomy. The results suggest a generally favorable disposition towards learner autonomy among Kurdish EFL teachers (Table 2).

Table 2: Teachers overall beliefs about learner autonomy

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teachers' Roles	2.80	5.00	4.08	.44
Psychological Factors	2.88	4.75	4.06	.39
Strategies	2.83	4.83	4.04	.40
Social Factors	2.57	4.86	3.96	.46
Contribution of learner autonomy	2.71	4.86	3.94	.43
Materials	2.75	4.50	3.83	.42
Technical Factors	1.50	5.00	3.81	.54
Political Factors	2.83	4.83	3.77	.44

The findings revealed that Kurdish EFL teachers generally held positive beliefs about learner autonomy. On average, the mean scores for each dimension exceeds 3, demonstrating teachers' favorable beliefs in the importance of learner autonomy. The highest mean (4.08) related to teachers' roles in promoting learner autonomy, signifying that Kurdish EFL teachers viewed their own actions and responsibilities crucial in facilitating learners' independence and self-directed learning. Following closely were their belief in the importance of psychological factors ($\bar{x} = 4.06$) and strategies ($\bar{x} = 4.04$) employed to foster learner autonomy.

On the other end of the spectrum, political factors received the lowest mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.77$), suggesting that the participating teachers considered learners' control over their learning and their decisions less influential than other factors in promoting learner autonomy. Despite the lower score, it is important to note that even this perspective reflected a positive view of learner autonomy.

The Difference between Experienced and Novice Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Learner Autonomy

The second research question examined whether teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy differed based on their experience. To answer this question, novice and experienced teachers' beliefs on the components of learner autonomy were compared. (Table 3).

Experienced teachers consistently exhibited more favorable attitudes towards learner autonomy than novice teachers across several aspects of the concept. With regard to the social factors, both experienced ($\bar{x} = 4.06$) and novice ($\bar{x} = 3.87$) teachers acknowledged the importance of collaboration and pair- and group-works in developing learner autonomy, with experienced teachers demonstrating slightly greater awareness of impact of the social context on developing learner autonomy. Similarly, the experienced teachers demonstrated a stronger emphasis on the importance of psychological factors such as learners' motivation, confidence, and interest ($\bar{x} = 4.16$) than novice

teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 3.96). Experienced teachers considered learner agency and the power dynamics in the classroom ($\bar{x}$ = 3.87) as more important than novice teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 3.67). Experienced teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 4.05) also expressed a stronger belief in the contribution of learner autonomy to language proficiency than novice teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 3.84).

Findings indicated that experienced teachers perceived their role in fostering learner autonomy ($\bar{x}$ = 4.17) more important than novice teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00). Experienced teachers placed greater importance on technology-supported self-directed learning ($\bar{x}$ =3.87) than novice teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 3.76). Finally, experienced teachers placed slightly more emphasis on the importance of learning strategies ($\bar{x}$ =4.06) and use of materials ($\bar{x}$ = 3.94) that promote learner autonomy, compared to novice teachers' use of strategies ($\bar{x}$ = 4.02) and materials ($\bar{x}$ = 3.73).

Table 3: Novice and experienced teachers' beliefs about factors impacting learner autonomy

	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Social Factors	N	3.87	.49	.07
	E	4.06	.41	.06
Psychological Factors	N	3.96	.43	.06
	E	4.16	.30	.04
Political Factors	N	3.67	.44	.06
	E	3.87	.41	.06
Contribution of Learner Autonomy	N	3.84	.46	.06
	E	4.05	.36	.05
Teacher's Roles	N	4.00	.46	.07
	E	4.17	.40	.06
Technical Factors	N	3.76	.57	.08
	E	3.87	.50	.07
Strategies	N	4.02	.41	.06
	E	4.06	.39	.06
Materials	N	3.73	.44	.06
	E	3.94	.38	.06

N=Novice
E= Experienced

Following the computation of group statistics, independent sample t-tests were employed to investigate the differences between novice and experienced teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Table 4 displays the results of the independent sample t-tests, including Levene's test for equality of variances and the t-test for equality of means.

The results in Table 4 point to significant differences between novice and experienced teachers in their beliefs towards learner autonomy. Experienced teachers exhibited significantly stronger emphasis on the importance of psychological factors, political factors, the contribution of learner autonomy, and materials in developing learner autonomy. In contrast, no significant differences were observed for the social and technical perspectives, teachers' roles, and the strategies which are used to promote autonomy, suggesting that both groups shared similar beliefs in these domains.

Table 4: T-test findings for novice and experienced teachers

	Levene's Test		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	F	Sig.			
Social Factors	1.61	.20	-1.88-	83	.06
Psychological Factor	4.48	.03	-2.36-	83	.02
Political Factors	.24	.61	-2.20-	83	.03
Contribution of Learner Autonomy	1.86	.17	-2.36-	83	.02
Teachers' Roles	.04	.82	-1.74-	83	.08
Technical Factors	.01	.91	-.99-	83	.32
Strategies	.06	.80	-.43-	83	.66
Materials	1.75	.18	-2.33-	83	.02

Approaches to Fostering Learner Autonomy

The qualitative phase of the study delved into the strategies employed by

novice and experienced teachers to foster learner autonomy and transfer control to their learners. To this end, 5 experienced and 5 novice teachers were interviewed; the data was transcribed, codded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved an iterative process of familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme development, theme refinement, and final theme selection. Through thematic analysis, several themes emerged from the data reflecting teachers' strategies to develop learner autonomy, including teaching techniques, engagement and goal setting, use of technology, and teacher leadership (Table 5).

The first category of strategies involves the teaching techniques employed to foster autonomy. Experienced teachers employed diverse teaching techniques to promote active participation and collaboration, and directed students to use various learning sources. In this regards, an experienced teacher stated that "I *offer various resources and encourage students to explore and discover what works best for them*." Novice teachers, on the other hand, focused more on promoting collaborative learning, adapting lesson plans, and directly monitoring classroom activities. While experienced teachers favored peer assessment and encouraged self-assessment, novice teachers preferred to monitor students' activities directly. Both groups recognized the value of promoting independent learning, collaborative group work, and allowing student-chosen topics.

Teachers used different strategies to engage students and help them set learning goals in order to foster autonomy. Experienced teachers focused more on creating a comfortable classroom environment, involving students in decision-making, and helping them set their own learning objectives. They emphasized the importance of setting deadlines and maximizing learner engagement to support learners in managing learning challenges.

Table 5: Experienced and novice teachers' strategies to promote learner autonomy

Themes	Experienced Teachers' Strategies	Novice Teachers' Strategies
Teaching Techniques	Utilizing diverse teaching materials Encouraging critical thinking Promoting active participation Implementing pair, group, and project works Using peer- and self-assessment Promoting student decision-making Adapting teaching to learners' needs Allowing (some) student-led learning	Promoting off-site learning Encouraging pair, group, and team works Monitoring students' activities directly Adapting lessons to students' needs Promoting guided self-learning
Engagement and Goal Setting	Creating comfortable classroom environment Facilitating open communication Allowing learners to incorporate their own material Helping learners set learning objectives Setting deadlines for learner challenges Making students curious to elicit an answer	Encouraging student participation Promoting collaborative learning Establishing a good rapport Evaluating student-selected activities Employing games to learning Encouraging student-chosen topics, games, and activities Guiding learning based on their interests and needs Helping students to set their objectives Encouraging long term learning

Use of Technology	Encouraging learners to use multimedia resources	Encouraging the use of online resources
	Encouraging the use of online resources	Acknowledging the role of the Internet in learning
	Encouraging the use of search engines for independent research	Using media as a teaching tool
		Employing learning applications and group chats for learning
Teacher Leadership	Providing support and assistance	Providing support and encouragement
	Directing students when necessary	Promoting learning beyond the classroom
	Being a leader, friend, and resource	Maintaining an environment that ensures teacher control
	Providing help only when needed	Being a trainer, resource, friend, and assistance
	Expanding learners' perspective	

An experienced teacher demonstrated this principle in practice by actively reducing her talk time to help her students develop independent thinking and; she stated:

I try to reduce my talk time to increase students' talk time. I try to achieve this by asking controversial questions. This ensures that learners are prepared to read about various materials. If they can do something without assistance, I step back and let them do it. I believe this is the best way to promote autonomy.

Novice teachers prioritized student interests and incorporated gaming to help them learn independently. They emphasized learner-driven goals and motivations to instill a sense of purpose and direction in their students. This was highlighted by a novice teacher who noted "*to maximize student learning, I act as a facilitator and pay attention to students' interests. I incorporate game-like elements into the daily practices to create a stimulating learning environment*".

The third theme that emerged from qualitative phase was the use of technology; novice and experienced teachers encouraged the use of online resources to promote independent learning. These similarities in the use of technology reflect the potential of digital tools for making learning more accessible and adaptable, promoting personalized learning experience, and allowing for greater learner independence. Experienced teachers placed a greater emphasis on encouraging learners to use multimedia and online resources as learning tools. Novice teachers promoted using online resources for engaging learners with interactive learning materials. A novice teacher highlighted the use of learning platforms and stated:

We have a Telegram channel for sharing ESL resources and an online group for discussions and exchanging ideas. Students take turns being the "teacher of the day," which boosts their engagement and confidence. They exchange voice messages in English. This enhances their speaking and overall language proficiency.

Finally, experienced teachers stated that they act as leaders, friends, and resources, providing support and assistance while directing students when necessary. They focused on helping students develop independence, offering help only when needed and correcting students constructively to facilitate their growth. Novice teachers, on the other hand, focused on providing support and encouragement, and viewed themselves mainly as trainers, resources, friends, and assistance. However, they were very cautious about maintaining classroom control.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated Kurdish EFL teachers' beliefs towards learner autonomy and the examined whether teaching experience plays a role in shaping those beliefs. Additionally, the study explored strategies employed by novice and experienced teachers to foster learner autonomy. The findings indicated that teachers generally held positive attitudes towards learner

autonomy. The mean scores for various dimensions of learner autonomy were consistently above the neutral value of 3, indicating that language teachers recognized the importance of learner autonomy. This finding adds to previous research (e.g., Benson, 2016; Smith et al., 2018) which highlights the growing recognition of learner autonomy in language education. The findings further revealed that teachers were aware of their roles in facilitating self-directed learning, a perspective supported by previous research (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Duong, 2014; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011; Richards & Rogers, 2001). The lower emphasis on political perspectives (i.e., power and control) suggests that teachers may find it challenging to adjust to a less teacher-centered classrooms environment.

The findings revealed that experienced teachers significantly placed more emphasis on the importance of psychological and political factors, the contribution of learner autonomy to language learning, and the use of materials. This might be attributed to teachers' experience in a variety of contexts in which these factors played crucial roles and where they could witness the impact of learner autonomy on language learning firsthand. The lower mean scores of novice teachers for all the factors could potentially be attributed to, as suggested by Nakata (2011), to teachers' insufficient readiness to enhance learner autonomy. Novice teachers might fear that giving students more autonomy will lead to chaos or a loss of their authority in the classroom. They may also have not been trained on how to foster learner autonomy, and thus may be unsure of effective strategies to implement it in the classroom. Interestingly, novice and experienced teachers shared similar beliefs about the importance the social aspects of learning, the use of technical tools to support learner autonomy, their roles in fostering it, and the strategies for promoting learner independence. This consistency could possibly imply that these factors are fundamental to the teaching profession and are, therefore, ingrained in teachers from the early stages of their careers. Another possible explanation is that these aspects are readily observable in various educational contexts, leading to a shared understanding regardless of a teacher's individual experience. Additionally, the emphasis placed on these

factors could reflect broader trends in educational discourse, which often promote collaboration, technology integration, teachers' roles, and student-centered learning strategies.

The qualitative data provides evidence for the link between teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and the strategies they reported using for developing it; this finding is similar to the findings of Crookes and Arakaki (1999) and Nunan (1996), who observed a strong connection between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. The qualitative findings of the present study indicated that novice and experienced teachers pursued various pedagogic strategies to promote learner autonomy. Experienced teachers employed a broader range of teaching techniques, focused on creating a comfortable classroom environment, and encouraged open communication and learner-centeredness. This finding concurs with Jang and Chang (2016) and Jalali (2022), who found that experienced teachers had better instructional strategies and classroom management techniques. Novice teachers, on the other hand, emphasized understanding students' learning style and interests. The varied approaches experienced and novice teachers employed builds upon previous studies that highlight the importance of diverse teaching techniques and learner-centered classroom environments (Benson, 2013; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Little, 2007).

Novice and experienced teachers similarly encouraged student engagement and goal setting to foster learner autonomy. Experienced teachers encouraged students to find solutions independently and helped them set learning objectives. Novice teachers prioritized students' interests and emphasized the importance of long-term learning; experienced teachers used their expertise to guide students towards in-depth problem-solving, while novice teachers aimed to establish a stimulating learning environment. Novice teachers helped students explore online learning resources and used technology to enhance their language learning. They also emphasized the importance of individual responsibility by tapping into their technological fluency through employing online resources and diverse learning applications. This agrees with Bennett et al.'s (2008) findings that novice

teachers often exhibit greater technological fluency due to their younger age.

Both groups of teachers emphasized the importance of technology for developing self-directed learning. Experienced teachers advocated for multimedia resources and the role of the Internet, while novice teachers endorsed online learning materials suggesting that novice teachers might be more proficient in utilizing online resources. This shared emphasis on technology, which has been addressed in previous studies (Singh & Kasims, 2019; Vereshchahina et al., 2018), further underscores the importance of technology in fostering learner autonomy.

Experienced teachers adopted roles as leaders, friends, and resources, providing support while retaining control over learning. This is reflected in prior research highlighting the importance of an open learning culture (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Pineda & Frodden, 2008; Teng, 2019), where a balance between student-centeredness and teacher guidance is essential. Open learning cultures promote learner agency and choice while recognizing the value of structure and facilitation provided by the teacher. The experienced teachers' focus on offering strategic support highlights the importance of teacher guidance in promoting learner autonomy (Duong, 2014; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011; Smith et al., 2018). Novice teachers viewed themselves as trainers, resources, friends, and assistants, adopting a supportive and encouraging approach to student learning. Although they acknowledged building rapport with learners, they were very cautious about maintaining classroom control. This difference between experienced and novice teachers could be attributed to the greater automaticity experienced teachers have developed over time (Tsui, 2009).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study shed light on Kurdish EFL teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and the role their teaching experience played in shaping these beliefs. The findings underscored a generally favorable view of learner autonomy, with teachers acknowledging their role in fostering learner

autonomy. Both novice and experienced teachers employed a variety of strategies to encourage learner autonomy. Nevertheless, their approaches differed in several key areas. Notably, teaching experience was found to significantly influence these attitudes, especially in relation to psychological and political factors, the role of learner autonomy in language learning, and the use of materials. However, beliefs regarding the importance of social and technical factors, and contribution of learner autonomy, the teachers' roles in developing it, and the strategies employed were universally shared among the teachers, irrespective of their experience.

The qualitative phase indicated that the strategies employed to promote learner autonomy differed based on the teachers' experience. Teaching experience enabled teachers to adopt a holistic view of learner autonomy and adapt their approaches accordingly. This suggests that novice teachers could benefit from training and need support to deepen their understanding of learner autonomy and develop more responsive practices. The study highlights the need for continuous professional development, particularly in understanding the psychological and political aspects of learner autonomy. The shared beliefs among teachers about the importance of social factors and the use of technical means to promote learner autonomy, their roles, and strategies suggest that these elements should be integral parts of teacher training programs. The finding that novice and experienced teachers employed various strategies to foster learner autonomy provides a rich resource that can be shared and discussed in professional development workshops.

Finally, although the study is limited by its small sample size, it adds to the research on learner autonomy in EFL contexts and offers insights for teacher training programs. To gain a better understanding of practices regarding learner autonomy, future research should investigate the effectiveness of teacher training programs on employing technology to foster learner independence and examine the challenges faced by teachers in developing it. Additionally, exploring the impact of the strategies outlined in this study on promoting learner autonomy warrant further investigation.

Finally, a longitudinal study tracking changes in novice teachers' beliefs and practices over time could illuminate how they develop expertise in fostering learner autonomy.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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