

Indonesian Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Readiness for Developing Learner Autonomy: A Mixed-Methods Case Study

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Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 10 Feb 2025 Accepted: 19 Jun 2025 Available online: 2 Jul 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Learner autonomy Independent learning Teacher readiness EFL Indonesia</p>	<p><i>Using a sequential exploratory design, this study measured the readiness of pre-service English as a foreign language teachers in East Java to develop learner autonomy (LA) in schools. Additionally, the study investigated how they perceived the effectiveness of their undergraduate teacher education programme (BA in English Language Teaching) in developing their readiness for fostering autonomy among their future students. The sample, comprising 87 participants, provided extensive data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The key findings were that these Indonesian pre-service teachers had a narrow conceptualisation of LA; they perceived it psychologically as an individual's willingness and mental capacity to regulate learning, and pedagogically as a teachable construct. They also lacked practical training in applying the concept within classroom settings, which would bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice. Statistical analyses further indicated that they were not fully ready to foster LA in their classrooms, regardless of their gender, or the location and status of the schools where they completed their teaching practicum. The results underscore the need for enhanced, context-specific teacher education programmes to better equip future teachers for developing LA in Indonesian schools.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy (LA) are firmly established concepts in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Yet, despite their acknowledged importance, ongoing debates regarding their definitions, classroom applications, and the contextual factors shaping their development (Chong & Reinders, 2022; Cirocki, 2016; Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Wilches, 2007) continue to fuel scholarly discussions. Although these concepts may seem straightforward in theory, their practical application presents challenges across various educational settings, including in Indonesia, the focus of the current study. Existing literature consistently underscores the difficulties in effectively promoting teacher and learner autonomy, notwithstanding the ongoing efforts to tackle these issues. It also highlights the interconnectedness between these two concepts (Han, 2020), indicating that autonomous

teachers are more likely to succeed in developing autonomy among learners. It is therefore essential that teacher education programmes and continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives for teachers not only focus on the development of learner autonomy in the classroom, but also create opportunities for teachers to develop or master their professional autonomy to fully prepare them for fostering independence among their students.

The educational landscape in Indonesia has long been characterised by centralised policies that restrict the autonomy of teachers and students in teaching and learning processes (Afandi et al., 2022). Until recently, this top-down approach, combined with an emphasis on exam-oriented education, fostered a classroom environment focusing on rote learning and strict adherence to a prescribed curriculum, rather than encouraging creativity and innovation (Sulistyo, 2007). However, recent changes in Indonesia's education system suggest a shift is taking place towards promoting LA. Initiatives such as "*Merdeka Belajar*" (Freedom of Learning) and the "*Guru Penggerak*" (Teacher as Catalyst) programme aim to decentralise decision-making in schools and universities, which will empower both teachers and students (Heyward et al., 2011; Sofo et al., 2012). Innovative approaches that equip learners with the tools and mindset needed to take responsibility for their own learning include promoting critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy. Despite these efforts, the deeply entrenched bureaucratic culture and a historical emphasis on compliance have somewhat slowed the adoption of recent reforms (Bjork, 2004, 2006; Lubis, 2018). This slow progress is compounded by low self-esteem and limited autonomy among teachers – as previous research demonstrates (e.g., Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Hikmawati et al., 2023) – as well as inadequate preparation of language teachers (Young, 2019).

To address these challenges, a critical review and enhancement of current English language teacher education programmes and CPD initiatives is imperative. The purpose of the review process should be to acquire a thorough comprehension of the status quo regarding LA on teacher education or professional development programmes. In terms of enhancement, these efforts should strengthen teachers' awareness of LA and pedagogical knowledge for implementing practical approaches to foster autonomy, and prioritise cultivating independence, creativity, and advanced English language proficiency among Indonesian teachers (Basikin, 2019). Such reforms are likely to improve student learning experiences whilst promoting greater LA and agency. To facilitate this, more practical and empirical literature on promoting LA in Indonesia is required so these concepts can be better understood in this particular context, thereby providing a clearer picture of the extent to which these concepts are applied in practice, along with a need to examine teachers' readiness to develop LA in the classroom. Teacher readiness, the central concept of this article, refers to the combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, actions, and contextual awareness that enables classroom practitioners to effectively support and encourage students' independent learning.

The present study evaluated pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' readiness to foster LA in schools across East Java. It addressed three research questions:

1. How do Indonesian pre-service teachers conceptualise LA?

2. To what extent are Indonesian pre-service teachers ready to develop LA in their classrooms at the end of their undergraduate teacher education programme?
3. How effective do Indonesian pre-service teachers perceive their undergraduate education to be in developing their readiness to foster LA in their classrooms?

The article commences by delineating the concept of LA. Thereafter, it provides an overview of the common approaches employed in nurturing LA, linking them to existing empirical studies concerning teachers' perceptions of LA and their preparedness to foster it. Finally, the article reports on the findings of a mixed-methods case study examining the readiness of 87 pre-service EFL teachers from one teacher education programme at a state university in East Java to foster LA.

To ensure clarity and precision in reporting the findings, two key points merit particular attention. Firstly, due to the small sample size, the findings are not intended to be generalised to a larger population. They should be viewed within their specific context, rather than as broad conclusions, and be interpreted with caution, not seen as representative of larger trends. Secondly, although this research focused on one teacher education programme, it contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the development of LA in the EFL classroom. In addition, it encourages programme leaders, in Indonesia and elsewhere, to reflect on how LA autonomy is incorporated into their teacher education programmes and how ready their pre-service teachers are to foster LA autonomy in pedagogical practice. It is also hoped that this study may inspire other programme leaders to engage in similar research to evaluate their teacher education programmes, specifically pre-service teachers' readiness to develop LA in the English language classroom. The literature emphasises the need to explore LA at various levels of education in Asian contexts. This includes diverse English language teaching settings, including general English and English for Academic Purposes, as noted by Barnard (2016), Intraboonsom et al. (2020), and Roe and Perkins (2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining learner autonomy

Defining LA in education is a complex task (Benson, 2011; Chong & Reinders, 2022). Some scholars describe it as a behaviour (i.e., actions learners adopt to take responsibility for their learning processes), others as a cognitive capacity (i.e., mental processes and abilities enabling learners to take control of their own learning). There is also an ongoing debate about whether LA should be regarded as a psychological phenomenon or a political right (Al-Noori, 2016). Furthermore, the literature reveals that LA is significantly influenced by cultural, institutional, and individual contexts (Linh & Loi, 2024; O'Leary, 2014). External factors such as policy constraints, institutional frameworks, teaching modes, instructional materials and resources, and traditional teaching methods further complicate the comprehension and implementation of LA within diverse educational environments (Pang, 2003; Ramli et al., 2019; Xu, 2007). As a result, the concept is difficult to encapsulate due to its intricate and multifaceted nature, involving multiple dimensions that interact in complex ways.

However, in brief, a synthesis of definitions of LA reveals its components to be a learner's ability to engage in self-directed learning, self-motivate, and take responsibility for managing their learning processes (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981; Little, 2000). This includes exercising control over learning content; establishing learning objectives; employing effective strategies; assessing progress; and fostering critical reflection, decision-making, and independent initiative (Cirocki, 2016). It can therefore be concluded that LA involves a complex constellation of attitudes, abilities, and behaviours related to taking charge of the learning process (Benson, 2005; Rayo & Vieira, 2015).

Developing learner autonomy in the English language classroom

Teachers can foster LA in various ways (Benson, 2011; Pawlak et al., 2017). This section presents four primary approaches: learner-based, classroom-based, resource-based, and technology-based, all serving as foundational frameworks for promoting LA in language education.

1. Learner-Based Approach: This approach focuses on teaching students effective learning strategies to enhance their efficiency, independence, and academic success (Benson, 2011; Oxford & Pawlak, 2018). For instance, teaching metacognitive reading strategies (global, problem-solving, and support) can significantly improve comprehension, critical thinking, engagement, and independent reading. Ahmadi et al. (2013) found that metacognitive reading instruction helps students become strategic readers. Jianfeng et al.'s (2018) study revealed a positive relationship between LA and all six categories of language learning strategies. Muhid et al. (2020) identified a positive correlation between metacognitive strategies and reading comprehension. They concluded that using additional strategies whilst reading makes students more successful and independent.

2. Classroom-Based Approach: This approach emphasises giving students control over planning and evaluating classroom activities, often by co-creating the curriculum with teachers. For instance, students should make choices, suggest discussion topics, participate in creating classroom rules, and help set assessment criteria for presentations. McCombs (2010) and Stefanou et al. (2004) discussed the link between student choices and ownership of learning, with Stefanou et al. (2004) identifying three levels of instructional choices: cognitive (asking questions), organisational (choosing partners), and procedural (selecting tasks or challenge levels). This approach enhances students' engagement and sense of responsibility by giving them a meaningful role in their education.

3. Resource-Based Approach: This approach involves self-access centres, also known as resource centres, which provide a variety of learning materials for students to use independently (Fujishima & Murray, 2021; Kongchan & Darasawang, 2015; Morrison, 2008). For example, students can enhance reading skills by engaging with graded readers (print or digital) in a classroom or school library. Similarly, audiobooks in a language laboratory can improve listening skills. Morrison's (2008) study in Hong Kong revealed that self-access centres bridge language learning and independent learning, enabling students to improve linguistic proficiency and independent learning skills. Hsieh (2010) made similar observations in Taiwan.

4. Technology-Based Approach: This approach emphasises the independent use of technology. For instance, students are encouraged to maintain e-diaries as part of their homework or participate in in-class or out-of-class Internet group projects. Individual and collective independence in such activities enhances students' intrinsic motivation to learn English and contributes to their engagement in the teaching-learning process. Research in Indonesia, Iran, and Türkiye has identified a positive relationship between autonomy and motivation (Agustina et al., 2022; Nikoopour et al., 2012; Salehi & Vaez-Dalili, 2017). Regarding technology-enhanced instruction, Farivar and Rahimi (2015) found that computer-assisted language learning significantly enhances student autonomy. Lai and Zheng (2018) reported that mobile devices positively influence independent language learning among undergraduate foreign language learners in Hong Kong. Additionally, Pawlak and Kruk (2012) discovered that Polish senior high school students using Internet resources during instruction displayed greater autonomy and achieved higher language test scores than those in the control group.

Cultivating LA using these four approaches is a gradual process requiring time, commitment, and a supportive classroom environment. Teachers play a crucial role in creating and sustaining an atmosphere that fosters self-directed learning by equipping students with tools and resources to manage their learning. The existing literature lists such roles as facilitator, counsellor, resource, guide, and manager (Hong-mei, 2018; Ja, 2017; Ma, 2021). Therefore, the successful development of LA depends on a synergistic relationship between a nurturing classroom setting, dedicated and autonomous teachers, and empowered students in charge of their learning journeys.

The relationship between LA and teacher autonomy is crucial in education and requires further attention (Han, 2020; Kojima, 2012). Teacher autonomy provides teachers with the professional freedom to design and implement instructional strategies that cultivate LA. This includes promoting self-directed learning, critical thinking, and decision-making skills among students, empowering them to assume responsibility for their educational path. Conversely, LA supports teachers by fostering dynamic and engaging learning environments where students actively engage in learning. The more autonomy teachers have, the better equipped they are to develop autonomy in their students, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of independent learning and effective teaching practices. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Sierens et al. (2010) and Zheng et al. (2020), confirm a correlation between support for teacher autonomy and self-regulated learning among students.

Although the current study did not aim to measure this specific correlation, its significance lay in its potential to examine how pre-service teachers perceive the concept of LA in the Indonesian context, especially as the importance of LA continues to grow. Additionally, it was deemed crucial to measure pre-service teachers' readiness to foster LA in their classrooms at the final stage of their undergraduate teacher education programme. The results of such an evaluation could indicate their ability to integrate 21st-century skills into the teaching-learning process and create effective and student-centred learning environments. Both aspects were considered essential as they predict the fostering of LA at the classroom level and align with recent educational policies in Indonesia.

To enhance the discourse on LA in the field of language education, it is vital that the four approaches to promoting LA be revisited through an ecological lens that aligns with 21st-century educational requirements and the principles of sustainability in education. The ecological perspective prioritises the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the teaching-learning process, whereby teachers, language learners, institutional practices, resources, educational policies, and cultural practices are interrelated and influence one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Hayes et al., 2017). In practical terms, applying the ecological position to developing LA means that LA does not develop in isolation but is influenced by various factors within the learner's environment. Therefore, the development of LA should be considered in the context of three environmental systems: the microsystem (direct interactions with learners' immediate environment, including teachers, peers, and extracurricular activities and how they influence motivation and attitudes towards autonomous learning); the mesosystem (the connections between the different parts of learners' immediate environments, such as parents and teachers or peers and family, and how they influence learners' autonomous learning); and macrosystem (the sociocultural context and how it shapes learners' autonomous learning experiences and identity). Furthermore, approaches to fostering LA should not be one-size-fits-all; teachers should tailor them to their students' characteristics, needs, and the teaching-learning environments to ensure their relevance and long-term impact, and also to engage students in purposeful, interdisciplinary, action-oriented, collaborative, and transformative learning (Hays & Reinders, 2020).

Because the needs and environments vary within Indonesia and, more broadly, in other Asian countries, it is essential that teacher education programmes deliver high-quality training on developing LA by prioritising context-dependent education. This will ensure future teachers are well-equipped and ready to confidently cultivate autonomous learners in their specific settings. Previous research indicates that a large number of EFL teachers are not fully prepared to foster their students' autonomy (Lin & Reinders, 2019; Nakata, 2011), highlighting the need for comprehensive training on LA (Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Demetrashvili et al., 2024; Nakata, 2011; Shahsavari, 2014) with an emphasis on practical implementation (Duong, 2014; Mansooji et al., 2022). Constraints affecting teachers' readiness stem from both external and internal sources (Lin & Reinders, 2019). External sources include students' preferences for teacher-centred instruction, teachers' heavy workloads, fixed curricula, exam-oriented systems, large classes, and a lack of pedagogical training regarding LA (Basri, 2023; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Demetrashvili et al., 2024; Lin & Reindeers, 2019; Nakata, 2011; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011). Internal constraints include teachers' lack of professional knowledge about LA, lack of teacher autonomy, and teachers' limited trust in learner abilities (Basri, 2023; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Lin & Reinders, 2019; Nakata, 2011; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011).

These findings highlight the persistent challenges in equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and independence to effectively foster LA, emphasising the urgent need for more practice-oriented teacher education, including in Asian contexts, and more research clarifying English language teachers' readiness for LA development in schools, hence the Indonesian project below.

METHOD

Design and participants

This exploratory case study was conducted in two consecutive stages: the collection and analysis of qualitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The study aimed to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context to generate an in-depth understanding of pre-service teachers' readiness to develop LA in schools in East Java. A mixed-methods design was most useful for addressing the three research questions listed at the beginning of this contribution because it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the depth and breadth of Indonesian pre-service teachers' perspectives on LA, including capturing their conceptualisations of LA, measuring their readiness to develop LA, and ascertaining the effectiveness of their teacher education programme in developing their readiness for fostering LA in their EFL classrooms. This approach not only triangulated the findings for greater validity, but also provided actionable insights for improving the teacher education programme under study.

The participants were all pre-service teachers ($n = 87$; 23 males and 64 females) enrolled on a Bachelor of Arts Programme in English Language Teaching at a single institution in East Java. They were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) they had to be pre-service EFL teachers; (2) they needed to have completed their teaching practicum experience in schools prior to commencing the study; and (3) they had to be affiliated with schools within the East Java region. Regarding their teaching practicum, the participants were based in urban ($n = 49$), suburban ($n = 29$), and rural schools ($n = 9$). These schools comprised state schools ($n = 62$) and private schools ($n = 25$).

Instruments and procedure

Two instruments, a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire, were used to collect data. The semi-structured interviews utilised open-ended questions, with 25 participants recruited through convenience sampling and interviewed individually to avoid any external influence. Each session lasted between 20 and 35 minutes, contingent on the participants' level of engagement and willingness to share their experiences. The questions addressed participants' familiarity with the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) and the practices of autonomous teachers in the classroom. Supplementing this, the interviews explored what the participants learnt about fostering LA during their teacher education programme and how ready they felt to foster autonomy in their own pedagogical practice.

The questionnaire design was based on an instrument developed by Cirocki et al. (2019) to measure EFL students' readiness for LA. It comprised six questions focused on teachers' readiness to foster LA, their motivation for teaching English (as motivation and autonomy are closely related [Fukuda et al., 2011; Ushioda, 1996]), and their perspectives on how their undergraduate programme developed their readiness for fostering LA in schools. The section on readiness for LA consisted of three parts: (1) pre-service teachers' preferred instructional strategies for creating an LA-friendly classroom environment in their teaching (15 items),

(2) their specific techniques for encouraging students to demonstrate autonomous behaviours (15 items), and (3) their capacity to plan for students' autonomous learning outside of their English language classrooms (14 items). The Cronbach's alpha value for the questionnaire was 0.8, indicating good reliability. The instrument was also reviewed for content validity by two TESOL experts, one local and one foreign, who examined all the items for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Participants were allotted 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

To ensure clarity and accuracy, the instruments were translated into Bahasa Indonesia by native researchers and subsequently cross-checked for precision by two independent native colleagues from different institutions.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic coding. To ensure sufficient rigour, the six stages of thematic analysis proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013) were meticulously followed. These were: familiarisation, formulation of codes, generation of themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes, and report formation. Specifically, the researchers individually labelled segments of the data, assigning codes that captured their meaning. These codes were then grouped into broader categories based on similarities and patterns. Themes emerged from identified relationships between the codes and were subsequently refined by assessing their coherence and consistency across the dataset and researchers' individual analyses. Finally, a consolidated set of themes was established. Regarding research question one, the themes included psychological and pedagogical dimensions of LA, learner-based approaches to LA, technology as a catalyst for autonomy, social dimensions of LA, and the role of teachers in fostering autonomy. Regarding research question three, the themes included limited explicit focus on LA, challenges in bridging theory and practice, perceived lack of in-depth knowledge of LA among teacher educators and cooperating teachers, institutional and governmental LA support deficiencies, and recommendations for incorporating LA into the teacher education programme. To distinguish the sources of responses during the interview phase, letter-number codes were assigned; for example, SIT9 referred to a semi-structured interview with pre-service teacher number 9.

The quantitative data were analysed statistically. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated to address the second research question, which assessed pre-service English teachers' readiness to develop LA. Spearman's rank correlation was employed to explore the potential relationship between motivation for teaching and levels of readiness to foster autonomy. Additionally, independent samples t-tests were conducted to identify differences in pre-service teachers' readiness to develop LA in terms of gender and the status of the schools (state and private) where their teaching practicum took place. A one-way between-groups ANOVA was also performed to examine possible differences in the pre-service teachers' readiness to foster LA in terms of school locations (urban, suburban, and rural) where they completed their teaching practicum.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the British Educational Research Association (2018), and ethical approval was obtained from a local university in Indonesia. Throughout the research process, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were rigorously upheld. Participants were required to sign consent forms in advance, clearly outlining their right to withdraw at any point. Upon completion of the qualitative phase, participants were invited to review and comment on the documented records of their responses to ensure accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indonesian pre-service teachers' conceptualisations of learner autonomy

The qualitative data were collected to address the first research question, the analysis of which revealed that Indonesian teachers conceptualise LA rather narrowly. They perceived it psychologically as individuals' willingness and mental capacity to regulate learning and pedagogically as a teachable construct. Their definitions were often brief (e.g., "Learner autonomy is a student's ability to control their learning" (SIT5) or "Learner autonomy is about regulating one's learning and teachers can support students in this by teaching them specific strategies" (SIT2), and any attempts at elaboration, particularly with practical classroom examples, seemed challenging. The latter is illustrated in the following extract:

- Interviewer: What does it mean that students should take control over their learning?
SIT4: Hmm, I think it means they should make decisions about their learning.
Interviewer: OK, what decisions?
SIT 4: Well, like, for example, how they want to learn.
Interviewer: Oh, I see. So, do you mean what strategies they want to use while learning?
SIT 4: Yes, that's right.
Interviewer: Do you happen to have any specific strategies in mind?
SIT: Umm, sorry, sir, nothing is coming to mind right now.

These findings align with those of Agustina et al. (2022), who emphasised the psychological dimension of LA. In their quantitative study, Indonesian teachers highlighted that students require mental attributes such as confidence and motivation to develop autonomy, concurring with Spratt et al. (2002). Research by Jianfeng et al. (2018) in China and Nikoopour et al. (2012) and Salehi and Vaez-Dalili (2017) in Iran also confirmed positive and significant relationships between learning motivation, autonomy, strategy use, and language proficiency.

These definitions align with learner-based and technology-based approaches to developing autonomy. From a learner-based perspective, participants understood autonomy through the lens of learning strategies. For instance, independent learners were described as intrinsically-motivated and "strategic learners who use many strategies to be more effective, confident, successful, and less dependent on teachers" (SIT9). Another participant noted that "autonomous

students know how to use and are motivated to use learning strategies to achieve good results and take responsibility for their learning” (SIT11). Additionally, one participant emphasised that “the knowledge and use of learning strategies and 21st-century skills make learners autonomous, enabling them to manage and be accountable for their learning” (SIT17). Such relationships between LA and strategy use have been evidenced in previous research by Ahmadi et al. (2013), Jianfeng et al. (2018), and Muhid et al. (2020).

A second group of definitions pertained to project-based learning involving technology. Participants highlighted that LA was evident in the independent use of technology for educational purposes. One participant noted that “learner autonomy manifests in the independent use of technology for learning purposes” (SIT10). Elaborating on this, another participant suggested that “autonomous learners are motivated by and drawn to technology, using it individually or collectively because it provides them the freedom for autonomous action” (SIT14). Another participant concurred with this and emphasised that when utilised for learning, technology enabled learners to “create space to collaboratively develop digital literacy and metacognitive strategies essential for independent lifelong learning” (SIT2). Whilst these comments corroborate previous findings on the impact of technology on LA by Farivar and Rahimi (2015) and Lai and Zheng (2018), the social dimension of autonomy, highlighted through student collaboration, matches the findings of Agustina et al. (2022), who identified cooperative work as crucial for fostering LA. This view is further supported by Benson and Cooker (2013) and Kohonen (2010), who emphasised the role of social interaction in developing LA. For instance, Benson and Cooker (2013, p. 8) described LA as a “social capacity” that develops through interdependence rather than independence.

However, none of these conceptualisations referred to the classroom-based and resource-based approaches to fostering LA presented in Section 1.3. This merits a critical re-evaluation of the current frameworks and methodologies employed in the teacher education programme under study and potentially across Indonesia more broadly. It underlines the necessity of integrating practical, context-specific strategies that effectively show teachers how to negotiate curricula with students and engage them in decision-making processes. Teachers must be equipped with the skills to encourage students to make informed choices, fostering a sense of ownership and participation in the teaching-learning process (Cirocki & Anam, 2024). Regarding resource-based approaches, it is crucial to emphasise the utilisation of self-access centres (Fujishima & Murray, 2021; Kongchan & Darasawang, 2015) and their role in enabling students to exercise autonomy and agency in their educational experiences, as well as their impact on students’ autonomous learning behaviour and the need to target language proficiency (Hsieh, 2010; Morrison, 2008). By addressing these aspects, teacher education programmes can better prepare future teachers to cultivate an environment that supports and enhances students’ independent learning.

An intriguing observation emerged from participants’ definitions of LA, highlighting teachers’ critical roles in cultivating autonomy at the classroom level. This is because teachers were frequently characterised as “facilitators tasked with creating an environment that supports self-directed learning” (SIT7). They were also seen as instrumental in “empowering students to become proactive, self-motivated learners” (SIT18) who displayed initiative. By designing

instructional materials and “activities that necessitate critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving” (SIT3), “reflective thinking, and creative thinking” (SIT12), teachers enabled students to acquire the skills essential for autonomous learning. Moreover, teachers served as role models, demonstrating how to “effectively search for resources, pose insightful questions” (SIT10), and engage in “successful social interactions and collaborations, thereby equipping students for independent action” (SIT1). These roles have been thoroughly examined in both conceptual and empirical literature, as demonstrated by Hong-mei (2018), Ja (2017), and Ma (2021).

Indonesian pre-service teachers’ readiness for developing learner autonomy

To answer the second research question, numerical data were collected using the questionnaire. Overall, pre-service EFL teachers exhibited moderate readiness ($M = 3.72$) for fostering LA in their language classrooms. This finding corroborates the limited existing research. For example, Nakata (2011) found that numerous Japanese EFL high-school teachers, despite recognising the significance of LA, were not fully equipped to foster it among their students and had not developed the characteristics of language teacher autonomy to a significant extent. Similarly, Lin and Reinders (2019) concluded that Chinese tertiary EFL teachers were “psychologically, but not technically or behaviourally, ready for autonomy” (p. 85).

In the Indonesian project, pre-service teachers’ readiness for fostering LA was analysed from three different perspectives: (1) pre-service teachers’ preferred instructional strategies for creating an LA-friendly classroom environment in their own pedagogical practice ($M = 3.82$), (2) their specific techniques for encouraging students to demonstrate autonomous behaviours ($M = 3.83$), and (3) their capacity to plan for students’ autonomous learning outside of their EFL classrooms ($M = 3.50$).

Regarding the first perspective (Table 1), the mean scores of pre-service teachers’ preferred strategies ranged from 3.10 to 4.21. The strategies preferred most included asking students to work collaboratively as a whole class or in groups ($M = 4.21$), questioning and testing their thinking ($M = 4.13$), allowing students to reflect on their learning ($M = 4.13$), encouraging them to freely express their views in the classroom ($M = 4.08$), motivating them to speak confidently about lesson-related topics ($M = 4.06$), and inspiring them to take the initiative ($M = 4.06$). Conversely, less preferred strategies included inviting students to engage in peer assessment ($M = 3.73$), being available for students who are not good at learning independently ($M = 3.60$), asking students to engage in self-assessment ($M = 3.39$), and creating opportunities for students to complete all exercises, activities, and tasks in the classroom without assigning homework ($M = 3.10$). To shed more light on the less preferred strategies, it is essential to recognise that self and peer assessment are rarely implemented in Indonesian schools. This can primarily be attributed to teachers’ limited training, their inadequate understanding of alternative assessment strategies, and the prevalence of a teacher-centred culture in schools, all of which contribute to teachers’ reservations about students’ abilities to assess themselves and their peers reliably (Fitriyah et al., 2023; Wulandari et al., 2021). Regarding homework, Indonesian teachers seldom require students to complete all their work at school; instead, they assign homework to reinforce learning outside of school hours (Halim et al., 2023).

Table 1
Pre-service teachers' instructional strategies for developing LA in their classrooms

No	Items: In their teaching, pre-service teachers prefer to:	Mean	SD
1.	explain things to students by asking them questions and testing their thinking	4.13	0.63
2.	create opportunities for the whole class to work and learn in groups	4.21	0.70
3.	give students activities to work on (either on their own or with their classmates), expecting them to use their prior knowledge and experience to complete them	3.94	0.77
4.	create opportunities in the classroom where students can nominate themselves to talk about lesson-related matters, ensuring they believe in their ability to interact in the target language for meaningful purposes	4.06	0.87
5.	not tell students immediately what their mistakes are; firstly, I should encourage them to identify their mistakes and then tell them whether they are right or wrong	3.85	1.02
6.	not control students' learning too much because they enjoy independence when they learn English	3.54	0.79
7.	create opportunities in the classroom for students to nominate themselves and express their views so that they feel confident about speaking in English in the classroom	4.08	0.72
8.	be available, as students are not good at learning independently	3.60	0.93
9.	give students regular feedback on their work and tell them how to improve things	4.05	0.70
10.	create opportunities where all the exercises, activities, and tasks can be completed with me in the classroom, and thus no homework is set	3.10	1.02
11.	ask students to self-assess their work	3.39	0.87
12.	ask students to peer-assess their classmates' work	3.73	0.77
13.	ask students to help me select activities or texts to work on in the classroom	3.47	0.99
14.	involve students in activities that allow them to reflect on their own learning and identify their strengths and weaknesses	4.13	0.71
15.	allow students to take the initiative in the classroom	4.06	0.67
AVERAGE SCORE		3.82	0.30

Regarding the second perspective, pre-service teachers reported using techniques that encourage students to demonstrate specific autonomous behaviours ($M = 3.83$; Table 2). Notably, the most frequently reported techniques involved students reflecting on their learning ($M = 4.30$), which included identifying strengths ($M = 4.24$) and weaknesses ($M = 4.23$) in their learning journeys. However, pre-service teachers placed less emphasis on stimulating students' autonomy in learning English outside the classroom. The least reported autonomous behaviours included students setting learning objectives outside the classroom ($M = 3.31$), selecting learning materials for home study ($M = 3.37$), and suggesting exercises, activities, or tasks for home study ($M = 3.52$). It is important for Indonesian teachers to place greater emphasis on the less frequently reported techniques that foster students' autonomous behaviours, particularly as the current findings align with those of a study by Cirocki et al. (2019), conducted among secondary school students in the Indonesian context.

Table 2
Pre-service teachers' techniques for encouraging students' autonomous behaviours

No	Items: I encourage students to...	Mean	SD
1.	suggest activities/exercises for class work	3.81	0.72
2.	suggest activities/exercises for home study	3.52	0.80
3.	set learning objectives in class	3.78	1.04
4.	set learning objectives outside class	3.31	0.94
5.	select learning materials for class work	3.69	0.93

No	Items: I encourage students to...	Mean	SD
6.	select learning materials for home study	3.37	0.86
7.	assess their own learning	3.60	0.91
8.	assess their classmates' learning	3.67	0.83
9.	evaluate their English language lessons/course	4.08	0.61
10.	identify strengths in their learning	4.24	0.55
11.	identify weaknesses in their learning	4.23	0.56
12.	plan their learning	4.08	0.76
13.	make decisions on what to learn next in their English course	3.82	0.87
14.	take the initiative in the classroom	3.99	0.67
15.	reflect on their learning	4.30	0.55
AVERAGE SCORE		3.83	0.37

Regarding the third perspective, pre-service EFL teachers' capacity to plan for students' autonomous learning outside of the EFL classroom appeared to be at a moderate level ($M = 3.50$; Table 3). Activities they commonly encouraged included listening to English songs ($M = 4.34$), watching English films ($M = 4.10$), and speaking English with friends ($M = 3.90$). However, they would rarely encourage their students to find opportunities to speak English with foreigners via social media ($M = 3.16$), read print and/or online journalistic texts ($M = 3.15$), practise English with foreigners face-to-face ($M = 2.69$), or attend private English courses or lessons ($M = 2.94$), face-to-face or online. These findings are largely consistent with those of Cirocki et al. (2019), suggesting that Indonesian learners' out-of-classroom activities may be guided by their teachers rather than initiated independently. However, more research is needed in the Indonesian context to draw firmer conclusions about the extent to which teacher guidance influences learners' autonomy, motivation, and ability to engage in self-directed learning outside the classroom.

Table 3
Out-of-classroom activities encouraged by pre-service teachers

No	Items: Teachers would encourage the following...	Mean	SD
1.	learning from reference materials	3.30	0.86
2.	reading literature, both in print and/or digital formats	3.72	0.77
3.	reading print and/or online journalistic texts	3.15	0.80
4.	listening to English songs (including Spotify)	4.34	0.82
5.	speaking English with their friend(s)	3.90	0.97
6.	communicating with foreigners in English via Zoom, Facetime, and WhatsApp	3.16	1.10
7.	seeking opportunities to practise English face-to-face with foreigners	2.69	1.05
8.	writing texts in English	3.75	0.78
9.	watching English-language content (e.g., BBC, CNN, National Geographic, streaming platforms, podcasts, YouTube)	3.26	1.12
10.	watching English films	4.10	0.82
11.	playing English games (e.g., computer, online)	3.78	0.89
12.	learning English with a friend/a group of friends	3.88	0.96
13.	attending English language extra-curricular activities (e.g., conversation club, debate team)	3.09	1.12
14.	attending private English courses/lessons (e.g., face-to-face, online, hybrid)	2.94	1.01
AVERAGE SCORE		3.50	0.51

Further analyses of the data, using independent samples *t*-tests, revealed no significant differences in pre-service teachers' readiness to foster autonomy in their classrooms in terms of gender (male [$M = 3.39$] and female [$M = 3.36$], $t(85) = .539$, $p = .59$) or the status of the schools (state [$M = 3.34$] and private [$M = 3.44$] schools, $t(85) = -1.690$, $p = .09$) where they undertook their teaching practicum. The results of the one-way between-groups ANOVA showed insignificant differences in pre-service teachers' readiness to foster autonomy in their classrooms in terms of school locations (urban [$M = 3.36$], suburban [$M = 3.37$], and rural [$M = 3.39$] schools, $F(2,84) = 0.66$, $p = .92$) where the pre-service teachers fulfilled their teaching practicum requirements.

After measuring pre-service teachers' readiness to develop LA, the next step was to evaluate their motivation to teach English. The data indicated a moderate level of motivation ($M = 3.56$). Given the close relationship between motivation and autonomy, these moderate levels could imply that the pre-service teachers were not fully autonomous themselves, potentially hindering their ability to foster autonomy among their students. Ushioda (1996, p. 40) confidently asserted that "without motivation, there is no autonomy", suggesting that autonomous teachers are inherently motivated, which is similar to her conclusion that "autonomous learners are by definition motivated learners" (Ushioda, 1996, p. 2). This connection between autonomy and motivation has been corroborated by studies on LA, including Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019), Liu (2012), and Spratt et al. (2002). This insight is particularly significant for the Indonesian context as it highlights the necessity for teacher education programmes to prioritise enhancing intrinsic motivation in future teachers. Such an investment would promote autonomous behaviours and facilitate the smoother development of LA among school students. A mitigating circumstance in the context of the current study was that the pre-service teachers were still in the process of learning the craft of teaching. It is highly likely that as they gain more teaching experience, their confidence in fostering LA among their students will increase.

Finally, the study revealed that the extent to which the undergraduate programme prepared pre-service teachers correlated with their readiness level to foster LA ($r = .42$; $p = .01$). The mean score reflecting the degree of preparation provided by the programme was 3.67.

Indonesian pre-service teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their undergraduate teacher education programme in developing their readiness to foster learner autonomy

To address the third research question, qualitative and quantitative data were collected. During the interview stage, the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of their teacher education programme in developing their readiness to foster LA varied. Given the cultural context of Indonesian politeness, it is reasonable to infer that there is a pressing need for improvement.

The participants generally acknowledged that LA was not an explicit component of the undergraduate curriculum, noting that it was often mentioned in passing without detailed clarification. One participant remarked that "LA is not included in the curriculum; I do not remember attending a class on this topic" (SIT23). Although half of the participants in the interview stage disagreed, they quickly stated that, "The focus on learner autonomy is minimal,

and we have rarely seen its explicit application in actual teaching practices” (SIT1). Another participant echoed this sentiment: “Our understanding of this concept is rather basic; we know it from theory, but implementing it in the classroom is challenging” (SIT25). Two participants elaborated as follows:

My lecturer mentions Kurikulum Merdeka all the time. He talks about the new policy and its good sides but has never provided a detailed definition of learner autonomy and does not show us practical examples, I mean, how the new policy should be implemented in the classroom. Specific examples of making autonomy happen in the classroom or school would be very useful. As future teachers, we want to see what we must do to make our students independent. (SIT12)

On my programme, we often talk about 21st-century skills such as critical thinking. These skills are very important. Our lecturer encourages us to teach them to students, but she does not show us how to do that. We only talk about this but do not get any models to follow or are asked to propose our own activities to receive feedback on. I think these skills are connected with learner autonomy, but our lecturer never clarified this. (SIT16)

The participants reported that although the new Independent Curriculum was frequently referenced on their programme, this seldom led to substantive discussions and practical solutions for increasing LA. As a result, the participants often perceived their teacher educators, and in multiple instances, their cooperating teachers during the practicum, as lacking practical expertise in this area, attributing this shortcoming largely to insufficient government efforts. The government, they argued, failed to adequately familiarise teachers with the new policy and “did not provide effective training for implementing learner autonomy in the classroom context” (SIT3). One participant elaborated emphatically, stating:

Me and my friends think that our lecturers do not completely understand what learner autonomy is. They usually say the same thing, “learner independence”, because they see it in the policy. What kind of independence? Why independence? They never give examples of activities we could better understand and use in our teaching but probably they did not receive adequate training from [the Ministry]. (SIT19)

Another participant was less direct, suggesting that:

The university and the government should offer learner autonomy workshops to us all, including our lecturers and cooperating teachers from schools, so that we work together and become more knowledgeable about the methods of fostering autonomy in the classroom...there should be less theory and more practical support. (SIT3)

These findings indicate that the pre-service teachers did not feel adequately prepared to foster LA in their classrooms. This is consistent with prior research, which highlighted insufficient training in integrating autonomous learning into instructional practices (Demetrashvili et al., 2024; Nakata, 2011; Shahsavari, 2014). Studies from Thai and Iranian contexts reported that

teachers had a theoretical understanding of LA and their roles in autonomous learning but struggled to implement supportive strategies (Duong, 2014; Mansooji et al., 2022), somewhat reflecting the Indonesian context presented in this article. Studies have also revealed that teachers who engage with self-regulated learning are better equipped to promote LA, meaning it is essential for teachers to first experience autonomous practices themselves (Nakata, 2011). This conclusion must be seriously considered in Indonesia if LA is to be significantly advanced within schools.

The qualitative findings were corroborated by the quantitative data. A substantial proportion of participants in the quantitative phase of the study experienced difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of their teacher education programme in developing their readiness to foster LA in their pedagogical practice. Consequently, nearly 33% of respondents selected the “neither disagree nor agree” option on the questionnaire.

Towards the end of their interviews, seven participants offered valuable suggestions for improving their teacher education programme. These proposals aimed to better address autonomy in practical terms and to bridge the gap between teacher education and classroom practice, issues also considered in research by Duong (2014) and Mansooji et al. (2022). For instance, one participant suggested introducing “compulsory courses on autonomy implementation in schools, where theory and practice go together, and future teachers create folders with practical activities to complete the course” (SIT3). Three participants advocated existing “courses on teaching methods, language skills, and ICT to emphasise autonomy, incorporating ready-made tasks or lesson scenarios to support teachers, and offering more training on learning strategies” (SIT5). Another participant proposed “negotiating the curriculum with pre-service teachers and listening to them...to hear their voices and see their choices so they could do a similar thing when they start teaching in schools” (SIT7). Additionally, one participant recommended integrating “reflective moments into relevant courses where all students focus on active autonomy development, thus aligning teaching with current policy” (SIT12). Another participant suggested forming “a learner autonomy interest group within the programme to gather those interested in better understanding the complex concept of autonomy; this would help bring pre-service teachers, lecturers, and cooperating teachers from schools together” (SIT21). Notably, none of the participants explicitly mentioned the design of assessments focusing on LA.

CONCLUSION

This article reports on a research project investigating pre-service EFL teachers’ readiness to develop LA in East Javanese schools in Indonesia. The findings revealed that these teachers conceptualised learner independence in a limited manner, associating their definitions exclusively with learner-based and technology-based approaches. Notwithstanding this narrow understanding, teachers reported being moderately prepared to foster LA among their students. However, they believed their teacher education programme could more effectively integrate the concept of LA, thereby equipping them to teach in 21st-century schools.

This research has, however, several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the findings were derived from a small sample of participants from East Java, limiting generalisability despite the robust design. Secondly, the scarcity of rigorous empirical studies on EFL teachers' readiness to develop LA in Indonesia made it challenging to contextualise the results. More extensive previous research would have facilitated a comparison with existing findings, leading to more generalisable conclusions. Lastly, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to social desirability and recall bias, affecting the accuracy of the participants' responses.

To improve the generalisability of the findings, future studies should incorporate participants from diverse regions of Indonesia, thereby representing various types and locations of universities. This broader sampling would facilitate a more comprehensive evaluation of EFL teachers' readiness to develop LA in accordance with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. By encompassing all geographic regions of Indonesia, future research will provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing EFL teachers' readiness to foster LA and the effectiveness of their pedagogical strategies across different contexts. This approach would also help identify potential institutional variations, thereby contributing to creating more tailored and effective teacher education programmes.

The present study has significant implications for policymakers, teacher educators, and practitioners. Firstly, policymakers should ensure that the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and LA become permanent components of teacher education programmes and are thoroughly discussed and integrated into classroom practice. Secondly, teacher educators should adopt practical training methods which provide concrete examples of LA development related to the resource-based, technology-based, learner-based, and classroom-based approaches, and assess future teachers' understanding and ability to design relevant activities that are both formative and summative. Finally, classroom practitioners should actively seek professional development opportunities to enhance their skills in fostering LA, demonstrating sufficient initiative in their practice to cultivate autonomy effectively among their students.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors confirm that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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