INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
Practical and Pedagogical Issues in English Education
IJPIE
ISSN : 2980-9533
Homepage: www.ijpie.org
3(3), Sep. 2025

Exploring the Relationship between Iranian EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Autonomy and Sense of Preparedness to Teach

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KEYWORDS

EFL Pre-service Teachers, Preparedness to Teach, Correlational Research, Teacher Autonomy, Teacher Education

ARTICLE INFO

Article type: Research Article

Article history:
Received: 25 April 2025
Revised: 22 June 2025
Accepted: 30 June, 2025
Published online: 30 June 2025

ABSTRACT

Teacher autonomy and preparedness play a significant role in enhancing the quality of education and directing the teaching process toward desirable outcomes. Focusing on teachers of pre-service programs, this study attempted to scrutinize two constructs of teacher autonomy and sense of preparedness to teach, and explore possible correlations between them. Employing a quantitative, correlational research design, an online questionnaire, adopted from Pearson and Moomaw (2006) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2002a), was administered to collect data. The participants, including 37 Iranian EFL pre-service teachers, were recruited through convenience sampling from two branches of Farhangian University in Zanjan and Ardabil. Using SPSS 26 (2019) software, statistical techniques including Pearson Correlation, Multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA), and Paired-Samples t-test were conducted to analyze the obtained data. A strong positive correlation was found between teacher autonomy and sense of preparedness to teach. Additionally, no significant difference was revealed between dimensions of teacher autonomy, i.e., general and curricular autonomy, suggesting that both dimensions are equally perceived by pre-service teachers. Among the subscales of sense of preparedness to teach, "using technology" was rated the highest, while "promoting student learning" was rated the lowest. Additionally, no clear decision could be reached on rejecting or supporting the correlations between subscales of preparedness and dimensions of autonomy. This study provides implications for various role-players in education, such as pre-and in-service teachers, teacher education programs, and policymakers, as well as some suggestions for future researchers to extend the body of knowledge on two main constructs of the current study.

Introduction

Education as one of the complex and noteworthy disciplines, is constantly under the influence of numerous internal and external factors. These factors affect teacher effectiveness and student outcomes, particularly in EFL teaching (Zeng, 2023). In this regard, teacher autonomy and preparedness to teach, as two key internal factors, play a significant role in this ongoing change which will be explored in this study.

While a large body of research is devoted to learner autonomy (e.g., Benson, 2016), teacher autonomy has received less attention despite its significant role in education. Teaching is not a static profession; rather, it is a career which entails professional development. Teachers are self-directed learners and throughout their professional lives must acquire new knowledge and skills (Smith, 2001). Additionally, every classroom situation poses its own set of conditions that are often novel and require ad hoc decision-making. Since it is impossible to prepare teachers for every possible situation during pre-service education, fostering autonomy becomes essential.

How to Cite: Zohrabi, M., Ahmadpour, F. (2025). Exploring the Relationship between Iranian EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Autonomy and Sense of Preparedness to Teach. *International Journal of Practical and Pedagogical Issues in English Education*, 3(3), 75-97. DOI: 10.22034/ijpie.2025.519072.1099

As the requirements of the new-modern world necessitates, teachers need to be reflective and meet the diverse needs of their learners and adapt to different teaching contexts (Koglek, 2024). Kumaravadivelu (2001) also cites teacher autonomy as one of the fundamental principles in post-method pedagogy which shifts the attention from a confined, method-centered teaching template to focus on the educator's control, adaptability, and action-informed practice.

Additionally, because of its great influence on teachers' performance and capabilities, it is of critical importance to investigate pre-service teachers' sense of preparedness to teach (Ingvarson et al., 2007). It refers to the extent to which teachers feel ready and well-equipped to start the profession (Housego, 1990). Teacher education programs play an important role in this regard, since their primary aim is to equip teachers with essential skills for their future profession and shape their behaviors, beliefs, and classroom performance. Darling-Hammond (2006) suggested some measurement methods to evaluate teacher education programs, including pretests, posttests, performance observation, and interviews. In the same regard, pre-service teachers' sense of preparedness to teach serves as an effective tool for assessing program success.

In Iran, the official teacher education institution is Farhangian University, which prepares pre-service teachers at a national level. It seeks to develop professional skills, pedagogical beliefs, and teaching competencies through a four-year program (Farhangian University, n.d.). This research is concerned with junior and senior pre-service teachers who have completed initial courses and internship experiences that have shaped their perceptions and professional readiness.

While the literature highlights the significance of teacher autonomy and its relationship with different educational concepts, it reveals a dearth of research in the Iranian context, especially for pre-service teachers. Although issues such as teaching skills and classroom management have received attention, the multifaceted issues surrounding preparedness to teach vis-á-vis autonomy have yet to be explored. Moreover, novice and pre-service teachers often face challenges transitioning into independent educators due to limited support and guidance. Iranian EFL teachers encounter additional obstacles, including restricted English practice opportunities outside classrooms and cultural barriers, which require greater preparation. Consequently, this study aims to address these gaps and problems by primarily investigating the potential association between autonomy and preparedness among Iranian EFL pre-service teachers, offering insights to improve teacher education programs. Besides, by applying Pearson and Hall's (1993) two-dimensional autonomy framework—general and curricular—it explores the participants' perceived autonomy and compares these two dimensions. Likewise, since actual preparedness and effectiveness are difficult to measure (Çelik & Topkaya, 2023), this study examines perceived preparedness to teach as an indirect measure of teaching effectiveness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002b). Finally, it investigates any possible correlations between the subscales of preparedness and teacher autonomy.

Literature Review

Teacher Autonomy

Autonomy has been defined and conceptualized in various fields and has recently gained significant focus in educational research (Wermke et al., 2018). Initially tied to learner independence, autonomy now includes language teachers' agency in professional growth as well (Benson, 2010). Young (1986) defined autonomy as the ability to shape one's life free from external influences. Benson (2000) identified personal autonomy —taking responsibility for one's own learning—as a key and ultimate goal of education. In EFL, autonomy has emerged as a result of the shift from traditional and lecture-based classes to learner-centered and discovery-based learning. Benson (2007) additionally mentioned the diverse needs and learning styles of language learners as key reasons for the foregrounding of the term 'autonomy' in EFL classes and the abandonment of fixed methods.

Esfandyari (2017) explained that the emergence of self-directed learning courses in EFL, initially designed for adult learners and later expanded to include young learners, highlights the growing need for autonomy in this field. According to OECD (2016), teacher autonomy is the teacher's power to freely make job-related decisions. Little (1995) defined Teacher Autonomy (TA) as the ability to engage in a self-managed teaching process. He identified it as a key trait and qualification of successful teachers, emphasizing its development from their learner experiences into professional life, and highlighted the interconnection between teacher and learner autonomy.

Since Little's (1995) initial work, scholars have further explored teacher autonomy, adding new dimensions and analyzing its connections to other factors. Littlewood (1996) identified two key aspects of TA: the capacity and skill to freely make choices and the confidence and willingness to act on them. Friedman (1999) added that autonomy can be exercised in four main areas of teaching as curriculum development, teaching and assessment, professional development, and administration. Smith (2001) also referred to TA as teachers' attempts to develop skills and knowledge in their profession. Similarly, Benson (2000) viewed autonomy as a teachers' right as individuals to freely make actions.

Multidimensional Nature of Teacher Autonomy

According to Huang (2005), teacher autonomy is a complex and multifaceted idea with many definitions put forth by various academics. Teachers handle diverse responsibilities, including knowledge transfer, class management, and social and administrative tasks. Thus, the amount of flexibility, freedom, and autonomy they demonstrate in each of these fields may vary considerably (Wermke et al., 2018). Pearson and Hall (1993) viewed TA through two dimensions: general autonomy, which deals with classroom management and personal choices in the teaching profession; and curricular autonomy, which refers to the teachers' freedom and power of making choices regarding the selection and integration of materials and activities. This classification led to the development of a self-report scale for measuring the sense of teacher autonomy. Wermke et al. (2018) identified three levels of teacher autonomy as classroom-related, school-related, and profession-related.

Importance and Benefits of Teacher Autonomy

According to previous research, teacher autonomy plays a vital role in both creating effective educational systems and providing educators with empowerment. Derakhshan et al. (2020) reported that teacher autonomy and professional development positively affect classroom

success and teacher performance. Additionally, Ramos (2006) and Xu (2015) confirmed autonomy's role in fostering professional growth. The existing literature has recognized the connection between autonomous teachers and lifelong learning and learner autonomy development (Little, 1995; Ramos, 2006; Xu, 2015). Furthermore, a study by Shafique et al. (2024) established a direct correlation between teacher autonomy and students' learning outcomes, emphasizing its positive contribution to student performance and educational achievements. Students also perceived teacher autonomy as crucial for enhancing their motivation, engagement, and dynamic learning, ultimately leading to improved education quality and teaching effectiveness.

It is also stated that higher teacher autonomy positively correlates with increased creativity in various professional aspects (Pashazadeh & Alavinia, 2019; Bakhshi & Sayadian, 2015). This association highlights the empowering role autonomy plays in fostering innovative teaching practices. In addition, the association between teachers' motivational levels and their autonomy is outlined in previous studies (Yildiz et al., 2021). In contrast, Zarfsaz and Hosseini (2023) revealed a negative and demotivating effect of autonomy on the motivational levels of Iranian L2 learners.

In examining the benefits of teacher autonomy, the study by Pearson and Moomaw (2005) demonstrated that teacher autonomy positively affects job satisfaction, yet Esfandiari and Kamali (2016) discovered an opposite result. The research conducted by Farjami and Kazemi (2018) revealed that teacher autonomy has a detrimental effect on self-efficacy, while Sokmen and Kilic (2019) established a positive association. Kavgacı and Çalık (2017) confirmed a positive link between autonomy and work engagement, and Erturk (2023) highlighted a positive connection with professional dedication.

Sense of Preparedness to Teach

In the broad field of educational research, the exploration of teachers' sense of preparedness to teach, also referred to as feelings and perceptions of preparedness to teach, and how they deal with students holds a significant place. It is one of the critical factors influencing their effectiveness in classes. Understanding this aspect of teacher education and preparation is crucial as it delves into the emotional and psychological readiness of educators, impacting not only their performance but also the learning outcomes of their students.

Origins and Definitions of Teachers' Sense of Preparedness to Teach

Darling-Hammond et al. (2002b) highlighted preparedness or readiness to teach as a critical measure for differentiating successful programs from unsuccessful ones. Higher levels of preparedness result in better-equipped and high-quality teachers who can have a significant impact on the educational system and ultimately society (Manowaluilou & Reeve, 2022).

Housego (1990) pioneered research on preparedness to teach, introducing a reciprocal deterministic framework involving three interconnected elements: teachers' characteristics and dispositions, environmental factors, and teaching behaviors. There exists a cause-and-effect relationship between these elements, with preparedness to teach identified as part of teachers' intrinsic characteristics. Following that, Bandura's concept of "perceived self-efficacy" provided the foundation for further work on the concept of preparedness. Self-efficacy refers to the confidence in one's abilities. Bandura (1977) suggested two components for self-efficacy: efficacy expectation, which refers to one's judgement of their ability to perform an action, and outcome expectation, which reflects one's beliefs about the outcomes of a certain action,

independent of their ability to perform a task. Later, Ashton and Webb (1986) applied Bandura's theory to the educational context, distinguishing teaching efficacy, which aligns with Bandura's outcome expectation and pertains to the effect of teaching on students and the achievement of desired outcomes, from personal teaching efficacy, corresponding to Bandura's efficacy expectation, which involves teachers' self-assessment of their competencies. Housego (1990) later described personal teaching efficacy as the "feeling of preparedness to teach" (cited in Housego, 1990).

According to Housego (1990), pre-service teachers' preparedness to teach is a vital cognitive factor in social psychology. The level of teachers' sense of preparedness is also suggested as an indicator to estimate their success in performing classroom tasks and dealing with challenges. Similarly, Brown et al. (2014) confirmed that preparedness to teach is a strong predictor of teachers' career success, emphasizing the importance of teacher education programs in equipping teachers for their important societal roles.

Housego (1990) proposed that teachers' sense of preparedness improves progressively with education and participation in various courses. However, his findings revealed that this feeling of preparedness is not uniform across all teaching aspects, with teachers feeling more confident in certain areas than others. The task-specific nature of the sense of preparedness to teach is also addressed by Tutyandari (2022). Furthermore, several other studies mentioned the significant role of teacher education programs in shaping teachers' perceptions and increasing their effectiveness (Tasdemir et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002a).

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2002a), two types of variables impact teachers' effectiveness and their perceptions of readiness: individual differences, which connect to the teachers themselves; and contextual differences, that involve the type of school, field of knowledge, and the support they receive. Likewise, Çelik and Topkaya (2023) identified internal factors, like personality types, confidence, and motivation, alongside external factors such as teaching knowledge, skills, and the quality of mentoring, as key factors that shape pre-service teachers' perceptions of preparedness. These variables interact to foster changes in their readiness for teaching roles.

Due to its multi-dimensional nature (Çelik & Topkaya, 2023), the sense of preparedness to teach has recently been recognized as a critical area of study. Brown et al. (2019) found a moderately significant predictive relationship between preparedness to teach and self-efficacy, highlighting their close association. They also observed a positive correlation between pre-service teachers' preparedness and their actual classroom performance. Çelik and Topkaya (2023) considered self-efficacy as a prerequisite for the sense of preparedness to teach. This correlation was also acknowledged by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002a). Similarly, Huang et al. (2023) highlighted a reciprocal relationship between motivation and preparedness, where greater motivation enhances readiness to teach, and a strong sense of preparedness boosts job motivation.

To fulfill research objectives, the following quantitative research questions are addressed:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL pre-service teachers' autonomy and their sense of preparedness to teach?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between the subscales of the sense of preparedness to teach among Iranian EFL pre-service teachers?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference between the two dimensions of teacher autonomy among Iranian EFL pre-service teachers?

4. Is there any statistically significant relationship between the subscales of the sense of preparedness to teach and the dimensions of teacher autonomy?

Method

Design of the Study

This study aimed at exploring the relationship between autonomy and preparedness to teach among Iranian EFL pre-service teachers. In this regard, a correlational quantitative method and statistical analysis were applied, through employing a survey-based approach for efficient data collection from a diverse participant group.

Participants and Setting

The participants of the current study included 37 Iranian EFL pre-service teachers (22 female and 15 male) from Farhangian University branches in Zanjan (24 participants) and Ardabil (13 participants). A convenience sampling method was applied for the recruitment of the participants. Mackey and Gass (2016) described convenience sampling as a form of non-random sampling method in which the researcher selects the most accessible and available participants. Since the number of the EFL pre-service teachers is restricted in Iran, and the researchers did not have access to all of them, the convenience sampling well-suited for the context of this study. The participants fell into five age groups as 18-20 (2.70%), 20-22 (56.76%), 22-24 (29.73%), 24-26 (8.11%), and 26-28 (2.70%).

Due to the focus of the study, inclusion necessitated prior experience in practicum courses for all participants. The sample comprised juniors (62.17%), who had completed four practicums, and seniors (37.83%), who had completed two practicums. This study selected Ardabil and Zanjan branches of Farhangian University, as they currently provide TEFL programs.

Instruments and Measures

The study adopted and utilized online questionnaires to gather quantitative data for statistical analysis, divided into three sections: demographics (age, gender, university branch, major, study year, teaching experience, practicum attendance), the teacher autonomy scale, and the sense of preparedness to teach scale.

Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS)

The teacher autonomy scale developed by Pearson and Moomaw (2006), based on Pearson and Hall (1993), was used in this study. It is one of the widely used scales in second language research and has a high reliability (overall reliability indices of .837), and validity, since it is grounded in well-established theories and validated through repeated use by various scholars in the field. The questionnaire was on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 4 (definitely true) and included 18 items. According to Pearson and Hall (1993), using a 4-point Likert scale can help mitigate the neutral responses. Based on this scale, Teacher autonomy consists of two dimensions: general autonomy (12 items), examining issues and behaviors regarding classroom management and personal choices; and curricular autonomy (6 items), measuring teachers' freedom in selecting and organizing materials and activities.

Sense of Preparedness to Teach Scale

The third section of the questionnaire measures Iranian EFL pre-service teachers' perceived preparedness using a survey by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002a). It was the first section of a larger survey used by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002b) to assess teacher education programs. Initially, it was designed based on California teacher qualification standards and contained 36 items. It was later expanded by adding four more items to compare teachers from different pathways.

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 40 closed-ended items on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from well prepared to unprepared). Thirty-six items were categorized into five subscales: student learning (15), critical thinking/social development (8), technology use (5), understanding learners (5), and instructional leadership (6). Thereafter, the last item as "overall preparedness" was added by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002b), where respondents reflect on their general perception of their preparedness by considering all 39 previous items. The three remaining items out of thirty-nine were grouped by the researcher of the present study based on subscale concepts and themes.

The survey demonstrated high reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.709 to 0.899 across five subscales (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Its validity was also confirmed, as the items closely align with California Standards for the Teaching Profession.

Procedures

The data collection for this correlational quantitative research design followed several stages. First, a literature review identified a gap in research on pre-service teachers' autonomy and preparedness. Subsequently, appropriate survey instruments were selected based on their validity, reliability, and appropriateness. This resulted in the choice of the Teacher Autonomy Survey by Pearson and Moomaw (2006), and the preparedness questionnaire by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002a). The following stage was the administration of an online questionnaire via Google Forms, ensuring anonymity, as Google Forms excluded IP addresses and also did not require the name, and accessibility. Distribution involved contacting the intended population and through public social media and direct outreach. Finally, SPSS V.26 (2019) software was utilized for statistical analysis of the collected data to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses.

Data Analysis

The obtained data underwent statistical calculations to provide answers to research questions. The preliminary analyses included an inspection of univariate and multivariate outliers (using z-scores), and examining the reliability of the Autonomy and Sense of Preparedness scales. Pearson Correlation was used to determine probable relationships between the participants' autonomy and their sense of preparedness to teach (Macky & Gass, 2016). Since there were multiple dependent variables, MANOVA was considered appropriate over AVOVA and applied to find significant differences among the five subscales of preparedness (Macky & Gass, 2016). A paired t-test was also conducted to compare means of general and curriculum autonomy. Finally, Pearson Correlation calculations were used to explore the existence of a relationship between any of the autonomy dimensions and preparedness subscales.

Results

To answer the research questions and analyze the data, statistical techniques of Pearson Correlation, MANOVA, and Paired-Samples t-test were used, along with checks for outliers, normality, and reliability indices prior to reporting findings.

Testing Assumptions

The study examined the collected data for significant univariate and multivariate outliers, focusing on both individual variables and the overall dataset. Table 1 presents the Standardized Scores (z-scores) for total Autonomy, Sense of Preparedness, and their respective components. Variables with z-scores exceeding ±3.29 are considered outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

Table 1

Standardized Scores for Checking Lack of Univariate Outliers

	N	Minimum	Maximum
Z score: (Autonomy)	37	-1.23	2.42
Z score: General Autonomy	37	-1.55	2.50
Z score: Curricular Autonomy	37	-1.56	2.67
Z score: Sense of Preparedness	37	-1.75	2.19
Z score: Promote Students' Learning	37	-1.56	2.06
Z score: Teach Critical Thinking	37	-1.81	1.81
Z score: Use Technology	37	-1.98	1.38
Z score: Understand Learners	37	-1.80	2.03
Z score: Develop Instructional Leadership	37	-2.05	1.95

Since all minimum and maximum values in Table 1 were lower than ±3.29, it was concluded that the present data did not suffer from any significant univariate outliers.

Table 2

Mahalanobis Distances for Checking Lack of Multivariate Outliers

	N	Minimum	Maximum
Mahalanobis Distance	37	2.647	16.915
Critical Chi-square (.001, 9)	27.87		

Table 2 shows Mahalanobis Distance (MD) values, which indicate a case's distance from the centroid of others (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). With a critical chi-square value of 27.87 at the .001 level for nine variables, the maximum MD value being below this threshold confirms the absence of multivariate outliers in the data.

Table 3

Skewness and Kurtosis Indices of Normality

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Autonomy	37	1.317	.388	1.140	.759
General Autonomy	37	.713	.388	.154	.759
Curricular Autonomy	37	1.003	.388	.994	.759
Sense of Preparedness	37	.301	.388	-.316	.759
Promote Students' Learning	37	.197	.388	-.964	.759
Teach Critical Thinking	37	.057	.388	-.789	.759
Use Technology	37	-.299	.388	-.990	.759
Understand Learners	37	.438	.388	-.700	.759
Develop Instructional Leadership	37	-.060	.388	-.116	.759

Table 3 displays Skewness and Kurtosis indices, which measure data symmetry and distribution shape. Since all values fall within the acceptable range of ±2, the data shows no significant deviation from normality (Bachman, 2005; George & Mallery, 2020).

Table 4

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics

		Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Autonomy	Total	.837	18
	General	.756	12
	Curricular	.720	6
Sense of Preparedness	Total	.951	39
	Promote Students' Learning	.921	15
	Teach Critical Thinking	.856	8
	Use Technology	.826	5
	Understand Learners	.770	5
	Develop Instructional Leadership	.810	6

Table 4 presents Cronbach's Alpha reliability indices, showing overall scores of .837 for Autonomy and .951 for Sense of Preparedness. General autonomy scored .756, and curricular

autonomy scored .720, while preparedness components ranged from .770 to .921. All values exceed the .70 threshold, confirming strong reliability (Harrison et al., 2021).

Exploring RQ1

The first research question examined the relationship between autonomy and sense of preparedness to teach among Iranian EFL pre-service teachers. Using Pearson Correlation, the results (r (35) = .745, p = .000) demonstrated a significant and large relationship (Table 5), based on the effect size criteria (.10 = weak, .30 = moderate, .50 = large) outlined by Pallant (2016), and Field (2024). Consequently, the first null hypothesis, as there was no relationship between autonomy and preparedness, was rejected.

Table 5

Pearson Correlation between Autonomy and Sense of Preparedness to Teach

		Sense of Preparedness
Autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.745**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	37

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Exploring RQ2

The second research question explored any differences between five subscales of the sense of preparedness to teach using MANOVA. Since the study involved a single group of EFL pre-service teachers, assumptions of homogeneity of variances and covariance matrices were not assessed.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Subscales of Sense of Preparedness to Teach

Prepared	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Promote Students' Learning	2.584	.097	2.387	2.780
Teach Critical Thinking	2.750	.091	2.566	2.934
Use Technology	3.178	.098	2.980	3.376
Understand Learners	2.832	.094	2.641	3.024
Develop Instructional Leadership	2.730	.090	2.546	2.913

According to Table 6, participants scored highest in use of technology (M = 3.17) and lowest in promote students' learning (M = 2.58).

Table 7

Multivariate Tests for Sub-Scales of Sense of Preparedness to Teach

	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.573	11.079	4	33	.000	.573
Wilks' Lambda	.427	11.079	4	33	.000	.573
Hotelling's Trace	1.343	11.079	4	33	.000	.573
Roy's Largest Root	1.343	11.079	4	33	.000	.573

Table 7 shows the main results of MANOVA. The results (F (4, 33) = 11.07, p = .000, Partial Eta Squared = .573 representing a large effect size) indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the participants' means on five subscales of sense of preparedness to teach; consequently, rejecting the second null-hypothesis.

Table 8

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Comparisons Tests

(I) Prepared	(J) Prepared	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Use Technology	Promote Students' Learning	.595*	.091	.000	.323	.866
	Teach Critical Thinking	.428*	.098	.001	.136	.720
	Understand Learners	.346	.125	.088	-.028	.719
	Develop Instructional Leadership	.449*	.096	.000	.163	.735
Teach Critical Thinking	Promote Students' Learning	.166	.073	.281	-.051	.383
	Develop Instructional Leadership	.020	.083	1.000	-.228	.269
Understand Learners	Promote Students' Learning	.249	.096	.138	-.039	.536
	Teach Critical Thinking	.082	.088	1.000	-.182	.346
	Develop Instructional Leadership	.103	.079	1.000	-.133	.339

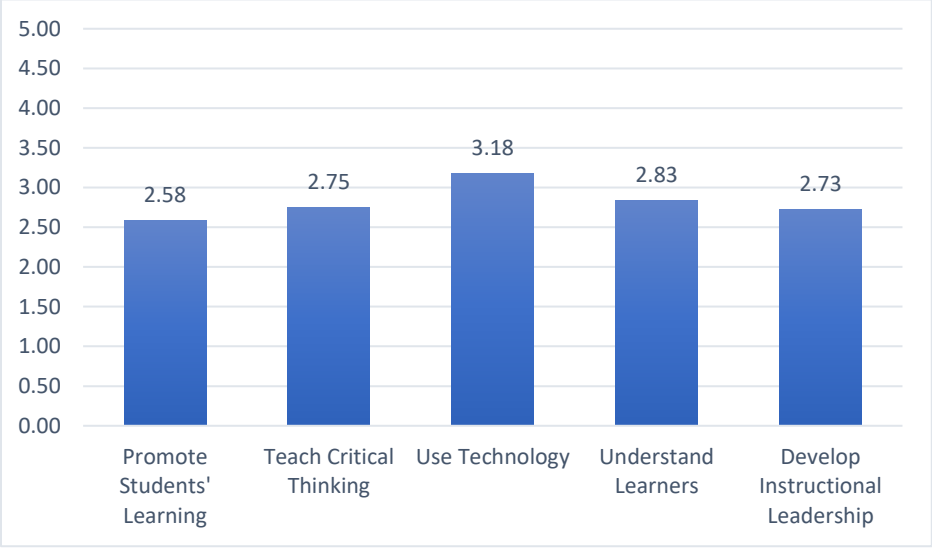
Develop Instructional Leadership	Promote Students' Learning	.146	.068	.395	-.058	.350

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 8 shows the results of the Bonferroni post-hoc comparison tests. Correspondingly, Figure 1 shows the EFL pre-service teachers' means on five subscales of sense of preparedness.

Figure 1

Mean Scores for Subscales of Sense of Preparedness to Teach



Exploring RQ3

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for General and Curricular Autonomy

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
General Autonomy	2.63	37	.241	.040
Curricular Autonomy	2.53	37	.552	.091

The third research question explored any significant difference between the two dimensions of autonomy using paired sample t-test. Based on the results displayed in Table 9, it can be claimed that the pre-service teachers had almost equal means on general (M = 2.63, SD = .241) and curricular (M = 2.53, SD = .553) autonomy.

Table 10

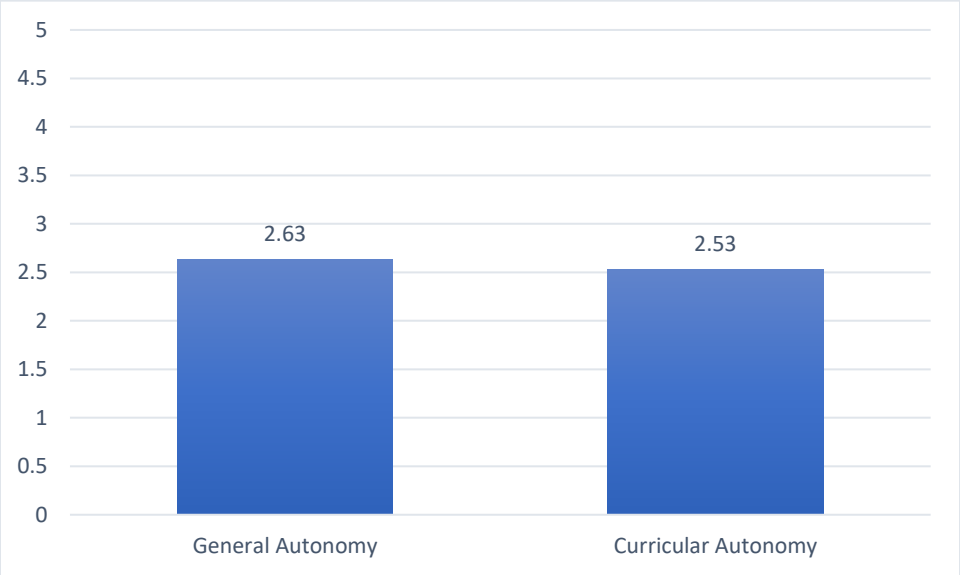
Paired-Samples t-test for General and Curricular Autonomy

Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
.104	.474	.078	-.054	.262	1.331	36	.192

The paired-samples t-test results (t (36) = 1.13, p = .192, Cohen's d = .166, representing a weak effect size) showed no statistically significant difference between participants' mean scores on general and curricular autonomy. Consequently, the third null hypothesis was supported, as illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 10.

Figure 2

Mean Scores for Pretest and Posttest of Ecological Agency



Exploring RQ4

The final research question explored any significant correlations between subscales of autonomy and sense of preparedness to teach using ten Pearson Correlation coefficients.

Table 11

Pearson Correlations between Subscales of Autonomy and Sense of Preparedness to Teach

		General Autonomy	Curricular Autonomy
Promote Students' Learning	Pearson Correlation	.554**	.693**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	37	37
Teach Critical Thinking	Pearson Correlation	.444**	.650**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.000
	N	37	37
Use Technology	Pearson Correlation	.096	.360*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.572	.028
	N	37	37
Understand Learners	Pearson Correlation	.485**	.604**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000
	N	37	37
Develop Instructional Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.354*	.637**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	.000
	N	37	37

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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

To prevent Type I error, the Bonferroni correction adjusted the significance threshold to .005. Based on the results shown in Table 11, significant correlations were found for promoting students' learning, teaching critical thinking, and understanding learners with both general and curricular autonomy. Using technology had non-significant correlations with general and curricular autonomy. Developing instructional leadership had non-significant correlations with general autonomy, but a significant correlation with curricular autonomy. Since all correlation

coefficients were not statistically significant; i.e. < .006, no clear decision can be reached on rejecting or supporting the fourth null-hypothesis.

The findings addressing the first research question on the correlation between teacher autonomy and preparedness revealed a significant positive relationship between these two constructs, rejecting the first null hypothesis. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985), autonomy (desire for self-regulation) and homonomy (desire to integrate with others) are two of humans' innate needs. Similarly, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) highlighted that empowering learners to take responsibility and minimizing external control, which aligns with intrinsic needs of learners, fosters joy, interest, reduces anxiety and alleviates boredom in educational settings, which ultimately foster feelings of self-fulfillment and accomplishment. In this regard, autonomy is seen as one of the fundamental psychological needs that, when satisfied, increases intrinsic motivation, performance, and well-being and consequently, sense of preparedness. The results of this study are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which illustrates how autonomy enhances a sense of competence and readiness in pre-service teachers. Teachers who view themselves as autonomous and in control of their tasks and learning are more confident in their skills and effectiveness as educators.

Supporting the result, Sokmen and Kilic (2019) and Peng et al. (2022) reported a positive relationship between teachers' autonomy and self-efficacy, a construct believed to be in direct relationship with preparedness, whereas Farjami and Kazemi (2018) indicated a negative correlation. Pearson and Moomaw's (2005) research demonstrated that greater teacher autonomy correlates with increased job satisfaction and empowerment. Building on Pearson and Moomaw's (2005) finding, the current study extends the relationship to pre-service teachers, showing that autonomy not only boosts satisfaction and empowerment but also enhances their sense of preparedness. Overall, these findings align with the result of the present study and highlight the significant role of autonomy-supportive environments in teacher preparation programs and educational institutions.

The results of RQ2, comparing the participants' means on the five subscales of sense of preparedness, revealed that teachers felt most prepared in using technology in their teaching (M = 3.17), indicating that pre-service teacher education programs align with modern trends, emphasizing digital literacy and essential teaching skills. Using technology in this sense includes integration of technological aids such as computers, the internet, websites, and social media in every aspect of teaching to improve effectiveness. In line with the current finding, both Davis (2017) and Tutyandari (2022) found that pre-service teachers felt highly prepared to use technology, with technological competencies rated higher than other teaching skills.

The present study underscores the importance of technology use in education. This issue has been supported by Ermet and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010), who stressed the role of teachers' mindsets and beliefs in educational decisions. Effective education relies on technology integration, driving the growing focus on technological competence courses to boost pre-service teachers' confidence and preparation in using technology.

The "understand learners" subscale, which ranked second, reflects pre-service teachers' confidence in addressing diverse student backgrounds, needs, and styles, aligning with learner-centered teaching and post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Darling-Hammond et al. (2002b) emphasized the importance of teacher education programs in equipping educators to handle student diversity effectively. Similarly, previous studies (Guner & Aslan, 2022; Tutyandari, 2022) rated "understand learners" moderately among pre-service teachers.

The "teaching critical thinking and social development" subscale was ranked third, indicating a moderate level of preparedness among pre-service teachers but room for improvement. Developing critical thinking skills as indispensable traits for 21st-century education is vital for fostering independent thinking and handling complex information (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Similarly, Tutyandari (2022) found a moderate level of preparedness in this aspect among pre-service teachers. Christodoulou and Papanikolaou (2023) stressed the critical role of teacher education programs in enhancing these skills.

The subscale "developing instructional leadership" was ranked fourth, indicating a poor preparation in this aspect. In contrast, Tutyandari (2022) found participants to be moderately prepared to develop instructional leadership. Finally, the subscale "promote student learning" ranked lowest, contrasting with Tutyandari (2022), which found a medium level of preparedness in this aspect. This broad subscale includes various tasks like teaching content and designing curriculum and materials, suggesting that participants may feel confident in some skills but lack expertise in others. It can also be concluded that pre-service teachers possess sufficient specialization and pedagogical competencies but struggle to translate theoretical knowledge into effective practical teaching methods that improve student learning outcomes.

Comparison of the two teacher autonomy dimensions for RQ3 revealed nearly equal means, supporting the null hypothesis and indicating a balanced perception of autonomy across teaching responsibilities. Similarly, Kashef and Barzegari (2023) mentioned that Iranian EFL teachers hold positive perceptions towards self-directed learning as one type of autonomy. In contrast, Esfandyari (2017) and Behroozi and Osam (2016) found higher general autonomy than curricular autonomy among Iranian participants. Esfandyari attributed lower curricular autonomy to pre-selected materials and content, limiting teachers' control over classroom instruction. Based on this result, current teacher education programs seem insufficient in developing autonomy as a critical skill. However, it is crucial to inform university instructors about their responsibility to foster future teachers' autonomy and to revise and modify teaching approaches to address current needs effectively (OK, 2016).

The results of RQ4 revealed the relationships between preparedness subscales and teacher autonomy dimensions as follows:

a. "Promote students' learning" had significant correlations with general and curricular autonomy: This indicates that autonomy enables teachers to take control of their actions, foster effective learning environments, and adapt methods and strategies to align with their unique teaching contexts. This is supported by Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which assumes autonomy as an essential and improving factor for motivation and effective performance. Similarly, Shafique et al. (2024) highlighted the critical role of teacher autonomy in boosting students' academic performance and educational outcomes.
b. "Teach critical thinking" had significant correlations with general and curricular autonomy: This relationship may stem from the flexibility that critical thinking provides, enabling teachers to analyze issues from multiple perspectives and make well-informed decisions. In parallel, Keyvanloo et al. (2022) found a positive and moderate correlation between teachers' critical thinking skills and autonomy. Tunçeli et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of integrating critical thinking and autonomy development in teacher education programs, emphasizing that teachers with high autonomy can exercise flexibility, creativity, and the use of effective strategies in their classrooms. This enables

them to challenge students' beliefs, promote deeper understanding, and cultivate critical thinking, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience.

c. "Use technology" had no significant correlations with general and curricular autonomy: Technology integration is complex and multifaceted, and influenced by factors like school climate, administrative support, teachers' mindsets, resources, and professional development (Ermet & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). Teachers can achieve high technological competence regardless of autonomy, as the evolving nature of technology necessitates continuous updating of skills and knowledge. This ongoing process of learning often occurs independently of teacher education programs, with pre-service teachers relying on self-directed learning to adapt and develop their technological skills, even with lower job-related autonomy levels. This result contrasts with Serin and Bozdağ (2020), who identified teaching autonomy and professional communication autonomy as key predictors of teachers' technology integration and attitudes in the teaching process.

d. "Understand learners" had significant correlations with general and curricular autonomy: In today's educational context, students bring diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and needs; making it essential for teachers to recognize and adapt to individual differences. Getting along with all these diversities of post-method era makes ready-made teaching prescriptions unsuitable and requires teachers to take actions. Meeting classroom diversities cannot be accomplished without autonomy. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985) reinforces this, asserting that teacher autonomy fosters a positive classroom environment, meeting students' psychological needs and helping them adapt to their diverse contexts.

e. "Develop instructional leadership" had non-significant correlations with general autonomy, while a significant correlation with curricular autonomy: While initially speculated to correlate with general autonomy because of the items mostly relating to classroom management and instructional issues, findings suggested a stronger association with curricular autonomy. Likewise, Ay and Boz (2022) and Kara and Bozkurt (2022) highlighted the strong link between autonomy and leadership, identifying autonomy as a predictor of instructional leadership and emphasizing its role in enhancing teachers' leadership abilities.

Based on these findings, this study offers key insights and implications for educational stakeholders. It emphasizes the need to assess and enhance pre-service teachers' autonomy and readiness for classroom challenges by analyzing their strengths and weaknesses as outlined in RQ2. It supports in-service teachers, especially novices, in identifying knowledge gaps and fostering professional development through training courses and collaborative learning. The findings advocate revising teacher education programs to better integrate theory with practice. It can be achieved by promoting teacher autonomy and freedom in internship courses and reducing the restrictions and amount of supervision over pre-service teachers' work. Policymakers are urged to prioritize teacher autonomy and preparedness to improve educational outcomes by reducing constraints, enhancing professional development, and implementing flexible curricula.

Conclusion

This quantitative correlational study focused on pre-service teachers due to the critical role they play in shaping education and society. It investigated teacher autonomy and sense of preparedness to teach, revealing a positive relationship between these constructs. No significant difference was found between general and curricular autonomy, suggesting equal perceptions of both. Among preparedness subscales, "use of technology" ranked highest and "promote student

learning" lowest. However, correlations between preparedness subscales and autonomy dimensions were not statistically significant, and thus no clear decision can be made rejecting or accepting the fourth null-hypothesis.

Generalizing the results requires caution due to several limitations: the small sample size restricted method selection and generalizability; reliance on self-reported measures introduced potential biases such as the halo effect, unrealistic responses to please researchers, or random answers, as well as overestimating preparedness and autonomy; the focus on perceived autonomy and preparedness rather than actual implementation may have caused discrepancies; and uncontrolled moderator variables, like demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, educational backgrounds), could have influenced relationships between constructs and altered the final outcomes. In addition, findings may not apply to non-Iranian contexts, because of the cultural and linguistic specifications as well as the different educational system and policies that exist in the Iranian context.

Moreover, this study proposes several suggestions for future research like extending the current line of research on the population of pre-service teachers especially in the Iranian context, including a larger and more diverse sample of pre-service teachers, investigating and comparing the study constructs among different fields of the study. Furthermore, it also suggests conducting cross-cultural and international studies and comparing pre-service teachers from different programs and countries. Future researchers can also conduct longitudinal studies investigating the effectiveness of practicum courses in enhancing pre-service teachers' autonomy and sense of preparedness to teach. Additionally, adopting a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data, and employing data triangulation can further enhance reliability, generalizability, and the robustness of conclusions.

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