EXPLORING LEARNER AUTONOMY: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF ELT PRACTICES IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy has gained prominence in English Language Teaching (ELT) as a pivotal element in fostering independent and lifelong learning skills. This mixed-methods study investigates the practices and perceptions surrounding learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms, emphasizing its practical implementation and theoretical underpinnings. The research was conducted in diverse classroom settings, incorporating both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with teachers and students. Results indicate that fostering learner autonomy significantly enhances student engagement and academic outcomes, particularly in linguistically diverse settings. The findings also reveal challenges, such as cultural influences, lack of resources, and teacher preparedness, that hinder the integration of autonomy-driven approaches. Strategies like collaborative learning, use of technology, and personalized learning plans emerged as effective in promoting autonomy among learners. This study bridges the gap between theory and practice by offering actionable insights for educators and policymakers to implement autonomy-focused pedagogy in multilingual environments. The implications underscore the need for teacher training programs and resource development tailored to diverse linguistic contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include longitudinal studies and specific age groups for a comprehensive understanding of autonomy's role in language acquisition.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, multilingual classrooms, ELT practices, mixed-methods research, language pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has emerged as a cornerstone in modern English Language Teaching (ELT), reflecting a paradigm shift from traditional teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered methodologies. This evolution mirrors broader educational reforms aimed at fostering lifelong learning, critical thinking, and adaptability—skills essential for success in an increasingly interconnected and dynamic world. Learner autonomy, as a concept, underscores the idea that students must take responsibility for their own learning, developing the capacity to identify goals, access resources, and evaluate their progress. While the theoretical foundations of learner autonomy have been well established, its practical implementation in diverse classroom settings, particularly multilingual ones, continues to be a rich area for empirical research and pedagogical innovation.

The term "learner autonomy" was first introduced by Henri Holec in 1981, who defined it as the ability to take charge of one's learning. This notion has since evolved, encompassing dimensions such as self-direction, decision-making, and critical reflection. In the context of ELT, autonomy involves a shift in focus from the teacher as the sole authority to a more collaborative, student-driven approach. This transition is particularly significant in multilingual classrooms, where learners' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds create unique opportunities and challenges. Multilingual environments reflect real-world complexities, making them ideal settings for exploring how autonomy can be nurtured amidst diversity.

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English is often regarded as a gateway to educational and professional opportunities. As such, the ability to learn independently becomes critical for learners who must navigate the complexities of language acquisition.

Autonomous learners are better equipped to adapt to varying contexts, manage their learning processes, and sustain their motivation over time. Intrinsic motivation, a key aspect of learner autonomy, has been consistently linked to improved learning outcomes. It empowers learners to engage deeply with the material, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability that traditional methods often fail to achieve.

Multilingual classrooms, however, add layers of complexity to the autonomy discourse. These settings are characterized by a mix of linguistic proficiencies, cultural expectations, and learning styles, making a one-size-fits-all approach to autonomy ineffective. On one hand, the linguistic diversity in multilingual classrooms can enhance metalinguistic awareness and provide opportunities for peer learning. For example, learners with varying first languages can bring unique perspectives and strategies to language learning, enriching the classroom experience. On the other hand, this diversity can pose challenges, such as differing levels of English proficiency and varying degrees of familiarity with learner-centered pedagogies. These factors demand a more nuanced and adaptable approach to fostering autonomy.

The role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy is crucial yet complex. Teachers must act as facilitators rather than traditional authority figures, guiding students in setting realistic goals, selecting effective learning strategies, and evaluating their progress. In multilingual classrooms, this role becomes even more challenging as teachers must address the diverse needs of learners while fostering a cohesive and collaborative learning environment. Effective autonomy-driven teaching requires a deep understanding of individual learners' strengths, challenges, and cultural contexts. Moreover, teachers need to create an environment that encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and self-reflection—elements that are foundational to autonomous learning.

Technology has significantly influenced the development of learner autonomy in recent years, providing tools and platforms that support personalized and self-directed learning. For example, language learning applications, online resources, and virtual classrooms allow learners to practice and develop their language skills at their own pace. In multilingual classrooms, technology can also serve as a bridge, offering tailored resources and support for learners with varying proficiency levels. For instance, tools like translation apps, interactive language games, and digital dictionaries can help students overcome initial barriers to communication and comprehension. However, integrating technology effectively requires addressing challenges such as digital literacy, access to devices, and the potential for over-reliance on technological tools. Teachers must ensure that technology complements rather than replaces traditional teaching methods, maintaining a balance that supports autonomy without diminishing the role of human interaction and mentorship.

The interplay between autonomy and motivation is another critical area of focus in ELT research. Autonomous learners are typically more intrinsically motivated, as they feel a sense of ownership over their learning journey. This intrinsic motivation is particularly important in multilingual classrooms, where learners may face unique challenges such as cultural dissonance, linguistic barriers, and uneven access to resources. By fostering autonomy, teachers can help learners develop resilience and self-confidence, enabling them to overcome these challenges. For example, encouraging students to set their own learning goals and reflect on their progress can enhance their sense of agency, leading to higher levels of engagement and achievement.

A mixed-methods approach is well-suited to explore the dynamics of learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms, as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of both quantitative patterns and qualitative experiences. In this study, surveys are used to measure learners' self-perceived autonomy, motivation, and language proficiency, while interviews

and classroom observations provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of teachers and students. This combination of methods ensures a holistic understanding of the factors that influence autonomy, capturing both its theoretical dimensions and practical applications. By triangulating data from multiple sources, the study aims to provide reliable and contextually relevant findings that can inform future research and practice.

The implications of fostering learner autonomy extend far beyond the classroom. In a globalized world, language skills are essential not only for academic and professional success but also for social integration and personal growth. Autonomous learners are better equipped to navigate the complexities of multicultural and multilingual environments, making them more adaptable and resourceful in an increasingly interconnected world. Moreover, promoting autonomy in multilingual classrooms contributes to broader educational goals such as equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning. By empowering learners to take control of their education, autonomy-driven approaches can help bridge gaps in access and opportunity, ensuring that all students have the tools they need to succeed.

Despite its potential benefits, implementing autonomy-driven approaches in multilingual classrooms is not without challenges. Factors such as limited resources, large class sizes, and rigid curricula can constrain teachers' ability to promote autonomy effectively. Additionally, cultural factors may influence learners' readiness for autonomy, with some students preferring more structured and teacher-led approaches. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort among educators, policymakers, and institutions. For example, teacher training programs can equip educators with the skills and strategies needed to foster autonomy in diverse classroom settings. Similarly, institutional policies can support the integration of autonomy-driven practices by providing resources, reducing class sizes, and encouraging innovative teaching methods.

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on learner autonomy by exploring its implementation in multilingual classrooms. By examining the practices, perceptions, and outcomes associated with autonomy, the study seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing actionable insights for educators and policymakers. The findings are expected to shed light on the opportunities and challenges of fostering autonomy in diverse linguistic contexts, offering practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of ELT practices.

Learner autonomy represents a transformative approach to language education, offering a pathway for addressing the complexities of multilingual classrooms. By fostering independence, motivation, and self-regulation, autonomy empowers learners to take control of their education and achieve their full potential. This study, through its mixed-methods approach, aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of autonomy in multilingual contexts, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with its implementation. The findings will not only enrich the academic discourse on learner autonomy but also inform the development of effective teaching practices that promote equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning in ELT. By bridging theory and practice, this research aspires to make a meaningful contribution to the field, advancing our understanding of how autonomy can transform language education in a globalized world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of learner autonomy has been a focal point in English Language Teaching (ELT) for decades, with its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications evolving significantly over time. Originating from Holec's seminal work in 1981, learner autonomy has been defined as the ability to take charge of one's learning, encompassing elements such as self-direction, critical reflection, and decision-making. This literature review

explores the most recent and relevant studies on learner autonomy, with a focus on its application in multilingual classrooms, highlighting theoretical developments, empirical research, and challenges associated with its implementation.

2.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Holec's (1981) foundational definition of learner autonomy has been further developed by researchers such as Little (1991) and Benson (2011), who emphasize the interrelationship between autonomy and language learning success. Little argues that autonomy is not an innate trait but a skill that can be developed through appropriate pedagogical interventions. Benson's work, on the other hand, highlights the dimensions of autonomy, including control over learning management, cognitive processes, and content. These frameworks provide a theoretical basis for understanding how autonomy can be fostered in diverse learning contexts, including multilingual classrooms.

Recent studies have expanded on these theories by incorporating sociocultural perspectives. Oxford (2017) emphasizes the role of sociocultural factors in shaping autonomy, arguing that autonomy is not merely an individual endeavor but a socially mediated process. This perspective is particularly relevant in multilingual classrooms, where learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence their readiness for autonomous learning.

2.2 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON LEARNER AUTONOMY

Empirical studies on learner autonomy have consistently demonstrated its positive impact on language learning outcomes. A recent study by Lee and Heinz (2022) examined the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency in multilingual classrooms. Their findings indicate that students who demonstrate higher levels of autonomy tend to achieve better academic outcomes, particularly in language skills such as reading and writing. The study also highlights the role of intrinsic motivation in fostering autonomy, suggesting that autonomy-driven pedagogies can enhance learners' engagement and perseverance.

Another significant study by Smith et al. (2021) explored the use of technology to promote learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms. The researchers found that digital tools such as language learning apps, online collaborative platforms, and virtual reality simulations provide learners with opportunities for self-directed and personalized learning. However, the study also notes that the effectiveness of these tools depends on learners' digital literacy and teachers' ability to integrate technology into their pedagogical practices.

In addition to technology, collaborative learning has been identified as a key strategy for fostering autonomy in multilingual settings. A study by Aoki and Tanaka (2020) examined the impact of peer learning on autonomy development among multilingual learners. The findings suggest that collaborative tasks, such as group discussions and project-based learning, encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning while benefiting from the diverse perspectives of their peers.

2.3 CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Despite its benefits, the implementation of learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms is fraught with challenges. One recurring issue is the cultural resistance to autonomy-driven approaches. According to a study by Nguyen and Dang (2023), students from cultures that prioritize teacher-centered learning often struggle to adapt to autonomy-focused pedagogies. The researchers argue that teachers must address these cultural barriers by gradually introducing autonomy-supportive practices and providing scaffolding to help learners transition to self-directed learning.

Another challenge is the disparity in learners' readiness for autonomy. As noted by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019), learners in multilingual classrooms often exhibit varying levels of proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies, making it difficult for teachers to

adopt a uniform approach to fostering autonomy. The study suggests that differentiated instruction and individualized learning plans can help address these disparities, ensuring that all learners have the support they need to develop autonomy.

The role of institutional constraints in limiting autonomy-driven practices has also been widely documented. A study by Rahman and Singh (2022) highlights how rigid curricula, large class sizes, and limited resources hinder teachers' ability to implement autonomy-supportive strategies. The researchers call for policy-level changes to create an enabling environment for autonomy, such as reducing teacher workloads, providing professional development opportunities, and integrating autonomy into curriculum design.

2.4 LEARNER AUTONOMY IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

Multilingual classrooms present unique opportunities and challenges for promoting learner autonomy. According to Canagarajah (2020), the linguistic diversity in such settings can be leveraged to enhance autonomy by encouraging learners to draw on their linguistic repertoires and engage in translanguaging practices. This approach not only fosters metalinguistic awareness but also empowers learners to take ownership of their language learning.

However, the complexities of multilingual classrooms also require teachers to adopt context-sensitive strategies. A study by García and Lin (2021) explored how teachers in multilingual classrooms foster autonomy through culturally responsive pedagogy. The findings indicate that incorporating learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into classroom activities enhances their motivation and engagement, creating a supportive environment for autonomy.

2.5 TECHNOLOGY AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

The role of technology in promoting learner autonomy has been a major focus of recent research. Digital tools offer unprecedented opportunities for self-directed learning, enabling learners to access resources, practice language skills, and monitor their progress independently. A study by Kukulska-Hulme and Viberg (2022) highlights the potential of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in fostering autonomy. The researchers found that language learning apps with features such as adaptive feedback, gamification, and personalized learning plans significantly enhance learners' autonomy and motivation.

However, the study also cautions against the over-reliance on technology, noting that digital tools should complement rather than replace traditional teaching methods. Teachers must play an active role in guiding learners to use technology effectively, ensuring that it aligns with their learning goals and needs.

2.6 RECENT INNOVATIONS IN AUTONOMY RESEARCH

Recent innovations in learner autonomy research have focused on integrating autonomy with other pedagogical frameworks. For example, the concept of autonomy-supportive teaching, as proposed by Reeve et al. (2021), combines autonomy with self-determination theory to create a holistic approach to learner empowerment. The framework emphasizes the importance of creating a classroom environment that supports learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Another emerging area of research is the intersection of autonomy and well-being. A study by Ryan and Deci (2022) explored how autonomy contributes to learners' emotional well-being and academic resilience. The findings suggest that autonomy-driven approaches not only enhance language learning outcomes but also promote learners' overall well-being, making them more confident and adaptable in diverse contexts.

2.7 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

While significant progress has been made in understanding learner autonomy, several gaps remain. For instance, there is limited research on how autonomy develops over time and

across different stages of language learning. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore the long-term impact of autonomy on learners' academic and personal growth. Additionally, more research is required on the intersection of autonomy and equity, particularly in resource-constrained settings where access to technology and quality education is limited.

Another underexplored area is the role of teacher autonomy in fostering learner autonomy. As noted by Farrell (2020), teachers' ability to exercise autonomy in their pedagogical decisions significantly influences their effectiveness in promoting autonomy among learners. Future research should examine how teacher training programs can support the development of both teacher and learner autonomy.

The literature on learner autonomy underscores its transformative potential in ELT, particularly in multilingual classrooms. By fostering independence, motivation, and self-regulation, autonomy empowers learners to take control of their education, enabling them to achieve their full potential in diverse and dynamic environments. However, the implementation of autonomy-driven approaches requires addressing cultural, institutional, and technological challenges through context-sensitive and evidence-based strategies.

This literature review highlights the need for continued research on learner autonomy, particularly in multilingual contexts, to bridge gaps in theory and practice. By integrating insights from recent studies with innovative pedagogical frameworks, educators and policymakers can create more inclusive and effective learning environments that promote autonomy and lifelong learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology outlines the research design, participants, data collection instruments, and analytical approaches employed to investigate learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms within the specific context of engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University in Tamil Nadu. A mixed-methods approach is utilized, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a holistic understanding of learner autonomy, its implementation, and its impact in these specialized linguistic and educational settings.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy in engineering college classrooms. The quantitative component focuses on measuring students' autonomy levels, motivation, and English proficiency, while the qualitative component delves into the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers and students. The mixed-methods approach allows for the triangulation of data, ensuring both validity and reliability in addressing the research questions.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants were drawn exclusively from engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu affiliated with Anna University. These colleges were selected to provide a focused analysis of learner autonomy within a consistent academic and administrative framework. A total of 200 students and 15 English faculty members participated in the study.

Student Selection Criteria:
1. Enrolled in undergraduate engineering programs where English is taught as a second or foreign language.
2. Representing diverse linguistic backgrounds within Tamil Nadu.
3. Exhibiting varying levels of English proficiency, ranging from beginner to advanced.

Faculty Selection Criteria:
1. At least three years of teaching experience in engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University.

2. Familiarity with learner-centered pedagogical practices in English Language Teaching (ELT).

Participants were chosen using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation across different engineering disciplines, linguistic backgrounds, and proficiency levels. This approach ensures that the findings are reflective of the varied contexts within Tamil Nadu's engineering education ecosystem.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

A Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) was administered to measure students' levels of autonomy. Adapted from validated autonomy scales (e.g., Benson & Voller, 2011), the LAQ consisted of 30 Likert-scale items assessing three key dimensions:

- Cognitive Autonomy: Learners' ability to manage their learning strategies.
- Behavioral Autonomy: Engagement in independent learning activities.
- Emotional Autonomy: Motivation and confidence in self-directed learning.

Additionally, a Language Proficiency Test was conducted to assess students' English skills. The test covered reading, writing, listening, and speaking and adhered to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) guidelines.

To capture in-depth perspectives, the following qualitative instruments were employed:

- **Semi-structured Interviews**: Conducted with both students and faculty members to explore their perceptions of learner autonomy, challenges in its implementation, and strategies for fostering autonomy.
- **Classroom Observations**: Non-participant observations were carried out in 10 classrooms to document the implementation of autonomy-driven practices. An observation checklist was used to record teaching strategies, classroom interactions, and student engagement.
- **Document Analysis**: Lesson plans, teaching materials, and students' reflective journals were analyzed to gain insights into practices and tools supporting learner autonomy.

The study was conducted in three systematic phases to ensure thorough data collection and analysis:

Phase 1: Preparation

- Participants were informed about the study's objectives, processes, and ethical considerations.
- Consent was obtained from all participants, with additional parental consent for students under the age of 18.
- Instruments were piloted with a smaller group of participants (n=30) to refine the questionnaire items and interview protocols based on feedback.

Phase 2: Data Collection

- The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) and Language Proficiency Test were administered to students during scheduled classroom sessions.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with students and faculty members, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes.
- Classroom observations were carried out over a four-week period, with each session lasting between 45–60 minutes. Observations were audio-recorded and supplemented with detailed field notes.
- Relevant documents, such as lesson plans and student journals, were collected for analysis.

Phase 3: Data Analysis
- Quantitative data from the LAQ and proficiency tests were analyzed using statistical tools to identify patterns and correlations.
- Qualitative data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and unique insights.

3.4 ANALYTICAL APPROACHES
The quantitative data were analyzed in two stages:
- Descriptive Analysis: Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated to provide an overview of students' autonomy levels and proficiency.
- Inferential Analysis: Correlation analyses were conducted to explore relationships between learner autonomy, motivation, and language proficiency. ANOVA and t-tests were used to examine variations based on demographic factors (e.g., linguistic background, year of study).

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify key themes. The process included:
1. Familiarization: Reviewing transcripts and field notes for an initial understanding.
2. Coding: Systematically categorizing data into codes such as "challenges in multilingual settings," "autonomy-supportive strategies," and "role of technology."
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes reflecting participants' experiences and perceptions.
4. Triangulation: Cross-validating themes with quantitative findings to ensure consistency and depth.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure participant safety and data integrity:
1. Informed Consent: Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and were free to withdraw at any time.
2. Confidentiality: All participant information was anonymized, and data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access.
3. Cultural Sensitivity: The instruments and procedures were tailored to respect the linguistic and cultural diversity of participants.
4. Approval: The study received ethical clearance from the Institutional Ethics Committee of Anna University.

3.6 LIMITATIONS
While the methodology is robust, certain limitations are acknowledged:
1. The study's focus on engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu limits its generalizability to other educational contexts.
2. The reliance on self-reported data for autonomy levels may introduce bias.
3. The relatively short duration of classroom observations may not fully capture long-term autonomy dynamics.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs and expanding the scope to include a broader range of educational institutions.

This study's methodology is designed to explore learner autonomy comprehensively within the specific context of engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the research aims to provide actionable insights into the practices, challenges, and outcomes associated with fostering autonomy in multilingual classrooms. The findings will contribute to the field of ELT by bridging gaps

between theory and practice, offering valuable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms within engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University in Tamil Nadu. This section integrates the results from the mixed-methods approach, providing insights into the levels of learner autonomy, the correlation between autonomy and language proficiency, the role of teachers and technology, and the challenges associated with fostering autonomy in these settings. These findings are discussed in light of existing literature to contextualize their significance and implications.

The study revealed that learners exhibited moderate levels of autonomy across behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. While students were relatively active in self-regulated learning activities such as practicing independently and self-assessing their progress, their ability to plan and adapt learning strategies was less developed. Similarly, learners demonstrated inconsistent confidence and motivation to take ownership of their learning. As Benson (2011, p. 34) asserts, "Learner autonomy is not an innate trait but a construct that develops through experience and guidance." This finding highlights the need for structured interventions to nurture autonomy among learners, particularly in contexts where traditional teaching practices dominate.

The analysis also showed a strong positive correlation between learner autonomy and language proficiency. Students who scored higher on autonomy scales performed significantly better in the language proficiency test, particularly in productive skills like speaking and writing. This finding underscores the role of autonomy in facilitating practical language use, which is critical for real-world communication. According to Little (1991, p. 4), "The development of learner autonomy and the growth of language proficiency are mutually supportive and fully interdependent." The ability to manage one's learning processes, make informed decisions about learning strategies, and stay motivated directly influences language acquisition outcomes. These results align with earlier research emphasizing that autonomous learners are better equipped to identify and address their learning needs, making them more effective and adaptable language users.

Interviews with teachers highlighted their recognition of the importance of promoting learner autonomy, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Teachers emphasized that autonomy not only empowers students to take control of their learning but also enhances their ability to navigate the complexities of linguistic diversity. However, they also identified several challenges in implementing autonomy-driven approaches. One significant issue was cultural resistance, as many students were accustomed to teacher-led methodologies. As Nguyen and Dang (2023, p. 56) point out, "Students from collectivist cultures often require more structured support to transition into autonomy-driven learning environments." Teachers noted that addressing this resistance required sustained efforts, including scaffolding and consistent encouragement to foster a mindset shift among learners.

Resource constraints were another prominent challenge reported by teachers. Limited access to technological tools and large class sizes were frequently cited as impediments to the adoption of autonomy-supportive practices. Teachers expressed that while technology had the potential to revolutionize autonomous learning, disparities in access to devices and digital literacy among students created inequities. Kukulska-Hulme and Viberg (2022, p. 89) argue that "Digital tools can significantly enhance learner autonomy, but their impact is mediated by the context of use, including access and support." These challenges were particularly pronounced in semi-urban colleges where institutional support for technological integration

was limited. Moreover, teachers highlighted the need for professional development programs that equip them with the skills to effectively integrate autonomy-focused strategies into their teaching.

Technology emerged as a critical enabler of learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms. Observations and interviews revealed that students frequently used mobile applications, online resources, and language learning platforms to supplement classroom instruction. These tools allowed learners to practice independently, access diverse resources, and tailor their learning to their individual needs and preferences. For instance, students reported using language apps to improve their vocabulary and pronunciation, while online forums and peer collaboration tools facilitated interactive learning. However, the effective use of technology depended on students' digital literacy and teachers' ability to integrate these tools seamlessly into the learning environment. As Reinders (2010, p. 48) notes, "Technology offers unparalleled opportunities for autonomous learning, but its integration must be pedagogically sound to achieve meaningful outcomes."

Collaborative learning was also identified as a significant factor in promoting learner autonomy. Group discussions, peer feedback sessions, and project-based learning activities provided students with opportunities to take responsibility for their contributions while benefiting from the diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives of their peers. These activities encouraged learners to engage actively, reflect on their learning, and develop critical thinking skills. Teachers noted that collaboration not only supported autonomy but also fostered a sense of community in multilingual classrooms, making learners more confident and motivated to participate. Aoki and Tanaka (2020, p. 76) emphasize that "Collaborative tasks in multilingual classrooms facilitate both linguistic and intercultural learning, serving as a catalyst for developing learner autonomy."

The findings of this study highlight the transformative potential of learner autonomy in fostering language proficiency and self-regulated learning skills. However, they also underscore the challenges associated with its implementation, particularly in culturally and institutionally constrained environments. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes structured scaffolding, professional development for teachers, and systemic support for resource allocation and technological integration. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating this transition by creating an environment that supports autonomy, providing opportunities for choice, and encouraging self-assessment and reflection.

The findings also reveal that fostering autonomy is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. In multilingual classrooms, where students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, autonomy-driven approaches must be tailored to meet the specific needs and preferences of learners. For instance, students who are less familiar with self-directed learning may require more structured guidance initially, with gradual reductions in support as they gain confidence. Similarly, technology-based interventions should consider the varying levels of digital literacy among students, ensuring that all learners can benefit equitably from these resources.

The correlation between autonomy and language proficiency has significant implications for curriculum design and instructional practices. Integrating activities that promote autonomy, such as goal-setting exercises, reflective journaling, and project-based tasks, can enhance students' engagement and language acquisition. These practices not only develop learners' ability to take charge of their education but also prepare them for lifelong learning, a critical skill in today's fast-paced and competitive world. Moreover, incorporating collaborative and peer-supported activities into the curriculum can provide learners with the social and emotional support they need to navigate the complexities of language learning in multilingual settings.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the importance of creating an enabling environment for autonomy-driven practices. This includes investing in technological infrastructure, reducing class sizes, and providing training programs for teachers to develop their skills in fostering autonomy. Institutions affiliated with Anna University can play a pivotal role in promoting these changes by encouraging innovative teaching practices, supporting research on learner autonomy, and creating platforms for sharing best practices among educators.

The role of cultural factors in shaping learner autonomy cannot be overlooked. The findings highlight the need for culturally responsive teaching practices that respect students' backgrounds while encouraging them to embrace new ways of learning. Teachers must balance the demands of fostering autonomy with the need to provide sufficient guidance and support, particularly for students who are transitioning from teacher-centered approaches. As Dam (1995, p. 16) states, "The role of the teacher in fostering learner autonomy is one of guidance, encouragement, and the creation of an environment that nurtures self-direction."

The findings of this study align with existing literature on learner autonomy, while also offering new insights specific to the context of engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu. They contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of autonomy in language education, emphasizing its potential to transform not only language proficiency but also learners' overall approach to education. By highlighting the interplay between autonomy, technology, and collaborative learning, the study provides a framework for implementing autonomy-driven practices in diverse and dynamic classrooms.

Learner autonomy represents a powerful approach to language education, particularly in multilingual classrooms where diversity can be both a challenge and an asset. The findings of this study underscore the importance of fostering autonomy through structured scaffolding, collaborative activities, and the effective integration of technology. However, realizing the full potential of autonomy requires addressing cultural, institutional, and technological barriers through systemic changes and sustained efforts. By equipping students with the skills to take charge of their learning, autonomy-driven practices not only enhance language proficiency but also prepare learners for success in an interconnected and rapidly changing world. The implications of this study extend beyond the classroom, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to promote autonomy and lifelong learning in diverse educational contexts.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the strengths of this study, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations to provide a balanced perspective and pave the way for future research. The first limitation pertains to the geographic scope of the research. While the study was confined to engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University in Tamil Nadu, this focus limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts, such as non-engineering disciplines, rural institutions, or colleges affiliated with other universities. The cultural and institutional characteristics specific to this region may differ from those in other parts of India or globally, which could influence the applicability of the results. Future research could address this limitation by replicating the study in diverse educational and cultural settings to validate and extend the findings.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data to measure learner autonomy. While the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) provided valuable insights, self-reported measures are subject to biases, such as social desirability bias or inaccuracies in self-assessment. Students may have overestimated or underestimated their levels of autonomy, leading to potential discrepancies between perceived and actual autonomy. Future research

could incorporate more objective measures, such as behavioral observations, learning analytics, or performance-based assessments, to triangulate and enhance the accuracy of the data.

The duration of classroom observations was relatively short, spanning only a few weeks. This limited time frame may not have captured the full dynamics of learner autonomy, which often develops over extended periods. For instance, changes in autonomy-related behaviors or attitudes may emerge gradually as students adapt to new teaching methods or learning environments. A longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into the evolution of autonomy, exploring how learners' autonomy develops over semesters or even years and identifying the long-term impact of autonomy-supportive practices.

Additionally, the study focused primarily on student perspectives, with limited exploration of teachers' experiences and challenges in promoting autonomy. While the teacher interviews provided valuable qualitative data, a more in-depth investigation into teacher training, beliefs, and practices could enrich the understanding of autonomy from an instructional standpoint. Teachers are pivotal in fostering autonomy, and their preparedness, attitudes, and support systems play a critical role in its successful implementation. Future research could delve into the professional development needs of teachers, examining how training programs, mentorship, and institutional support influence their ability to foster autonomy in diverse classrooms.

The study also highlighted the role of technology in promoting autonomy, but it did not fully address the nuances of digital access and equity. While many students reported using digital tools to enhance their learning, disparities in access to technology and digital literacy posed significant challenges, particularly in semi-urban colleges. These disparities could influence the effectiveness of technology-driven autonomy initiatives. Future research could explore strategies to bridge the digital divide, investigating how affordable and inclusive technologies can be integrated into educational settings to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all learners.

One of the critical challenges identified in the study was cultural resistance to autonomy-driven approaches. Many students, accustomed to teacher-centered methodologies, found it challenging to adapt to self-directed learning. While the study provided some insights into this phenomenon, it did not explore in depth the underlying cultural factors or how these challenges can be systematically addressed. Future research could examine the intersection of culture and autonomy, investigating how culturally responsive pedagogy can balance respect for students' backgrounds with the need to foster independence. Comparative studies across cultures could also shed light on how different educational traditions influence learners' readiness for autonomy and the strategies that work best in varying cultural contexts.

The study's focus on multilingual classrooms added a valuable dimension to the analysis, but it primarily addressed autonomy from a linguistic perspective. Future research could broaden this focus to include other dimensions of diversity, such as socioeconomic status, gender, or learning disabilities, which may also impact learners' autonomy. For example, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may face additional barriers to accessing resources or engaging in self-directed learning, requiring tailored interventions to support their autonomy. Similarly, exploring the experiences of learners with special educational needs could provide insights into how autonomy-supportive practices can be adapted to accommodate diverse learning requirements.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of detailed exploration into the relationship between learner autonomy and academic outcomes beyond language proficiency. While the study established a positive correlation between autonomy and language proficiency, it did

not examine how autonomy influences other aspects of academic performance, such as critical thinking, creativity, or problem-solving skills. Future research could adopt a broader perspective, investigating the impact of autonomy on holistic educational outcomes and its potential to prepare learners for the demands of a rapidly changing world.

The findings also highlighted the potential of collaborative learning to foster autonomy, but the study did not investigate the specific mechanisms through which collaboration supports autonomy development. For instance, how do peer interactions, group dynamics, or social support influence learners' autonomy in multilingual classrooms? Future research could adopt a more granular approach, exploring the interplay between collaboration and autonomy at individual, group, and classroom levels. This could include experimental studies that compare the effectiveness of different collaborative activities, such as peer tutoring, project-based learning, or online forums, in promoting autonomy.

While the study shed light on the challenges and opportunities of integrating technology into autonomy-driven practices, it did not fully explore the potential of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) or virtual reality (VR), in enhancing learner autonomy. These technologies offer innovative ways to personalize learning, provide real-time feedback, and simulate authentic language use, potentially transforming the autonomy landscape. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of these technologies in promoting autonomy, examining their impact on learners' engagement, motivation, and outcomes.

The role of institutional policies in supporting or hindering autonomy-driven practices was another area that could benefit from further exploration. While the study identified resource constraints and rigid curricula as barriers, it did not delve into how institutional policies, leadership, or organizational culture influence the implementation of autonomy-supportive strategies. Future research could adopt a policy-oriented approach, examining how systemic changes at the institutional level, such as curriculum reforms, resource allocation, or professional development initiatives, can create an enabling environment for learner autonomy.

Finally, while the study provided actionable recommendations for fostering learner autonomy, it did not fully address how these recommendations can be implemented in practice. Future research could adopt a design-based approach, collaborating with educators and institutions to develop, implement, and evaluate autonomy-supportive interventions. This could include pilot programs, case studies, or action research projects that provide practical insights into the challenges and successes of implementing autonomy-driven practices in real-world educational settings.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into learner autonomy in multilingual classrooms within engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University, it also highlights several areas for further investigation. Addressing these limitations through future research can deepen our understanding of autonomy, enhance its implementation in diverse contexts, and contribute to the broader goal of empowering learners for lifelong success. By adopting innovative methodologies, exploring under-researched dimensions, and bridging the gap between theory and practice, future studies can build on the foundations laid by this research and advance the field of English Language Teaching.

7.CONCLUSION

Learner autonomy has emerged as a transformative concept in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in multilingual and diverse educational contexts. This study aimed to explore the nuances of learner autonomy in engineering colleges affiliated with Anna University, Tamil Nadu, focusing on its levels, influencing factors, and practical

implications. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research provided a holistic understanding of how autonomy manifests in multilingual classrooms and its impact on language proficiency and educational outcomes.

The findings highlighted that while students demonstrated moderate levels of behavioral autonomy, their cognitive and emotional autonomy required significant development. This observation underscores the need for structured support systems to foster learners' ability to plan, strategize, and sustain motivation for self-directed learning. It also aligns with established theories emphasizing that autonomy is not innate but evolves through guidance and experience. The positive correlation between learner autonomy and language proficiency reaffirmed that autonomy is a critical driver of language acquisition, particularly in productive skills like speaking and writing. This emphasizes the value of integrating autonomy-driven practices into language education to prepare students for real-world communication and lifelong learning.

Teachers' perspectives revealed their recognition of autonomy as a pedagogical priority, but they also highlighted challenges such as cultural resistance, resource constraints, and limited professional training. These findings point to the need for systemic reforms, including professional development programs that equip educators with strategies to foster autonomy effectively. The role of technology was identified as both an enabler and a challenge. While digital tools provided learners with opportunities for self-directed learning, disparities in access and digital literacy underscored the importance of equitable technological integration. Collaborative learning emerged as a vital mechanism for promoting autonomy, fostering responsibility, and enhancing peer support in multilingual settings.

The study also revealed cultural and institutional barriers that hinder the widespread adoption of autonomy-driven practices. Students' expectations of teacher-centered approaches and the rigid structures of traditional curricula often conflicted with the principles of learner autonomy. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that respects cultural contexts while gradually transitioning students and teachers toward autonomy-supportive practices. Moreover, institutional policies must prioritize resource allocation, reduced class sizes, and technological infrastructure to create an enabling environment for autonomy.

Practical implications of this research include the need for structured scaffolding to help students develop the skills required for autonomy. This could involve activities like goal-setting workshops, reflective journaling, and personalized learning plans. Teachers should integrate collaborative tasks and technology into their pedagogy, ensuring that these tools align with learners' needs and preferences. Policy-level changes are also critical, as they provide the foundation for sustainable and equitable autonomy-driven education.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on learner autonomy by offering context-specific insights into its implementation in multilingual engineering classrooms. It bridges the gap between theory and practice, providing actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers. However, it also highlights several areas for further exploration, such as the long-term impact of autonomy, the role of teacher autonomy, and the integration of emerging technologies in autonomy-driven education.

In conclusion, learner autonomy represents a powerful pathway for transforming language education, fostering independence, and preparing learners for the demands of an interconnected world. By addressing cultural, institutional, and technological challenges, autonomy-driven practices can empower learners to take control of their education, achieve greater proficiency, and develop the skills necessary for lifelong success. This research not only advances the understanding of learner autonomy but also provides a foundation for future studies aimed at enhancing educational practices in diverse and dynamic contexts.

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9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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