

The Effect of EFL Teachers' Autonomy Awareness on Students' Investment in EFL Learning: A Mixed-Methods Approach

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of raising EFL teachers' awareness of learner autonomy on students' investment in EFL learning. A total of 100 public high school students in Shahrood city were selected as the participants, with 50 assigned to an experimental group and 50 to a control group. A standardized questionnaire on investment in L2 learning was administered to assess their initial levels of investment in L2 learning. The experimental group was taught by teachers who had participated in a comprehensive workshop aimed at enhancing their understanding of learner autonomy. The workshop addressed key topics such as the definition of learner autonomy, strategies for promoting autonomous learning, the benefits of autonomy-supportive environments, and their potential influence on student investment. Meanwhile, the control group received conventional instruction. After the intervention, students' investment levels were reassessed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their perceptions of the intervention's practicality and impact. Quantitative results revealed a significant increase in investment among students taught by autonomy-aware teachers. Qualitative findings further supported this outcome, highlighting improvements in self-management, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and overall learning engagement. The study offers practical implications for EFL teachers, learners, and teacher educators in fostering autonomy and enhancing student investment in language learning.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy (LA), Teachers' Autonomy Awareness, EFL Learning, Student Investment

1. Introduction

Lack of sufficient knowledge and training among teachers regarding learner autonomy (LA) can present a significant obstacle to effective EFL learning (Alibakhshi, 2015; Huynh, 2019). Teachers who understand and apply autonomous learning principles are better equipped to integrate theory into practice (Stockwell & Reinders, 2019). Enhancing teachers' comprehension of LA is crucial for fostering student motivation and encouraging them to take charge of their autonomous language development (Saeed, 2021). By understanding autonomous learning, teachers can implement strategies that enhance students' motivation and investment in language learning (Yosintha & Yunianti, 2021).

Professional development that bridges teachers' beliefs and classroom practices plays a key role in promoting LA (Zhao & Qin, 2021). Educators need effective methods to integrate LA into instruction while reflecting on their own views of autonomy and its role in language learning (Wiranti & Widiyati, 2023). Encouraging teachers to

reconsider their perspectives on LA and adopt autonomy-supportive teaching practices can enhance both instruction quality and student engagement.

The concept of investment, introduced by Norton (1995), builds on Bourdieu's (1977) notion of cultural capital, emphasizing the relationship between learners' identity, motivation, and commitment to language learning. Investment extends beyond effort and time; it reflects how learners perceive the value of a language in relation to their social identity and future opportunities (Darvin & Norton, 2023). Learners who see English as a valuable resource are more likely to invest in acquiring it (Soltanian et al., 2018). However, many Iranian EFL learners struggle to perceive its immediate relevance, limiting their investment in learning EFL (Jiang et al., 2020).

A key barrier to fostering investment is the limited awareness and training of EFL teachers regarding autonomy in language instruction. As the focus on autonomous learning grows, teachers face the challenge of developing instructional approaches that promote self-directed learning while sustaining students' motivation and commitment to EFL learning (Lee, 2014). Investment is also shaped by power dynamics, as social, historical, and institutional factors influence learners' opportunities to engage with the target language (Mehranfar & Tahririan, 2022). In this sense, students' motivation to invest in learning English is often driven by the pursuit of symbolic assets (e.g., education, social mobility) and material assets (e.g., career prospects) (Norton, 2015).

The construct of investment holds significant importance in applied linguistics, as it highlights the socially and historically situated relationship between learners' identity and language learning (Norton, 2019). Further research is needed to examine how learners' investment influences their identity construction and language acquisition. Since learners' identities are dynamic and shaped by social interaction, investment offers a critical lens for analyzing how power relations affect language learning in different contexts (Norton et al., 2020).

Given these considerations, this study investigates whether increasing teachers' awareness of autonomy can enhance students' perceived value of language learning, thereby fostering greater investment in the process. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does EFL teachers' knowledge of learner autonomy have a significant effect on learners' investment in L2 learning?

RQ2: What positive effects does EFL teachers' knowledge of autonomy have on learners' investment in foreign language learning?

2. Review of the Literature

Teachers' comprehension of learner autonomy (LA) is a crucial factor in determining their instructional effectiveness and significantly impacts language learning. From a Vygotskian perspective, fostering autonomous learning is essential in creating a student-centered classroom environment, which enhances learners' agency and engagement (Lien, 2022). Traditional classroom models often position teachers as primary knowledge providers who direct instruction (Kobayashi, 2020). However, for LA to flourish, teachers must transition from a teacher-centered approach to a facilitator role, empowering students to take charge of their learning (Hussein & Al Bajalani, 2019).

To successfully promote autonomy, teachers need a deep understanding of pedagogy, classroom management, and learner support strategies. They function as guides who help students navigate learning pathways and reflect on their choices (Derakhshan et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers act as resource facilitators, enhancing learning environments by integrating diverse strategies that encourage students' self-directed engagement.

The construct of investment in language learning was introduced by Norton Peirce (1995) to address gaps in motivation theories within second language acquisition (SLA). While traditional motivation theories assume that learners' willingness to engage remains stable, investment highlights the dynamic relationship between learners' identity, social positioning, and access to language learning opportunities (Norton et al., 2020). A learner may be highly motivated yet disengaged if they experience exclusion or marginalization in classroom or societal contexts (Norton, 2019). Conversely, when learners perceive themselves as legitimate participants in learning environments, their investment increases (Jiang et al., 2020).

From a poststructuralist perspective, investment is closely tied to identity negotiation and the pursuit of symbolic and material resources (Li & Wang, 2024). Language learning is not merely a cognitive process but a social practice, where learners constantly reposition themselves based on available opportunities (Hajar et al., 2024). Learners engage in specific practices when they perceive them as beneficial, recognizing that their existing social and cultural capital can either facilitate or constrain their investment in language learning (Kwok, 2025).

Moreover, investment differs from instrumental motivation, as it does not solely rely on learners' desire for tangible rewards. Instead, it considers how learners engage in language practices that help them access social networks, cultural capital, and identity validation (Afreen & Norton, 2024). Symbolic resources, such as language proficiency, social mobility, and education, play a pivotal role in learners' investment (Shahidzade & Mazdayasna, 2022). At the same time, material resources (e.g., financial stability, institutional access) influence the shifting value of learners' linguistic and cultural capital across different contexts (Nameni et al., 2022).

Teng (2019) explored the relationship between investment, identity formation, and language acquisition, emphasizing three key aspects. First, learners' identities are shaped by historical and social factors, influencing their engagement with language learning. Second, the process of language learning is inherently social, as learners develop their identities through interaction. Third, learners transition across different educational and social communities, continuously renegotiating their identities and investment in language learning.

While investment theory has been extensively explored in learner identity research, limited attention has been given to the role of EFL teachers' autonomy awareness in fostering student investment. Since teachers' beliefs and instructional practices play a crucial role in shaping classroom learning environments, examining how their awareness of learner autonomy influences students' investment in EFL learning is crucial. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the impact of teacher autonomy awareness on students' investment, contributing to both learner autonomy and investment frameworks within SLA research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were male high school students who studied English as a compulsory subject in Shahroud city. Convenience sampling was used in this study to identify and select the participants. Only students in the 12th grade and mainly those who had not joined any other English classes except their regular school classes were allowed to participate in this study. A total of 100 students, aged 17 to 18, were randomly assigned to two equal groups: an experimental group ($n = 50$) and a control group ($n = 50$). In line with ethical considerations, all participants voluntarily consented to take part in the study and were assured of the confidentiality and privacy of their personal information.

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. Learner's Language Investment Questionnaire: A standardized 42-item questionnaire, based on a six-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6), was used to assess students' levels of investment in language learning. During the item analysis process, the main themes were extracted and sorted according to validity indices and the final questionnaire items were identified and sorted. To ensure its reliability, the questionnaire was pilot-tested, and its internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of approximately 0.91—consistent with findings reported in previous TEFL literature. This instrument was administered both before and after the treatment to address the first research question, which focused on changes in students' investment in EFL learning.

3.2.2. A Semi-structured Interview: In order to collect the qualitative data, a group of 20 learners was randomly selected to be interviewed face-to-face. The interview questions aimed at tapping the language learners' internal conflicts and struggles, feelings, hopes, and desires related to learning English both inside and outside the English classroom. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. To ensure the validity of the interview, the researchers

sought the critical judgments of three experts. In addition, the reliability and response consistency were enhanced by asking similar questions in different forms during the interview. In the present study, the interviewer was an insider, i.e., he was an Iranian English language teacher who was aware of the language, culture, and foreign language education system in Iran, so it could be easier to overcome the nuances of research issues pertinent to the study.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

To conduct this study, 100 students from public high schools in Shahrood city were selected based on convenient sampling procedure and randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 50$) and a control group ($n = 50$). Before the instructional intervention, all students completed a standardized questionnaire measuring their initial level of investment in L2 learning. During the study, the control group received conventional English instruction from teachers who had not undergone any specific training, while the experimental group received instruction from teachers who had participated in a comprehensive workshop designed to raise their awareness of learner autonomy. This workshop covered key principles of learner autonomy, strategies for fostering autonomous learning, and the benefits of an autonomy-supportive classroom. The instructional treatment provided to the experimental group followed a five-level framework of autonomy implementation: *awareness* (informing students of lesson goals), *involvement* (engaging them in varied activities), *intervention* (encouraging them to modify and adapt materials), *creation* (designing tasks based on self-set goals), and *transcendence* (promoting learning beyond the classroom). After the instructional phase, all students again completed the same investment questionnaire to identify any significant changes in their responses. Additionally, students in the experimental group participated in semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions of how teacher autonomy awareness influenced their investment in English language learning.

4. Results and Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of the First Research Question

The first research question of this study was as follows:

RQ1: Does EFL teachers' knowledge of autonomy have any significant effect on learners' investment in L2 learning?

To address this question, the descriptive statistics for the experimental and control groups' pretest scores were first analyzed. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the pretest scores.

Table 1

The Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental and Control Groups' Pretest Scores

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Exp G Pre	50	174	69	243	147.64	48.533	2355.500
Ctl G Pre	50	213	69	282	156.06	49.732	2473.241

As can be seen in Table 1, the means for the experimental and control groups' pretest scores are 147.64 and 156.06, respectively. Next, whether the mean difference for pretest scores is statistically significant should be determined. First, the normality of scores should be checked to find an appropriate inferential test for the comparison of means. Here, because of the sample size (< 100), the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was run. The statistics for the normality of pretest scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The Normality Test of the Experimental and Control Groups' Pretest Scores

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Exp G Pre	.956	50	.061
Ctl G Pre	.958	50	.075

Table 2, indicates that the sig. values for both the experimental and control groups' pretest scores are 0.061 and 0.075, respectively. Here, both of them are more than the critical value i.e., 0.05 ($0.061 > 0.05$ and $0.075 > 0.05$) which means that the two sets of scores are normally distributed. Thus, a parametric test was run for the comparison of means. Since two sets of scores belong to different groups, the Independent Sample T-test was utilized by the researchers. Now, it should be determined which row of the statistics is appropriate for the interpretation of sig. value. The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was run to specify the appropriate row of sig. value for the interpretation of inferential test results. Table 3, below presents the statistics of homogeneity of variances.

Table 3

The Levene Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Pretest Scores

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.011	1	98	.918

According to Table 3, the sig. value is 0.918 and it is more than the critical value i.e., 0.05 ($0.918 > 0.05$) which means that the homogeneity of variances is assumed and the first row of the statistics is appropriate for the interpretation of the significance of means difference. Table 4 presents the result of the independent samples t-test between the control and the experimental groups in the pretest.

Table 4

The Independent Samples t-Test for the Experimental and Control Groups' Pre-Tests

	t-test for Equality of Means		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		
	t	df	(2-tailed)			Lower	Upper
Pre-Test	-.857	98	.394	-8.420	9.827	-27.922	11.082

Considering Table 4, the sig. value is 0.394 and it is more than the critical value i.e., 0.05 ($0.394 > 0.05$) which means that the observed means difference is not statistically significant. Thus, it can be said that there was not any meaningful difference between these two groups' means regarding their pretest scores. To continue with the analysis, it is necessary to check whether the difference between posttest means is statistically significant or not. To do it, first, the descriptive statistics for the experimental and control groups' posttest scores are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5

The Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental and Control Groups' Post-Test Scores

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Exp G Post	50	192	72	264	167.18	52.680	2775.212
Ctl G Post	50	223	55	278	145.52	52.268	2731.969

As can be seen in Table 5, the means for the experimental and control groups' posttest scores are 167.18 and 145.52, respectively. Next, whether the mean difference for posttest scores is statistically significant or not should be determined. First, the normality of scores should be checked to find an appropriate inferential test for mean comparison. Here, because of the sample size (< 100), the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was used. The statistics for the normality of posttest scores are presented in the following table.

Table 6

The Normality Test of the Experimental and Control Groups' Posttest Scores

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Exp G Post	.965	50	.144
Ctl G Post	.961	50	.101

Table 6, indicates that the sig. values for both experimental and control groups' posttest scores are 0.144 and 0.101, respectively. Here, both of them are more than the critical value i.e., 0.05 ($0.144 > 0.05$ and $0.101 > 0.05$) which means that the two sets of scores are normally distributed. Thus, the researchers were allowed to run a parametric test for the comparison of means. Since two sets of scores belong to different groups, the Independent Sample T-test was utilized by the researchers. Now, it should be determined which row of the statistics is appropriate for the interpretation of sig. value. The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was run to specify the appropriate row of sig. value for the interpretation of inferential test results. Table 7, below presents the statistics of homogeneity of variances.

Table 7

The Levene Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Posttest Scores

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.148	1	98	.701

According to Table 7, the sig. value is 0.701 and it is more than the critical value i.e., 0.05 ($0.701 > 0.05$) which means that the homogeneity of variances is assumed and the first row of the statistics is appropriate for the interpretation of the significance of means difference. Table 8 the result of the independent samples t-test for the experimental and control groups' post-test means comparison.

Table 8

The Independent Samples t-Test for the Experimental and Control Groups' Post-Tests

t-test for Equality of Means		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper

Post-Test	2.064	98	.042	21.660	10.495	.833	42.487
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Table 8, indicates that the sig. value is 0.042 and it is less than the critical value i.e., 0.05 ($0.042 < 0.05$) which means that the observed means difference is statistically significant. Thus, it can be said that there was a meaningful difference between the two groups' performance regarding their posttest scores. Thus, it can be said that EFL teachers' knowledge of autonomy has a significant effect on learners' investment in L2 learning.

4.2 Analysis of the Second Research Question

The second research question of this study was as follows:

RQ2: What positive effects does EFL teachers' knowledge of autonomy have on learners' investment in foreign language learning?

Table 9 presents the statistics for each category of the answers.

Table 9

The Descriptive Statistics for the Second Qualitative Research Question

Code	Answer Category	Frequency	Percentage %
1.	Do you think that studying English is more interesting than other subjects?		
	Yes, it is.	15	75
	Yes, but it depends on the available learning situations.	2	10
	No, this is unlikely.	3	15
	I have no idea.		
2.	Do you agree with the statement that after learning English, you find yourself more sensitive to changes in the outside world?		
	Yes, exactly.	12	60
	Yes, but this cannot be true for all cases.	4	20
	No, that doesn't make sense.	3	15
	I have no idea.	1	5
3.	Do you think that learning the English language is worth spending a lot of money and time?		
	Yes, sure.	13	65
	Yes, but it may not be possible in all situations.	4	20
	No, it is not.	2	10
	I have no idea.	1	5
4.	Do you agree with the statement that in the current digitally advanced society, you can better convey your ideas to others in English?		
	Yes, exactly.	11	55
	Yes, but it largely depends on the situation.	7	35
	No, that cannot be possible.	1	5

I have no idea.	1	5
5. Do you think that limited language proficiency places constraints on learners' ambitions?		
Yes, exactly.	17	85
Yes, but this cannot be true for all cases.	1	5
No, that doesn't make sense.	1	5
I have no idea.	1	5
6. Do you think that using modern technology in language classes can enrich the content of the lessons and consequently our learning?		
Yes, exactly.	16	80
Yes, but it largely depends on the situation.	2	10
No, that cannot be possible.	1	5
I have no idea.	1	5
7. Do you agree with the statement that after learning English, learners feel their behaviors have become somewhat Westernized?		
No, not at all.	11	55
Yes, to some extent.	4	20
I'm not sure.	5	25

The quantitative results presented above can be enhanced by the qualitative data extracted from the interviews which are presented below.

“In my opinion, if we give students the freedom to choose the educational content, at first glance, we may feel that it can lead to an increase in their participation, but in fact, it can work oppositely and take them away from the educational goals.” Here, these comments may back to the learner's ineffective experience of autonomous learning practice. According to Shahid et al. (2022), one of the risks of practicing autonomous learning is the risk of unduly increasing the freedom of choice for learners, which can lead to the opposite results and not only does not improve autonomy but also can lead the learner away from the right path of learning. Therefore, teachers should be aware of these precautions and provide the learners with a safe level of freedom of choice with the utmost care (Turan-Ozturk & Ozkose-Biyik, 2023).

“By creating a supportive atmosphere and assigning more responsibilities in the learning process to students, we can prepare them to deal with critical learning conditions and motivate them to resist.” Recent studies have shown that autonomous learning practice can provide students with more chances of participation by creating a constructive classroom atmosphere, and also strengthening learning productivity, and guiding students in achieving and fulfilling assigned learning goals and managing difficult learning situations (Howlett & Waemusa, 2019; Saeed, 2021; Tyas, 2020).

“When students are allowed to learn independently from the teacher, they follow the work with more enthusiasm in the learning process and show more collaborative enthusiasm for extracurricular learning such as technology-oriented learning.” Here, the role of collaboration among learners in autonomous learning practice is mentioned. Autonomous learning practice, by affecting the sense of cooperation, puts learners in a position where they can think together and combine opinions and ideas through a series of collaborative interactions, and as a result, provides them with a pleasant experience of learning participation (Kobayashi, 2020; Melvina et al., 2021).

Regarding this research question, 85% of interviewees found studying English more interesting than other subjects. This claim can go back to the motivational ability of the autonomous learning practice, where by doing it,

the learners feel more enthusiastic and consider learning English as a more interesting process (Lien, 2022; Recard et al., 2020).

Eighty percent of them argued they felt more sensitive to changes in the outside world when they were exposed to the autonomous learning practice. This may be due to the potentiality of autonomous learning practice to improve learners' ambiguity tolerance. Recently, it was shown that autonomous learning practice has a constructive effect on learners' ambiguity tolerance development and enables them to accept and handle predetermined and sudden changes in their learning status (Chen, 2023).

Eighty percent of the participants believed that learning English language is worth spending a lot of money and time. This result can be related to the influence of autonomous learning on the English language learning attitude of the learners, because recent studies have emphasized the undeniable role of the autonomous learning approach in improving the attitude toward language learning (Hussein & Al Bajalani, 2019; Yosintha & Yuniarti, 2021).

Ninety percent of them agreed that the current digitally advanced society brings better chance to convey ideas to others in English. Eighty percent of the participants argued that limited language proficiency places constraints on learners' ambitions. Ninety percent of them asserted that using modern technology in language classes can enrich the content of the lessons and consequently the process of learning. Regarding these findings, it can be said that modern autonomous learning practice has an innovative perspective on the role of technology in learning. According to Dahal et al. (2022), recent advance in modern technology in learning is regarded as a determining factor in enhancing learners' autonomy level where they have more opportunity to expand their sense of responsibility on learning tasks and activities. Therefore, the positive attitude of learners who have been exposed to this approach towards the use and impact of technology in learning is not unreasonable.

Finally, fifty-five percent of the participants commented that learning English had no Westernized effect on learners' behaviors. Regarding this research finding, it can be said that the attitudinal impact of autonomous learning can lead to improving the learners' perspective towards learning a second language so that learners focus on the learning process itself. In this line, recent studies have shown that there is a direct and increasing relationship between the practice of autonomous learning and the improvement of learners' attitudes (Kiliç & Levent, 2022; Lai, 2019; Tran, 2020).

5. Discussion

The statistical analysis of the first research question revealed that EFL teachers' awareness of their students' autonomy significantly enhanced their students' level of investment in language learning. In other words, when teachers were more informed about the principles of learner autonomy, their students demonstrated a deeper, more sustained commitment to L2 learning. The analysis of the second research question further showed that teachers conceptualized their autonomy-related knowledge as a key factor influencing learners' investment, particularly in terms of their persistence in learning, meaning-making capabilities, and tolerance for ambiguity in the learning process.

'Investment' in language learning, as indicated by the findings of this study, should be regarded as a vital construct in EFL classrooms—complementing motivation and extending it by incorporating identity, agency, and sociocultural engagement. As Darvin and Norton (2023) note, investment involves a continuous negotiation of learner identity across social contexts, highlighting how students actively claim their roles in the learning process. Similarly, Soltanian et al. (2018) argue that learners are more likely to invest in language acquisition if they perceive their efforts as yielding meaningful returns. This aligns with the principles of learner autonomy, which empower students to view themselves as agents capable of succeeding in their language learning journeys (Moharami et al., 2023).

Investment is a multi-faceted construct interwoven with motivation, personal goals, engagement, and learner agency (Jiang et al., 2020; Lee, 2014; Mehranfar & Tahririan, 2022). These dimensions are also integral to the notion of autonomy, further reinforcing the interdependence between teacher autonomy awareness and student investment. This study affirms that language teachers, through sustained interaction with learners, play a vital role in fostering conditions that promote greater investment—thus intensifying learners' sense of purpose, responsibility, and emotional attachment to language learning.

Moreover, the findings highlight that when teachers adopt autonomy-supportive practices, they become more attuned to students' developmental trajectories. By shifting responsibility to learners and encouraging self-direction, teachers prompt learners to invest greater effort, time, and emotional energy into their education—knowing they are ultimately accountable for their own progress. This relationship is corroborated by prior studies (Ayllón et al., 2019; Derakhshan et al., 2020; Pogere et al., 2019; Stockwell & Reinders, 2019; Zhao & Qin, 2021), that found that a teacher's knowledge of autonomy serves as a critical determinant of students' willingness to invest in learning.

The qualitative findings also revealed that students responded positively to autonomy-enhancing practices, reporting improvements in collaborative decision-making, class participation, ambition, and resilience. These traits are closely tied to investment, as students who feel empowered are more likely to persist and engage deeply. Recent research supports this, suggesting that autonomy-based tasks help learners shape their learning identities (Resnik & Dewaele, 2023) and participate meaningfully in complex learning activities such as decision-making (Wiranti & Widiyati, 2023), real-world application (Tran & Vuong, 2023), and sustained motivation (Hosseini et al., 2023). In line with studies that recognize autonomous learning as a foundation for educational success (Teng & Zhang, 2022), the current findings confirm that autonomy nurtures learners' adaptability (Yu, 2023) and flexibility (Ding & Shen, 2022), equipping them to overcome academic challenges (Gocić & Jankovic, 2022) and invest meaningfully in their educational goals (Ahundjanova, 2022).

6. Conclusion

The present study affirms that learner investment is a core outcome of EFL teachers' awareness of autonomy. As self-directed learning becomes increasingly prominent in contemporary education, the concept of investment—defined as learners' active, identity-linked, and socially situated engagement in language learning—emerges as a key indicator of success. This research confirms that when teachers understand and implement autonomy-supportive practices, they create learning environments that encourage deeper and more sustained investment from their students.

Importantly, investment goes beyond mere participation or motivation. It encompasses learners' emotional commitment, resilience, and willingness to engage in long-term learning endeavors. The findings indicate that EFL teachers with higher autonomy awareness are more likely to cultivate this investment by fostering student agency, accountability, and goal-directed behavior. Studies consistently show that students taught by autonomy-aware instructors tend to invest more effort and perform better academically (Hosseini et al., 2023; Tran & Vuong, 2023; Zhao & Qin, 2021).

This has significant implications for teaching practices. In a world where learners are increasingly inclined to take ownership of their learning, EFL educators must shift from traditional teacher-centered methods to student-centered strategies that actively promote autonomy and encourage investment (Gocić & Jankovic, 2022). This pedagogical transformation demands the development of creative teaching methods, critical thinking skills, and a commitment to fostering learners' self-direction (Chen, 2023).

However, many Iranian EFL teachers report lacking sufficient training and institutional support to adopt these changes. Thus, it is imperative for teacher education programs to prioritize autonomy-related professional development. These programs should equip teachers with both theoretical understanding and practical tools to support student investment effectively (Kobayashi, 2020).

Ultimately, this study highlights that increasing student investment is not only beneficial but essential for achieving meaningful learning outcomes. Investment reflects the socially constructed link between learner identity and educational commitment (Marzban et al., 2023). When students invest in their learning, they exhibit increased focus, engagement, participation, and a willingness to communicate and solve problems (Afreen & Norton, 2024). Therefore, promoting investment—by enhancing teacher autonomy awareness—should be recognized as a fundamental objective of EFL pedagogy and policy (Hajar et al., 2024).

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