Promoting learner autonomy: Practices of English teachers in Saudi secondary schools

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Abstract: The promotion of learner autonomy has gained prominence in English language teaching (ELT) as an essential pedagogical goal, particularly within contexts where traditional teacher-centered approaches dominate. This mixed-methods study explores the practices of English language teachers in Saudi secondary schools in promoting learner autonomy. Drawing on quantitative survey data and qualitative open-ended responses from 82 teachers across ten regions, the study reveals a growing awareness among Saudi educators of the importance of student-centered learning. Findings indicate that while many teachers employ autonomy-supportive strategies such as shared decision-making and independent learning activities, systemic constraints—including rigid curricula, exam-oriented instruction, and a lack of professional development—limit their effectiveness. This study contributes to the discourse on educational reform in Saudi Arabia by identifying key areas for teacher training and institutional support to cultivate learner autonomy in ELT contexts.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT), Language learning strategies, Learner autonomy, Learner-centered pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The promotion of learner autonomy has become a cornerstone of modern educational practices, particularly in the field of language learning, where the ability to independently engage with language acquisition processes is crucial for long-term success. The concept of learner autonomy, as defined by Holec [1] involves an individual's capacity to take charge of their own learning by making decisions regarding learning objectives, strategies, and evaluation. This approach aligns with contemporary shifts from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogies, emphasizing the learner's active role in constructing knowledge and developing lifelong learning skills.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the educational landscape has undergone significant changes over the past decades, particularly in English language teaching (ELT). The inclusion of English as a subject in secondary and primary school curricula underscores its growing importance in preparing students for global communication and participation in knowledge-based economies. Despite these advancements, traditional teacher-centered approaches, which prioritize rote memorization and textbook dependency, continue to dominate classrooms, often limiting the potential for learners to develop autonomy.

The current study investigates how secondary school English teachers in Saudi Arabia perceive and implement teaching practices that promote learner autonomy. It seeks to explore the methods and activities employed by teachers and to assess the extent to which these align with the principles of autonomous learning. By addressing these questions, this research contributes to the broader discourse on educational reform in Saudi Arabia and provides practical insights into enhancing teacher training programs and classroom strategies to foster learner independence.

The study's significance lies in its potential to inform policy makers, educators, and curriculum designers about the importance of integrating learner autonomy into teaching practices. Moreover, it highlights the role of teachers as facilitators in creating learning environments that empower students to take ownership of their educational journeys. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining applied linguistics and pedagogy, this research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering actionable recommendations for improving English language education in Saudi schools.

This article builds upon a comprehensive review of literature, situating the concept of learner autonomy within the socio-cultural and institutional frameworks of the Saudi education system. It employs a mixed-methods design, incorporating a questionnaire survey to gather data on teaching practices and teacher perceptions. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for promoting learner autonomy in secondary schools, offering a foundation for further studies and practical interventions.

2. Literature Review

Learner autonomy has emerged as a pivotal concept in educational theory and practice, particularly in the field of language learning. This section critically examines the theoretical underpinnings of learner autonomy, the barriers to its implementation, and its significance in the context of Saudi secondary schools. It draws extensively on existing literature to position this study within the broader discourse on English language teaching (ELT) and learner-centered pedagogies.

2.1. Defining Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy is foundational to contemporary pedagogy. Holec [1] defines it as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning," encompassing decision-making in areas such as setting learning goals, choosing learning methods, and evaluating progress. Little [2] further refines this definition by associating autonomy with a psychological capacity for critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. While Holec's definition is often linked to adult education, Little emphasizes its relevance across educational contexts, including formal schooling, where students are encouraged to develop self-regulated learning skills. This interplay between independence and guided support underpins the theoretical framework of this study.

In the Saudi educational context, autonomy challenges traditional hierarchies that place teachers as sole authorities in the classroom. As such, promoting learner autonomy necessitates redefining teacher roles and fostering environments that support student-driven learning. This theoretical shift is aligned with global trends advocating for learner-centered approaches, where autonomy is both a goal and a means of achieving effective learning [3].

2.2. Theoretical Misconceptions and Challenges

Despite its widespread acceptance, learner autonomy remains a contested concept, often misunderstood as synonymous with self-instruction or independent learning without teacher involvement [2]. Such misconceptions hinder its practical implementation, particularly in traditional educational settings like those in Saudi Arabia. Research has shown that autonomy is not an innate ability but rather a skill that can be cultivated through appropriate pedagogical strategies and supportive teacher-student relationships [4].

Saudi classrooms are often characterized by rigid curriculums, textbook dependency, and a focus on rote memorization. These traditional practices create barriers to autonomy by limiting opportunities for students to engage critically with their learning processes. According to Barnes [5] this distinction between "school knowledge" and "action knowledge" is a critical impediment. When learning is restricted to abstract, teacher-directed content, students struggle to integrate new information into their personal frameworks, thereby alienating them from the learning process.

2.3. The Role of Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy is central to fostering autonomy, emphasizing active student participation and collaborative learning. Little [2] argues that learner-centered approaches inherently support autonomy by encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning. Such classrooms are characterized by a shift in teacher roles from authority figures to facilitators, guides, and co-learners [5].

In the Saudi context, the Ministry of Education has recently adopted policies promoting learnercentered practices, such as Rule 15 of 2014, which mandates teachers to act as facilitators rather than sole sources of knowledge [6]. However, the practical implementation of these policies remains inconsistent, with many teachers reverting to traditional practices due to a lack of training and resources.

2.4. The Importance of Promoting Learner Autonomy

The significance of learner autonomy extends beyond the classroom, equipping students with critical skills for lifelong learning. Holec [7] emphasizes that autonomy prepares students to adapt to the unpredictable demands of adult life by fostering self-awareness, decision-making skills, and the ability to learn independently. Similarly, Little [2] argues that autonomy enhances the effectiveness of language learning by enabling students to actively construct meaning and apply knowledge in real-world contexts.

In Saudi Arabia, the potential benefits of autonomy are particularly relevant given the limited opportunities for students to interact with native English speakers outside the classroom. As Alsugair [8] notes, many Saudi students struggle to achieve even basic communicative competence despite years of formal English instruction. This discrepancy underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate language learning with meaningful, student-driven activities.

2.5. Factors Influencing Teacher Practices

The role of teachers in promoting autonomy is shaped by a complex interplay of interpersonal and task-related factors. Wright and Candlin [9] identify key interpersonal variables, such as social roles, status, and power dynamics, which influence teacher-student interactions. In Saudi Arabia, the high social status traditionally accorded to teachers often results in hierarchical classroom environments that are less conducive to autonomy.

Task-related factors, including the design and implementation of classroom activities, also play a critical role. Research by Al-Otaibi [10] and Al Asmari [11] highlights the importance of equipping teachers with the skills and resources to create learner-centered activities that encourage self-direction and critical engagement.

2.6. Learner Autonomy in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi educational system presents unique challenges and opportunities for implementing autonomy. Textbooks designed by the Ministry of Education prioritize cultural alignment over linguistic diversity, limiting the scope for creative teaching methods [6]. Moreover, large class sizes and resource constraints exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for teachers to implement learner-centered strategies effectively.

Despite these limitations, studies have shown that autonomy can be fostered even in resourcelimited settings. Kuchah and Smith [12] demonstrate that learner autonomy can be achieved in classrooms with as many as 200 students through innovative pedagogical practices. Similarly, Rabab'ah [13] advocates for the use of real-life communicative tasks to bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical language use.

2.7. Teacher Training and Autonomy

The relationship between teacher education and learner autonomy is well-documented. As Little [14] argues, the promotion of learner autonomy requires a corresponding emphasis on teacher autonomy. Effective teacher training programs must equip educators with the skills to design and implement autonomy-supportive practices while also fostering their own professional independence.

In Saudi Arabia, the current teacher training curriculum focuses heavily on theoretical knowledge, with limited attention to practical teaching strategies [15]. Reforming these programs to include modules on learner-centered pedagogy and autonomy-supportive practices is essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design to explore the teaching practices of English language teachers in Saudi Arabia and their efforts to promote learner autonomy. The research combines structured questionnaires with open-ended questions to provide both large-scale data and deeper insights into teacher perceptions and practices. Questionnaires were chosen as the primary instrument due to their efficiency in gathering data from a broad population, as highlighted by Nunan [16]. However, recognizing the limitations of quantitative surveys, such as their inability to capture the underlying motives behind responses [17] open-ended questions were included to enrich the data and ensure a nuanced understanding of contextual factors.

The study was guided by two main research questions: what methods do Saudi teachers perceive as appropriate for teaching English, and to what extent do they promote learner autonomy? These questions were designed to explore the strategies teachers employ and their alignment with the principles of autonomous learning. The target population included secondary school English teachers in Saudi Arabia, particularly those teaching third-year students. This focus is due to the pivotal role of secondary education in equipping students with essential skills for higher education and professional life. Convenience sampling was used to access a geographically diverse sample through networks established with supervisors in 10 regions across Saudi Arabia. A total of 82 completed questionnaires were received, providing a substantial dataset for analysis.

The questionnaire was designed in English and Arabic to ensure clarity and reduce potential language barriers. It comprised two parts: the first focused on teaching practices and included Likert-scale statements alongside open-ended questions about appropriate teaching methods and classroom responsibilities. The second part centered on learner autonomy, featuring frequency-based statements and open-ended questions exploring factors influencing learning success and the outcomes of promoting autonomy. This dual structure allowed for a comprehensive examination of both teacher practices and their perceptions.

To ensure validity, the questionnaire underwent face validation by the researcher's supervisor and a pilot test involving six participants. These included experienced teachers and colleagues familiar with the concept of learner autonomy. Feedback from the pilot study led to revisions that enhanced the instrument's clarity and contextual appropriateness. Data collection was conducted online due to logistical constraints and the summer vacation period for Saudi teachers. Google Forms was used to create the questionnaire, which was distributed through email networks facilitated by supervisors and private school contacts. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, ensuring that respondents could provide candid feedback without concerns about confidentiality.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively address the research questions. Likert-scale and frequency-based responses were coded and analyzed statistically using Microsoft Excel, with descriptive statistics used to identify trends. Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke [18] guidelines for identifying patterns and relationships in qualitative data. Manual coding helped categorize themes aligned with the research questions, offering deeper insights into teacher perspectives. Quantitative and qualitative findings were

then triangulated to provide a holistic understanding of the data, allowing the study to validate trends and elaborate on them through contextual interpretations.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of their right to withdraw, and guaranteed confidentiality. Data anonymization during analysis further ensured the protection of participant identities. However, the study acknowledges several limitations. Self-reported data may introduce response bias, as participants might overstate or understate their practices. Additionally, the reliance on convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings. Future research could address these limitations by employing random sampling and incorporating observational methods to validate self-reported practices.

In conclusion, the methodological framework adopted in this study balances quantitative rigor with qualitative depth, enabling a thorough investigation of the teaching practices and perceptions of English language teachers in Saudi Arabia. By addressing both the prevalence and contextual nuances of learner autonomy promotion, this approach provides valuable insights into a critical area of educational research. The study also lays the groundwork for future investigations to build on its findings and further enhance the understanding of effective pedagogical practices in similar educational contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire provides insights into the teaching practices of English language teachers in Saudi secondary schools and their efforts to promote learner autonomy. The findings are presented and discussed in alignment with the study's research questions, focusing on the methods employed by teachers and the extent to which these methods align with the principles of autonomous learning. This section integrates quantitative and qualitative data to provide a nuanced understanding of teacher practices and perceptions while relating them to the broader educational context.

The responses to the first part of the questionnaire reveal that Saudi English language teachers generally adhere to structured planning practices, consistent with the Ministry of Education's guidelines [6]. Most participants reported determining lesson aims, activities, and homework in advance, reflecting compliance with institutional expectations (Figure 1). However, a noteworthy proportion of teachers (66%) indicated that they share lesson objectives with students during the class, signaling a shift toward engaging learners in the learning process (Figure 2). This practice aligns with learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasizes transparency and collaboration between teachers and students [4].
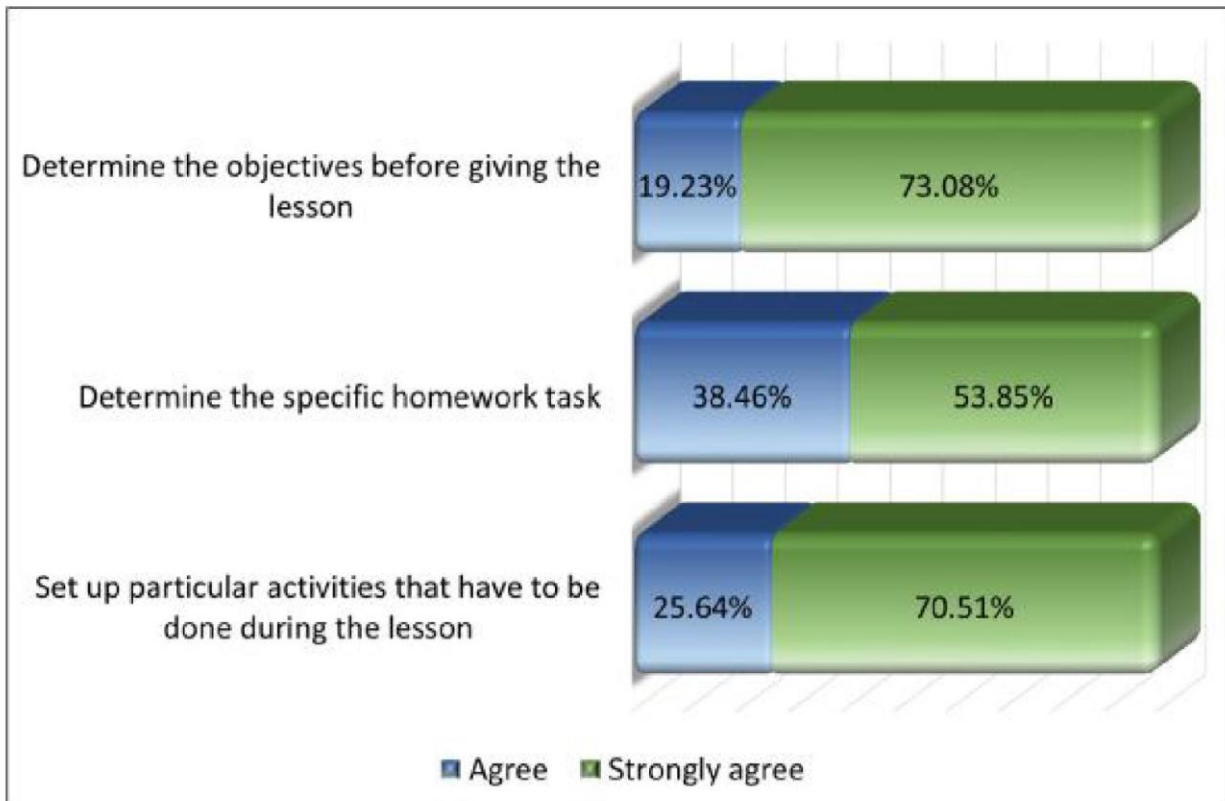
Figure 1.
Respondents answers to questions related to preparation of the lessons
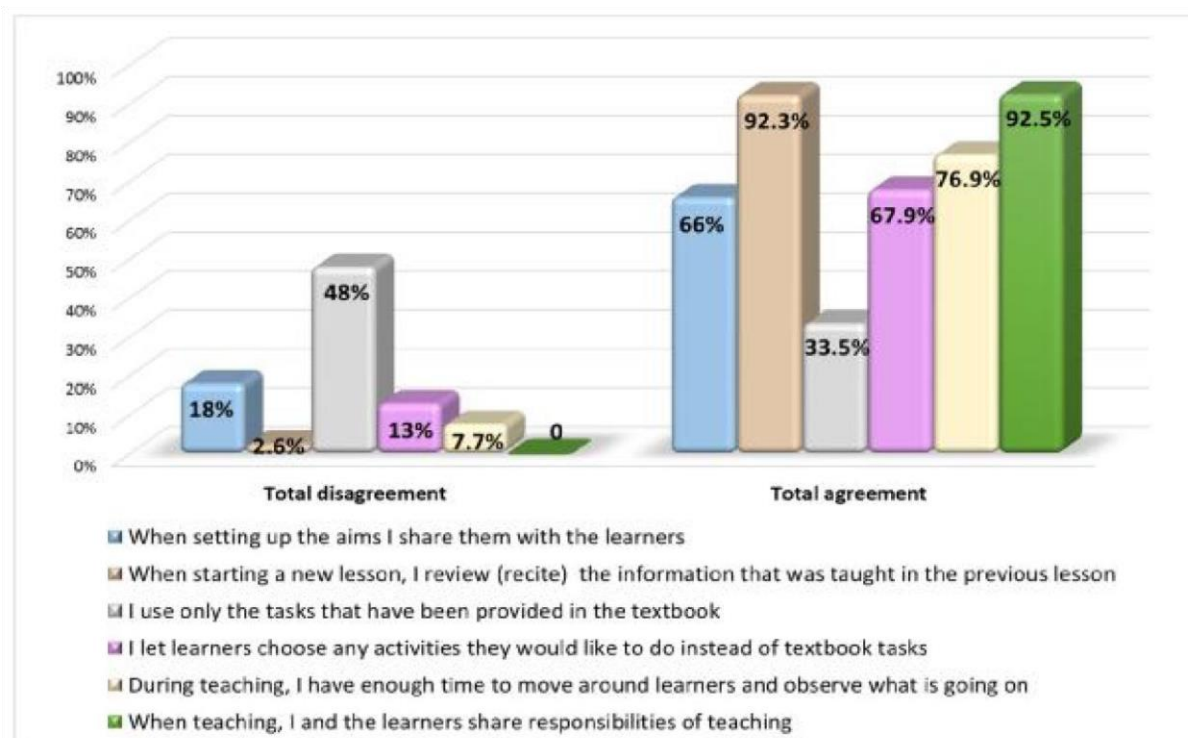
Figure 2.
Responses of teachers about practices during the lessons (Questions 4 to 9).

Interestingly, while the majority of respondents reported adhering to textbook requirements, 67.9% also indicated providing learners with opportunities to select activities of interest. This suggests an attempt to balance curriculum constraints with practices that foster learner autonomy. Such initiatives demonstrate the capacity of teachers to integrate elements of choice and learner agency, even within a rigid educational framework. However, a smaller subset of teachers (13%) adhered strictly to textbook activities, highlighting the variability in the adoption of autonomysupportive practices (Figure 3). This finding reflects challenges documented in previous studies, where teachers cited curriculum rigidity and limited resources as barriers to implementing innovative pedagogies [8, 13].
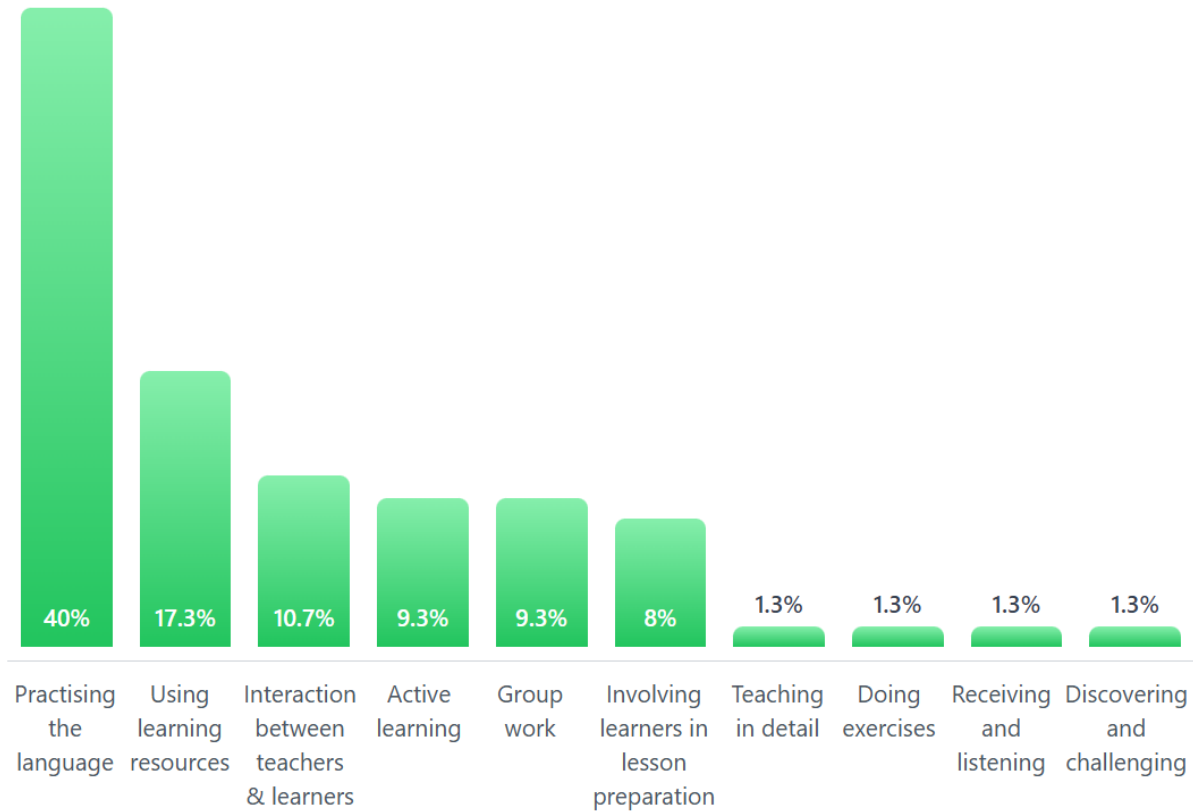
Figure 3.
Teachers' responses to Question 12 (what do you think are the most appropriate methods of teaching the English language?).

The qualitative data from open-ended responses further elucidate teachers' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. Many teachers expressed a belief in shared responsibility for learning, indicating a gradual move away from traditional, teacher-dominated practices. This shift is critical for fostering autonomy, as it positions learners as active participants in their educational journey. However, some responses revealed a persistent adherence to traditional roles, with teachers viewing themselves as sole authorities in the classroom (Table 1). This dichotomy underscores the need for targeted professional development programs that emphasize the principles and benefits of learner autonomy [14].

Table 1.
Teachers' responses to Question 13 (What are teachers' responsibilities in the classroom?).

		Response		
		N	**Percentage**	**Total**
Responses that reflect learner-centred practices	Observing the learning process	13	9.5%	66.4%
	Supporting the learners	2	1.5%	
	Stimulating the learning process	20	14.6%	
	Guiding the learners	33	24.1%	
	Managing the learning process	14	10.2%	
	Facilitating the learning process	3	2.2%	
	Developing learners' language skills	2	1.5%	
	Providing learning strategies	2	1.5%	
	Organising the learning process	2	1.5%	
Responses that reflect traditional practices	Providing the whole lesson	32	23.4%	33.6%
	Leading the learners	2	1.5%	
	Evaluator	12	8.8%	
Total		137		100%

The second part of the questionnaire explored the extent to which teachers encourage practices that promote autonomy. A significant proportion of respondents reported frequently engaging students in activities such as group work, independent research, and decision-making tasks (Figure 4). These practices reflect an alignment with learner-centered approaches, which advocate for active participation and collaborative learning [3]. Additionally, many teachers reported encouraging learners to evaluate their progress, an essential component of autonomous learning as defined by Holec [1]. However, the frequency of these practices varied, with some teachers indicating limited implementation due to time constraints and large class sizes.
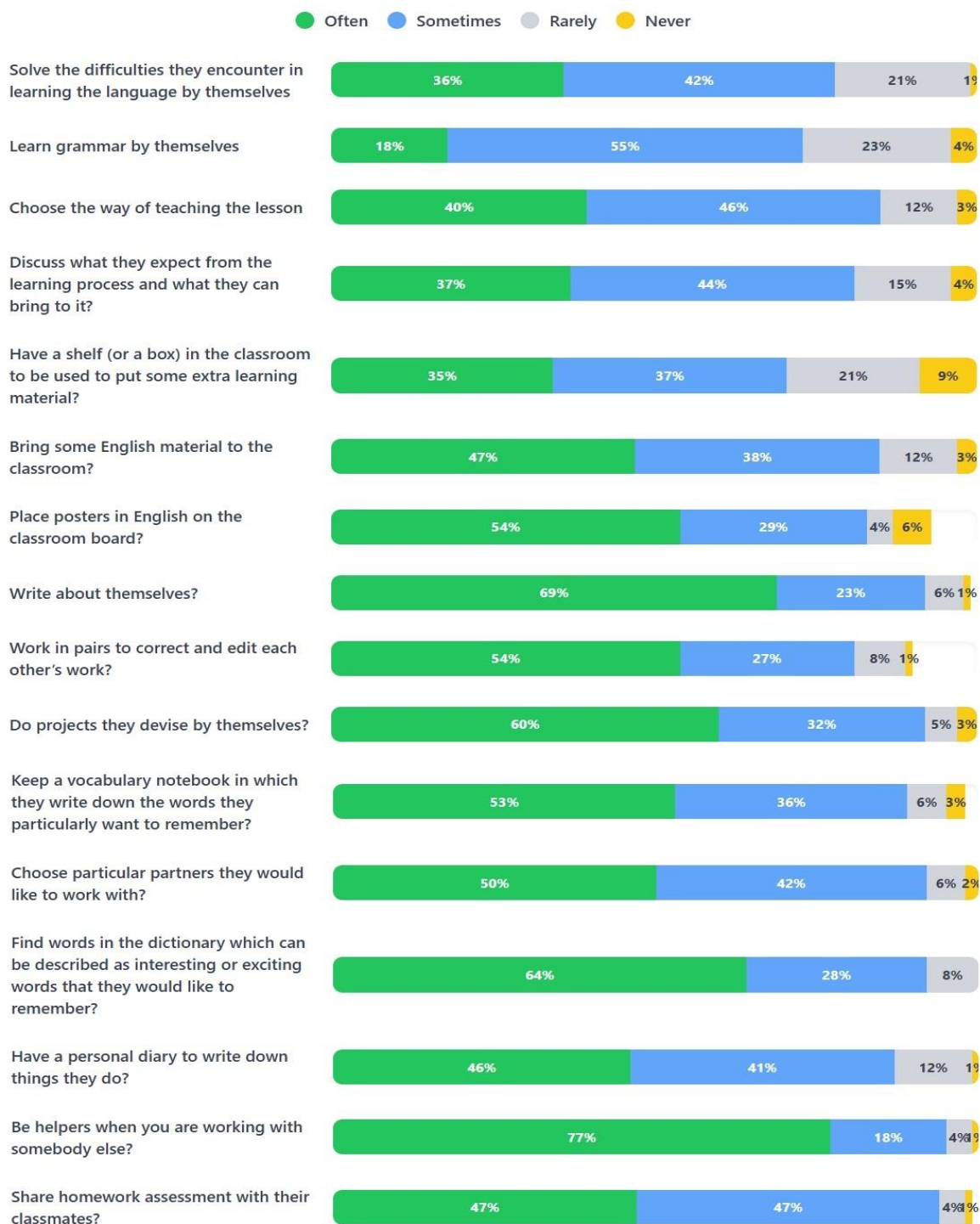
Figure 4.
Teachers' responses to Question 15 to 30 (How often learners are encouraged to be autonomous).

Open-ended responses revealed mixed attitudes toward learner autonomy. While many teachers acknowledged its importance for developing lifelong learning skills, others expressed skepticism about its feasibility in the Saudi educational context. Commonly cited challenges included the dominance of exam-oriented teaching, a lack of training in autonomy-supportive methods, and cultural expectations that position teachers as primary knowledge providers (Figure 5). These findings echo the work of Alsugair [8] who highlighted the tension between traditional educational values and the demands of modern pedagogies in Saudi Arabia.
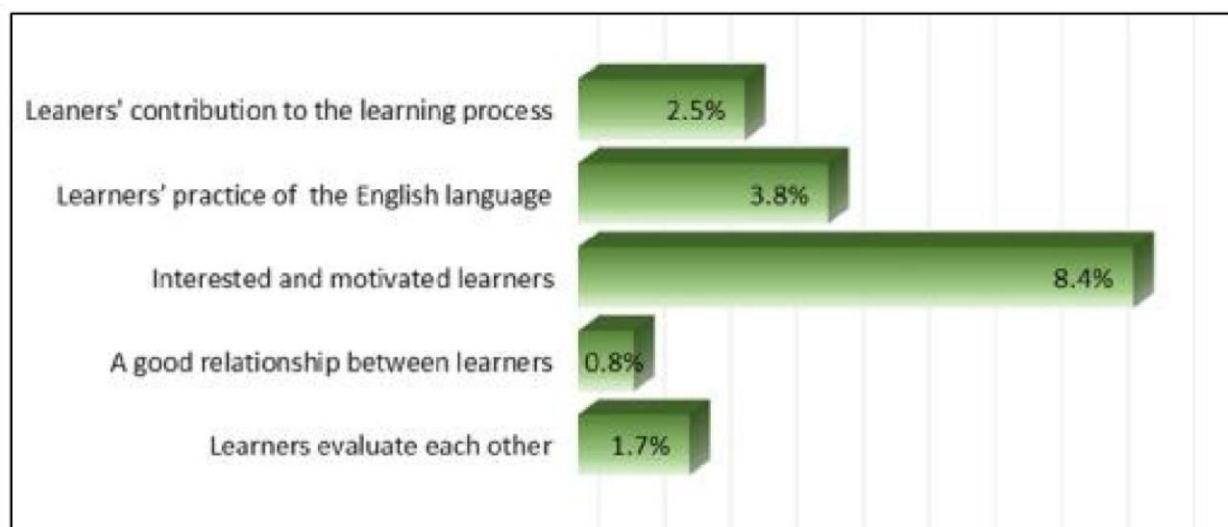

Figure 5.
Responses to Question 31 that focused on learner-related factor (What do you think are the main factors that lead to a successful learning process?).

Despite these challenges, the results suggest that learner autonomy can be cultivated even in resource-constrained settings. Teachers who adopted autonomy-supportive practices often relied on creative solutions, such as adapting textbook activities or incorporating real-life scenarios into lessons (Figure 6). This aligns with the findings of Kuchah and Smith [12] who demonstrated that autonomy can be fostered in large, under-resourced classrooms through innovative approaches. Moreover, teachers' willingness to integrate autonomy-promoting activities, despite systemic barriers, highlights their potential as change agents within the educational system.
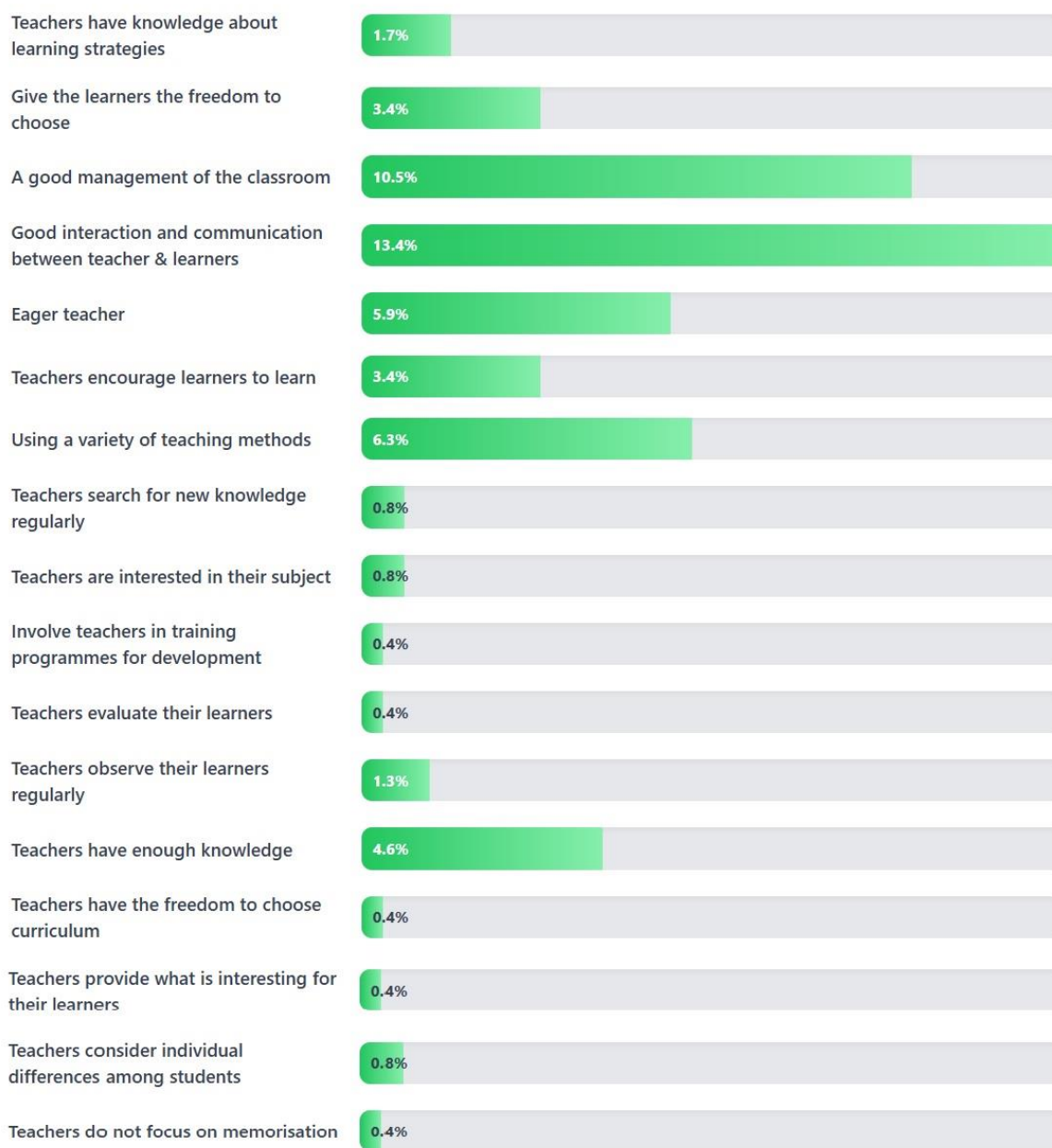
Figure 6.
Teachers' responses to Question 31 that focused on teacher-related factors.

The discussion also highlights the critical role of teacher training in promoting autonomy. Many respondents identified a lack of preparation in learner-centered methods as a significant barrier to implementing these practices. This finding supports previous research by Al-Otaibi [10] and Al Asmari [11] which emphasized the need for professional development programs that equip teachers with practical strategies for fostering autonomy. Additionally, the results suggest that institutional support, such as flexible curriculums and access to resources, is essential for enabling teachers to adopt innovative practices.

In conclusion, the results reveal a complex landscape of teaching practices and perceptions regarding learner autonomy in Saudi secondary schools. While many teachers demonstrate a willingness to engage learners in autonomous activities, systemic and cultural barriers often limit the full realization of these practices. The findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions, including teacher training and curriculum reforms, to bridge the gap between policy and practice. By addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can create an environment that empowers both teachers and learners to embrace the principles of autonomy, ultimately enhancing the quality of English language education in Saudi Arabia.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the teaching practices of English language teachers in Saudi Arabia and their alignment with the principles of learner autonomy. Through a mixed-methods approach combining structured questionnaires and open-ended responses, the study explored teachers' perceptions, methods, and the extent to which their practices foster learner autonomy. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on English language teaching in Saudi Arabia while addressing critical gaps related to the implementation of autonomy-supportive practices in traditional and exam-oriented educational contexts.

The results demonstrate that while many Saudi teachers engage in structured planning and adhere to Ministry of Education guidelines [6] a substantial number also incorporate practices that encourage learner autonomy. Teachers frequently reported sharing lesson objectives, facilitating collaborative activities, and providing opportunities for students to make decisions about their learning (Figures 1 and 5). These practices align with learner-centered pedagogies, which position students as active participants in the learning process [4]. However, the extent of these practices varied significantly, with some teachers expressing hesitancy to fully adopt autonomy-supportive methods due to systemic constraints, such as rigid curriculums, large class sizes, and limited resources.

The qualitative findings reveal a nuanced understanding of teachers' roles and responsibilities. Many educators expressed a belief in shared responsibility for learning, reflecting a gradual shift away from teacher-dominated models. This transformation is essential for fostering autonomy, as it encourages students to take ownership of their educational journeys. Nonetheless, traditional views persist among some teachers, who continue to see themselves as sole authorities in the classroom (Table 1). These dualities highlight the importance of targeted professional development programs that equip teachers with the skills and confidence to embrace learner-centered approaches [10, 14].

Learner autonomy is widely recognized as a critical component of effective language learning, providing students with the tools to engage in lifelong learning and adapt to diverse educational and professional challenges [7]. This study underscores the potential for autonomy to enhance language learning outcomes in Saudi Arabia, particularly given the limited opportunities for students to interact with native English speakers outside the classroom [8]. By fostering autonomy, teachers can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical language use, enabling students to become more proficient and confident communicators.

Despite its potential, the implementation of learner autonomy in Saudi secondary schools faces significant challenges. Cultural and systemic factors, including a focus on high-stakes exams and traditional views of teacher authority, often limit the adoption of autonomy-supportive practices [13]. Additionally, the findings indicate a lack of institutional support, with many teachers citing the rigidity of curriculums and insufficient training as barriers to fostering autonomy (Figure 6). These challenges echo those identified in previous research, which has highlighted the tension between traditional educational values and the demands of modern pedagogies [8].

Nonetheless, the study also highlights opportunities for innovation. Teachers who adopt autonomysupportive practices often employ creative solutions, such as adapting textbook activities or incorporating real-life scenarios into lessons (Figure 7). These approaches demonstrate that autonomy can be cultivated even in resource-constrained settings, aligning with the findings of Kuchah and Smith

[12] who showed that innovative pedagogies can thrive in challenging environments. Moreover, the willingness of many teachers to experiment with learner-centered methods suggests a growing openness to educational reform.

To address the challenges identified in this study, systemic interventions are needed. Professional development programs should prioritize training in autonomy-supportive methods, equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement these practices effectively. Such programs should also emphasize the importance of reflective teaching, encouraging educators to critically examine their roles and assumptions [2]. Additionally, institutional reforms, such as flexible curriculums and increased access to resources, are essential for enabling teachers to adopt innovative practices.

The findings also have broader implications for educational policy in Saudi Arabia. As the nation strives to achieve the goals of Vision 2030, which emphasizes the development of a knowledge-based economy, fostering learner autonomy will be critical for preparing students to succeed in a rapidly changing world. By empowering teachers and learners to embrace autonomy, policymakers can create an educational system that is not only aligned with global standards but also responsive to local needs and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this study highlights the transformative potential of learner autonomy in enhancing English language education in Saudi Arabia. While challenges remain, the findings demonstrate that autonomy can be fostered through targeted interventions, creative pedagogies, and systemic support. By addressing these issues, educators and policymakers can create classrooms that empower both teachers and students, ultimately contributing to a more dynamic and effective educational system. The insights provided by this study also lay the groundwork for future research, which could explore the long-term impacts of autonomy-supportive practices and their applicability across different educational contexts.

Transparency:
The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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