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1. Neda. Pournaderi^{ID}: Department of Educational Technology, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

2. Shahram. Khoshkar^{ID}: Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.
(Email: sh53.khoshkar@gmail.com)

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Exploring the Assessment Practices That Shape Learner Autonomy in Language Education

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the assessment practices that shape learner autonomy in language education, focusing on the perceptions of teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 28 participants selected purposively from language education institutions in Tehran. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo software to identify key themes and patterns related to assessment and learner autonomy. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: Assessment Design for Autonomy, Teacher Practices Facilitating Autonomy, and Learner Engagement and Autonomy. Formative feedback, self-assessment integration, authentic tasks, transparent criteria, learner choice, and continuous assessment were identified as critical design elements supporting autonomy. Teachers played a pivotal role by co-creating goals, fostering dialogic assessment, promoting reflection, encouraging peer assessment, and building trust to empower learners. Learners demonstrated autonomy through intrinsic motivation, self-regulation skills, active engagement with feedback, peer collaboration, and emotional resilience. Barriers such as cultural expectations, fear of failure, and teacher dependence were also acknowledged as challenges to autonomy development. Assessment practices significantly influence learner autonomy in language education by providing structures and supports that empower learners to take control of their learning. Formative, authentic, and learner-centered assessment approaches, combined with supportive teacher mediation, facilitate autonomy development. However, contextual factors and learner readiness must be considered to effectively implement autonomy-supportive assessments. The study recommends embedding formative feedback, self- and peer-assessment, and authentic tasks in language curricula while fostering trusting, dialogic teacher-student relationships to maximize learner autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, assessment practices, formative feedback, self-assessment, language education, qualitative research, Tehran.

Introduction

The pursuit of learner autonomy has become a defining goal in language education, reflecting a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogies in the 21st century (Benson, 2011). The concept of learner autonomy is broadly understood as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning, involving self-regulation, critical reflection, and the capacity to make informed decisions about learning strategies and goals (Little, 2007; Oxford, 2022). The increasing emphasis on autonomy arises from research linking autonomous learning behaviors with improved language proficiency, heightened motivation, and the development of lifelong learning skills (Dam et al., 2019; Ushioda, 2011). However, the means by which

educational systems and classroom practices actually foster autonomy, especially through assessment, remain contested and complex.

The dynamic relationship between assessment and learner autonomy has gained substantial attention in language education research, as assessment is no longer seen as a mere endpoint for evaluating knowledge, but as a powerful tool for promoting learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Carless & Boud, 2018). Traditional assessment practices—characterized by summative tests, standardization, and a focus on recall—have been critiqued for perpetuating dependency and reducing opportunities for learner agency (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011). In contrast, formative assessment and assessment for learning (AfL) approaches seek to integrate assessment as an ongoing, dialogic process that provides feedback, supports metacognition, and empowers students to become active participants in their educational journeys (Heritage, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Central to formative and autonomous-oriented assessment is the quality of feedback provided to learners. Research underscores that effective formative feedback—characterized by specificity, timeliness, and actionable suggestions—can serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and independent learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). Such feedback enables learners to monitor their progress, identify gaps, and set personalized goals, thus fostering both self-efficacy and strategic learning behaviors (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Yet, as Carless and Boud (2018) argue, not all feedback leads to autonomy; its impact depends on learners' engagement with the feedback, their beliefs about learning, and the degree of agency they are afforded in the assessment process.

Another critical aspect is the integration of self-assessment and peer assessment, which has been associated with higher levels of metacognitive awareness and ownership of learning (Andrade & Brookhart, 2019; Oscarson, 2013). By involving students in evaluating their own work or that of peers, teachers can shift the locus of control from external authority to internal reflection and self-regulation (Nicol, 2010). Self-assessment tools—such as checklists, reflective journals, and rubrics—have been shown to scaffold learners' ability to judge quality, set standards, and make informed choices about learning strategies (Panadero et al., 2017). However, the successful implementation of these practices depends on clear guidance, transparent criteria, and a supportive classroom culture (Boud et al., 2018).

Authentic assessment, which refers to tasks and evaluations that mirror real-life language use and challenges, has also emerged as a significant factor in cultivating learner autonomy (Gulikers et al., 2004; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2018). When students perceive assessments as relevant and meaningful, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning and transfer skills to contexts beyond the classroom (Brindley, 2001). Project-based tasks, scenario-driven activities, and open-ended assignments create opportunities for learners to exercise choice, creativity, and problem-solving—key components of autonomous learning (Rivers, 2018).

The design and clarity of assessment criteria further influence autonomy development. Transparent rubrics and co-constructed success criteria help demystify expectations and empower students to take responsibility for their progress (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). Involving students in the creation of criteria or providing opportunities to interpret and apply them has been linked to increased self-regulation and engagement (Jonsson, 2014). However, research also cautions that over-complexity or lack of clarity in criteria can impede the development of autonomy, particularly among learners with limited assessment literacy (Tai et al., 2018).

The role of the teacher is pivotal in facilitating learner autonomy through assessment. Teachers act as mediators, mentors, and co-learners, guiding students in setting goals, reflecting on their learning, and navigating the complexities of self- and peer-assessment (Little, 2012; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008). Teacher practices such as dialogic assessment, scaffolding, and the normalization of errors as opportunities for growth have been shown to create psychologically safe environments that encourage students to take risks and assume greater responsibility for their learning (Sampson & Dervin, 2022). Moreover, the teacher's

ability to build trust, support emotional resilience, and gradually release responsibility is crucial for fostering enduring autonomy (Dewaele & Mercer, 2018).

At the same time, learner autonomy is not an unproblematic or universally achievable outcome. Research highlights a range of barriers, including cultural expectations, fear of failure, lack of confidence, and dependency on the teacher (Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2011). In many contexts, students may be unaccustomed to taking an active role in assessment or may feel uncertain about the value of self- or peer-assessment (Nguyen & Habók, 2021). These challenges underscore the importance of responsive, context-sensitive assessment practices and the need for explicit scaffolding to build assessment literacy and confidence (Carless & Chan, 2017).

Recent empirical studies provide valuable insights into how assessment practices can be harnessed to develop autonomy in language learners. For example, Lee and Coniam (2013) demonstrated that formative feedback and peer assessment increased learners' motivation and self-regulation in secondary English classrooms in Hong Kong. Similarly, Xu and Brown (2017) found that teacher feedback, when delivered dialogically and with sensitivity to learner needs, supported the development of agency and self-directed learning in Chinese EFL settings. In a review of assessment for learning in language education, Klenowski (2011) argued that sustainable assessment practices—those that build learners' capacity for independent judgment and continuous improvement—are essential for lifelong learning.

Technological advances have also transformed assessment and its potential to foster autonomy. Digital assessment tools, online feedback platforms, and e-portfolios enable more frequent, personalized, and learner-driven assessment experiences (Wang et al., 2019). These innovations can enhance accessibility, provide real-time feedback, and support collaboration, although they also present new challenges in terms of digital literacy and equity (Jisc, 2020).

Despite growing consensus on the value of assessment for autonomy, there remain significant gaps in understanding how specific assessment practices are perceived and enacted by language educators and learners in different cultural and institutional contexts (Boud et al., 2018). In particular, the voices of teachers and students regarding what makes assessment supportive of autonomy—and the contextual factors that facilitate or hinder these practices—are underexplored in empirical literature.

Given these complexities, the present study seeks to address the following research question: How do assessment practices shape learner autonomy in language education, as perceived by teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators in Tehran? By employing a qualitative methodology, this study aims to illuminate the lived experiences and nuanced understandings of key stakeholders, providing practical and context-sensitive recommendations for language educators and policymakers.

In summary, fostering learner autonomy through assessment is both a theoretical and practical imperative in language education, but one that requires careful consideration of feedback practices, self- and peer-assessment integration, authentic and clear criteria, and supportive teacher mediation. By exploring these themes in the context of language education in Tehran, this study contributes to a growing body of research aimed at designing more effective, equitable, and autonomy-enhancing assessment systems.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This research employed a qualitative design to explore the assessment practices that contribute to the development of learner autonomy in language education. The study focused on eliciting rich, in-depth perspectives from key stakeholders engaged in language education settings. Participants were purposefully selected to represent a diverse range of experiences and roles within the field, including language teachers, curriculum designers, and educational administrators. A total of 28 participants from

various language education institutions in Tehran took part in the study. The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new significant themes or insights were emerging from the data.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their views and experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe specific areas of interest related to assessment and learner autonomy. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of relevant literature and refined through expert feedback to maximize its clarity and relevance. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews took place either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' preferences and public health considerations. All interviews were conducted in a confidential manner, and participants were assured of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis aimed to identify, categorize, and interpret recurring patterns and themes related to assessment practices and learner autonomy. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was utilized to facilitate systematic coding and organization of the data. The coding process was both inductive and iterative, allowing for themes to emerge organically from the data while maintaining a focus on the study's research questions. Data analysis proceeded concurrently with data collection, supporting an adaptive and reflective approach. To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted with several participants, and coding reliability was reinforced through periodic peer debriefing.

Findings and Results

Assessment Design for Autonomy

Formative Feedback

Participants consistently highlighted the significance of formative feedback in promoting learner autonomy. Teachers emphasized providing actionable suggestions and personalized comments tailored to individual progress. One teacher explained, "When I give immediate feedback and set clear goals, students become more engaged and motivated to improve." Actionable feedback was seen as a catalyst for goal setting and immediate response, with several participants noting the importance of encouragement in the feedback process.

Self-Assessment Integration

The use of self-assessment tools such as checklists, reflection prompts, and journals emerged as a key strategy. These practices enabled learners to monitor their own progress and reflect on their achievements. A student participant shared, "Keeping a learning journal helps me see how far I've come and what I still need to work on." The integration of rubrics and progress tracking fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility in learners.

Task Authenticity

Authentic assessment tasks—those resembling real-world scenarios—were reported as powerful motivators for learner independence. Teachers noted that scenario-based activities and practical language use encouraged students to take initiative. As one administrator described, "When assessment feels like something they might encounter outside of class, students take it more seriously and become more autonomous."

Clear Criteria and Rubrics

Transparent benchmarks and student-friendly rubrics were highlighted as essential in supporting autonomy. Several participants mentioned the positive impact of involving students in criteria development. “When students help set the standards, they understand exactly what’s expected and are more likely to meet those expectations,” stated one curriculum designer. The use of simple language and consistent standards also contributed to clarity and fairness.

Opportunities for Choice

Providing flexible task options and opportunities for students to select topics or formats was seen as a way to empower learners. One teacher remarked, “Letting students choose how they show what they know gives them a sense of control over their learning.” This practice supported student-generated questions and creativity in demonstrating understanding.

Continuous Assessment

Ongoing evaluation, such as portfolio use and regular check-ins, emerged as effective in sustaining student engagement. Participants valued multiple low-stakes assessment opportunities, as one teacher noted: “Continuous assessment reduces pressure and gives students a chance to show their learning in different ways over time.”

Teacher Practices Facilitating Autonomy

Goal-Oriented Guidance

Many teachers reported co-creating learning goals with students, offering scaffolding, and monitoring progress as integral to fostering autonomy. “Setting goals together gives students direction, but also responsibility for their own growth,” explained a language teacher. Feedback on learning strategies further helped students become self-directed.

Dialogic Assessment

Interactive questioning, peer dialogue, and teacher-student conferencing were common practices. These approaches encouraged students to articulate their thinking and reasoning. One participant shared, “In our class, assessment is a conversation, not a judgment. Students learn to reflect and explain their choices.”

Promoting Reflection

Reflection was embedded through prompts, debriefs, and self-evaluation discussions. Teachers described the benefits: “Reflective prompts at the end of tasks help students internalize what they’ve learned and how they learned it,” said one educator.

Encouraging Peer Assessment

Peer review sessions and collaborative scoring fostered critical thinking and responsibility. A teacher commented, “Students often learn more from each other’s feedback than from mine.” Constructive peer feedback and group moderation were highlighted as developing evaluative skills and mutual respect.

Building Trust and Responsibility

Respecting student voices, gradually releasing responsibility, and empowering students were viewed as essential for nurturing autonomy. One participant explained, “I try to create a safe space where students feel trusted to make decisions and take risks.” Empowerment was linked with increased confidence and willingness to participate.

Error as Learning Opportunity

Normalizing mistakes and promoting a growth mindset were frequently discussed. Teachers used reflective error analysis and celebrated improvement. As one teacher stated, “We talk about errors openly. It’s part of the process, not something to be ashamed of. Every mistake is a step forward.”

Learner Engagement and Autonomy

Motivation and Ownership

Intrinsic motivation, pride, and personal goal setting emerged as critical indicators of learner autonomy. Learners who took initiative were seen as more engaged. “When I see my own progress, I feel proud and want to work harder,” shared one student.

Self-Regulation Skills

Participants discussed the importance of teaching students time management, planning, and adaptive strategies. “I encourage students to plan their study sessions and adjust their methods if something isn’t working,” noted a teacher. Monitoring learning and self-discipline were seen as essential self-regulation components.

Engagement with Feedback

Students who actively sought clarification, applied suggestions, and engaged in dialogue about their feedback were viewed as more autonomous. A participant shared, “Sometimes students come to me after class to discuss feedback—they want to understand and improve, not just get a grade.”

Peer Collaboration

Collaboration among peers, sharing strategies, and supporting each other were seen as key to autonomous learning. One teacher observed, “Group projects and peer encouragement make students more independent and willing to try new things.”

Emotional Resilience

The ability to manage anxiety, handle feedback positively, and persevere in the face of challenges was repeatedly mentioned. “Learning a language is stressful, but resilient students don’t give up easily,” explained an administrator.

Transfer of Autonomy

Participants noted that skills developed in the classroom were transferred to other subjects and contexts. As one student put it, “I use what I learn about self-study in English class for my other subjects too. It’s a lifelong skill.”

Barriers to Autonomy

Some challenges included fear of failure, cultural expectations, lack of confidence, and teacher dependence. Teachers reported that, “Some students are afraid to make mistakes or rely too much on the teacher,” indicating the need for targeted strategies to overcome these barriers.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the assessment practices that shape learner autonomy in language education through the perspectives of 28 participants from Tehran, including teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators. The findings revealed three overarching themes: Assessment Design for Autonomy, Teacher Practices Facilitating Autonomy, and Learner Engagement and Autonomy, each with several subthemes that provide a nuanced understanding of how assessment can promote autonomous language learning.

Assessment Design for Autonomy emerged as a critical domain where formative feedback, self-assessment integration, task authenticity, clear criteria, opportunities for choice, and continuous assessment collectively foster learner autonomy. Participants emphasized the power of formative feedback that is timely, specific, and actionable, confirming its role in enhancing learners’ self-regulation and motivation. This finding aligns with Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) model of feedback, which highlights the significance of feedback in closing the gap between current and desired performance. The emphasis on personalized comments and encouragement resonates with Shute’s (2008) assertion that feedback must be constructive to facilitate learners’ adaptive strategies and sustained effort.

The integration of self-assessment tools such as checklists, reflective journals, and rubrics was identified as instrumental in promoting metacognitive awareness and ownership of learning. These practices enable learners to internalize assessment criteria and monitor their progress, echoing Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) principles of formative assessment that support

self-regulated learning. Our findings also support Andrade and Brookhart's (2019) evidence that self- and peer-assessment promote deeper engagement and critical thinking. Participants' emphasis on authentic tasks underscores the motivational and practical benefits of assessment that reflects real-life language use, consistent with Gulikers et al.'s (2004) framework for authentic assessment which enhances learner relevance and transferability of skills.

The clarity and transparency of assessment criteria further reinforced learner autonomy. Involving students in setting criteria or interpreting rubrics fostered a shared understanding of expectations, in line with Jonsson's (2014) findings that co-constructed rubrics enhance assessment literacy and learner empowerment. However, the study also highlighted the need for simplicity and consistency in criteria to avoid overwhelming learners, a concern supported by Tai et al. (2018) who warned that complex assessment demands may hinder learner autonomy, particularly among less experienced students.

Participants valued assessment practices offering choices in task topics and formats, supporting the idea that learner agency increases when students can make meaningful decisions about their learning (Reeve, 2012). This aligns with Rivers (2018), who showed that project-based and open-ended assessments cultivate creativity and responsibility. Moreover, the continuous assessment approach, using portfolios and regular low-stakes evaluations, was perceived as reducing anxiety and providing multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning, echoing Black and Wiliam's (2009) advocacy for assessment for learning as an ongoing process.

Teacher Practices Facilitating Autonomy revealed the vital role of teachers in mediating assessment to support learner independence. Goal-oriented guidance, including co-creating learning objectives and scaffolding progress, was instrumental in helping learners navigate their learning pathways, corroborating Little's (2012) view of the teacher as a facilitator of autonomy rather than merely a knowledge transmitter. Dialogic assessment practices—such as interactive questioning and teacher-student conferencing—fostered a dialogic classroom culture, empowering students to articulate their reasoning and self-evaluate, a process supported by Heritage (2010) who emphasized the formative potential of classroom dialogue.

Reflection promotion, through prompts and debriefs, enhanced learners' metacognition and self-assessment skills, consistent with Panadero et al. (2017) who identified reflection as a cornerstone of self-regulated learning. Encouraging peer assessment fostered collaborative evaluation skills and social responsibility, supporting findings by Oscarson (2013) that peer review cultivates evaluative judgment and deeper learning. Furthermore, building trust and gradually releasing responsibility were described as foundational for creating psychologically safe spaces where students felt empowered to take risks—a dynamic echoed by Dewaele and Mercer (2018) in their research on emotional factors influencing language learning autonomy.

The normalization of errors as learning opportunities was a noteworthy practice, promoting a growth mindset and resilience. This aligns with the findings of Black and Wiliam (2009) and Boud and Molloy (2013), who argue that error analysis and supportive feedback reduce fear of failure and motivate persistence.

Learner Engagement and Autonomy was characterized by intrinsic motivation, self-regulation skills, engagement with feedback, peer collaboration, emotional resilience, transfer of autonomy beyond the classroom, and recognition of barriers to autonomy. Students' expressions of motivation, ownership, and pride align with Ushioda's (2011) emphasis on motivational constructs as prerequisites for autonomy. The development of self-regulation strategies such as time management and study planning supports Oxford's (2022) framework for autonomous language learning, which stresses strategic learning as essential.

The active engagement with feedback—seeking clarification and applying suggestions—reflects Nicol's (2010) conception of feedback as dialogic and interactive rather than one-way. Peer collaboration as a dimension of autonomy supports collaborative learning theories that highlight social interaction as a medium for cognitive and affective growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Emotional resilience was consistently linked with learners' ability to handle challenges and persist, supporting Dewaele and Mercer's (2018) findings on the affective dimension of autonomy.

The transfer of autonomy skills to other academic areas and life contexts reflects the broader educational aim of fostering lifelong learners, as noted by Dam et al. (2019). Finally, the identification of barriers—such as fear of failure, cultural expectations, and dependence on teachers—reinforces Littlewood’s (1999) and Benson’s (2011) assertions that autonomy is context-dependent and often constrained by socio-cultural factors.

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Authors’ Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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