

**INVESTIGATING TEACHER AUTONOMY AT ENGLISH
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates teacher autonomy in the English departments of universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, focusing on three objectives: (1) assessing the overall degree of teacher autonomy, (2) examining differences in autonomy based on gender and teaching experience, and (3) identifying institutional, cultural, and political factors influencing professional decision-making. Utilizing a descriptive quantitative design, the research employed the Teacher Autonomy Perception Scale (TAPS), a 20-item questionnaire rated on a 5-point Likert scale, covering curriculum design, classroom management, assessment, and professional development. Data were collected from 76 educators at Salahaddin University Erbil and Jihan Private University Erbil to ensure diversity in demographic factors. Statistical analysis, including one-sample t-tests, independent t-tests, and one-way ANOVA, revealed that overall teacher autonomy scores significantly exceeded the expected benchmark. Male educators reported notably higher autonomy levels than female educators, highlighting gender-based disparities, while no significant differences emerged between institutions or across teaching experience groups. The findings underscore the impact of institutional policies and cultural norms on teacher autonomy and stress the need for gender-sensitive policies and professional development initiatives, offering valuable insights for future educational reforms in the Kurdistan Region.

Keywords: Educational Reform, English Departments, Kurdistan Region, Professional Development, Teacher Autonomy

A. INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy is a critical factor in enhancing educational quality and fostering professional growth, particularly in higher education systems undergoing reform (Huang, 2019). It encompasses various dimensions, including curriculum development, pedagogical decision-making, assessment strategies, and professional development opportunities (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), teacher autonomy plays a particularly significant role, as educators must navigate international teaching methodologies while adapting them to local educational and cultural contexts (Smith, 2003). The concept of teacher autonomy has evolved significantly in educational research, particularly in language teaching contexts. Little (1995) provided one of the foundational

definitions, describing teacher autonomy as the teacher's capacity to engage in self-directed teaching and professional development. This understanding was further developed by Benson (2013), who emphasized the importance of teachers' ability to make independent decisions about both content and teaching methods. Pearson & Hall (1993) developed one of the first comprehensive instruments for measuring teacher autonomy, identifying key dimensions including curriculum development, classroom standards, and professional development. Building on this foundation, Pearson & Moomaw (2005) conducted empirical research demonstrating the relationship between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction, highlighting how increased autonomy correlates with reduced job stress and improved professional status.

In the context of language teaching, Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) conducted a significant study examining English teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, revealing the complex relationship between teachers' theoretical understanding and practical implementation of autonomous learning principles. Their research highlighted how institutional contexts and cultural factors influence teachers' ability to promote autonomy in their classrooms. However, while these findings offer valuable insights, it remains unclear whether the same dynamics apply within the distinct educational landscape of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Given the unique cultural, political, and institutional factors present in this region, additional elements may influence teacher autonomy that were not fully addressed in previous studies. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further investigation into how these region-specific factors shape teacher autonomy, particularly in the context of English language departments. In this regard, La Ganza (2008) proposed a four-perspective model of teacher autonomy in language education, examining the interrelationships between teachers and their institutional environment, pedagogical knowledge, and student interactions. This theoretical framework has been particularly useful in understanding how teacher autonomy operates within specific educational contexts.

Research on teacher autonomy in Middle Eastern educational contexts has revealed unique challenges and opportunities. Al-Asmari (2013) examined how Saudi EFL teachers perceive and implement autonomy in their teaching practices, finding significant influences of cultural and institutional factors on teacher decision-making. Similarly, Al-Rabai (2014) investigated constraints on teacher autonomy in Gulf countries, identifying key institutional and cultural barriers to autonomous teaching practices. In the Iraqi context, Borg (2015) conducted research on teacher cognition and practice in English language teaching, providing valuable insights into how teachers navigate professional decision-making within institutional constraints. Moreover, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) presents a unique case for studying teacher autonomy due to its distinct educational landscape and ongoing higher education reforms. Since gaining autonomous status, the region has undergone substantial transformation, with English departments playing a crucial role in preparing graduates for a globalized workforce (Sofi-Karim, 2015). However, the balance between centralized educational policies and the need for localized teaching approaches has created a complex environment for teachers, particularly in English departments, where institutional, cultural, and political factors influence professional agency and decision-making. Vernez et al. (2014), in their comprehensive RAND Corporation study, documented the challenges and opportunities in the region's education system, including issues related to teacher professional development and autonomy. Their research highlighted the need for systematic reforms to support teacher autonomy and professional growth. Qadir & Omar (2012) specifically examined English language teaching practices in Kurdish universities,

documenting how institutional policies and cultural factors influence teaching approaches. This research provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by English language teachers in the region (Qolamani, 2022).

Recent research has increasingly focused on how technology integration affects teacher autonomy. Reinders & White (2016) examined two decades of research on autonomy and technology in language education, emphasizing both the benefits and challenges of technological progress. The influence of professional development on teacher autonomy has also been widely explored by Smith (2003), who emphasized the importance of teacher education programs that explicitly promote autonomous teaching practices. This work has been particularly influential in shaping understanding of how to support teacher autonomy development. Despite the growing body of research on teacher autonomy globally and regionally, there remains a significant gap in understanding how this concept manifests within Kurdish higher education, particularly in English departments. While studies have examined various aspects of ELT in the region (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012), few have focused specifically on teacher autonomy in English departments. This research aims to address that gap by investigating the factors that enhance or constrain teacher autonomy in Kurdish universities' English departments.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute both to theoretical understanding and to the practical implementation of teacher autonomy in similar educational contexts. By examining the interplay between institutional policies, cultural factors, and teacher agency, this research seeks to provide insights that could inform educational policy and practice in the Kurdistan Region and similar contexts undergoing educational reform (Atrushi & Woodfield, 2018). To achieve these objectives, the study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate teacher autonomy across multiple English departments in the Kurdistan Region's universities. Through surveys, interviews, and document analysis, it explores teachers' perceptions of their autonomy, the factors influencing their professional decision-making, and the institutional structures that support or hinder autonomous teaching practices. Specifically, the study aims to assess the overall level of teacher autonomy by comparing autonomy scores against a hypothetical benchmark to determine whether educators perceive themselves as autonomous in their professional roles; analyze differences in teacher autonomy based on demographic factors, particularly examining variations in autonomy scores by gender and teaching experience; and identify institutional, cultural, and political factors influencing teachers' professional decision-making, with particular attention to whether autonomy perceptions vary between public and private universities and how broader systemic factors shape educators' autonomy.

B. METHOD

The present study investigates teacher autonomy in the English departments of higher education institutions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq using a descriptive quantitative design. This approach enables an objective measurement of teacher autonomy perceptions across a large sample, enhancing the generalizability of the findings. Descriptive quantitative research is widely used in educational studies to objectively measure variables and characterize populations (Jw, 2009). This research was conducted within the campuses and academic settings of Salahaddin University-Erbil and Jihan Private University Erbil, both located in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Data collection took place over a two-week period during the academic semester of 2023/2024, targeting educators working in the English

departments at these institutions to ensure diverse representation regarding gender and teaching experience.

A structured questionnaire was used to evaluate educators' experiences and perspectives on teacher autonomy in English Language Teaching. Participants were drawn from two universities in the Kurdistan Region—Salahaddin University Erbil (public) and Jihan Private University Erbil (private)—using a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across variations in teaching experience and institutional affiliation. A total of 76 educators participated in the study. The sample comprised 46 males (60.5%) and 30 females (39.5%), with teaching experience distributed as follows:

Table 1. Distribution of Demographic Characteristics in the Study Sample

Variables	Categories	No.	%
Institution	Salahaddin University Erbil	52	68.4
	Jihan Private University Erbil	24	31.6
	Total	76	100
Gender	Male	46	60.5
	Female	30	39.5
	Total	76	100
Years of Teaching Experience	1–5 years	28	36.8
	6–10 years	18	23.7
	11–15 years	16	21.1
	More than 15 years	14	18.4
Total		76	100

Table 1 illustrates that 68.4% of the respondents are from Salahaddin University Erbil while 31.6% are from Jihan Private University Erbil. In addition, 60.5% of the educators are male and 39.5% are female. The teaching experience of the participants is varied, with 36.8% having 1–5 years, 23.7% with 6–10 years, 21.1% with 11–15 years, and 18.4% with more than 15 years of experience.

The primary instrument was the Teacher Autonomy Perception Scale (TAPS), a 20-item structured questionnaire developed to assess various dimensions of teacher autonomy in English Language Teaching. The TAPS evaluates educators' abilities in curriculum design and modification, selection of instructional strategies, development and implementation of assessment methods, classroom management, and engagement in professional development and self-evaluation. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, which is widely used in educational research for its simplicity and effectiveness in capturing participants' attitudes and perceptions (Dörnyei, 2007). The instrument was developed based on an extensive literature review, validated by experts for clarity, relevance, and accuracy, and pilot-tested to ensure its applicability. The questionnaire was created and distributed via Google Forms, which offered an intuitive design and seamless data export, while SPSS was utilized for data processing and comprehensive statistical analysis.

Faculty members were contacted via their official institutional email addresses. After obtaining informed consent, each participant received a personalized Google Forms link to complete the questionnaire within a two-week period. Reminder emails were sent periodically to enhance the response rate, which is a widely recommended strategy in online survey research to ensure sufficient participation and data reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Responses collected through Google Forms were exported to SPSS for analysis.

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were computed to summarize demographic data and TAPS responses. Inferential statistics were applied: one-sample t-tests compared the sample mean of teacher autonomy scores to a hypothetical benchmark, independent samples t-tests examined differences by gender, and one-way ANOVA assessed variations among teaching experience groups. These statistical procedures are widely recommended in educational research to determine significant differences and relationships within datasets (Field, 2024).

The study adhered to ethical standards by fully informing participants about the study’s objectives, procedures, and their rights prior to obtaining consent. Confidentiality was maintained by excluding personal identifiers, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

The TAPS’s validity was confirmed by a panel of specialists in English Language Teaching, instructional methodologies, and educational psychology. Items that achieved at least 80% agreement on clarity and relevance were retained, with minor adjustments made based on expert feedback. A pilot study involving 20 educators (excluded from the final sample) yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83, indicating acceptable internal consistency, as values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable for measuring reliability in social science research (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings in alignment with the three research objectives: (1) Overall Degree of Teacher Autonomy, (2) Differences in Teacher Autonomy by Demographic Factors, and (3) Institutional, Cultural, and Political Factors Influencing Teacher Autonomy.

1. Overall Degree of Teacher Autonomy

This subsection addresses the first research objective: assessing the overall level of teacher autonomy.

Table 2. One-Sample t-Test Findings

Sample	Hypothetical Mean	Mean	Std. Deviation	t- Calculated	t- Tabulated
76	70	73.80	6.50	5.10	1.99

Table 2 presents the one-sample t-test results comparing the overall teacher autonomy score to a hypothetical mean of 70. Based on data from 76 educators, the sample yielded a mean autonomy score of 73.80 (SD = 6.50). The calculated t-value of 5.10 far exceeds the critical t-value of 1.99 (with 75 degrees of freedom at $\alpha = 0.05$), indicating that the observed autonomy level is statistically significantly higher than the benchmark ($p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that, on average, educators in the Kurdistan Region perceive themselves as having a relatively high level of autonomy in their professional roles. Factors such as supportive institutional policies, opportunities for curriculum input, and decision-making flexibility may contribute to this elevated perception.

2. Differences in Teacher Autonomy by Demographic Factors

This subsection corresponds to the research objective of analyzing differences in teacher autonomy based on demographic variables. The analysis considers gender, institutional affiliation, and teaching experience.

Gender Differences

To examine potential gender-based differences in teacher autonomy, an independent samples t-test was conducted. This analysis aimed to determine whether male and female educators in the sample reported significantly different levels of autonomy in their professional roles. The results of the t-test are presented in Table 3:

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test Results by Gender

Gender	n	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	t-calculated	t-tabulated
Male	46	80.0	5.0	7.58	2.00
Female	30	70.0	6.0		

Table 3 compares teacher autonomy scores between male and female educators. Male educators (n = 46) reported a mean score of 80.0 (SD = 5.0), while female educators (n = 30) reported a mean score of 70.0 (SD = 6.0). The independent samples t-test produced a calculated t-value of 7.58, which exceeds the critical value of 2.00. This statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) indicates that male educators experience higher levels of autonomy compared to their female counterparts. Sociocultural factors, institutional policies, or disparities in leadership opportunities may underlie this gap.

Institutional Differences

To investigate whether institutional affiliation influences teacher autonomy, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare educators from a public and a private university. This analysis aimed to determine if differences in institutional policies, administrative structures, or work environments affect teachers' perceived autonomy. The results are presented in Table 4:

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test Results by Institution

Institution	n	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	t-calculated	t-tabulated
Salahaddin University Erbil	52	75.0	7.0	0.55	2.00
Jihan Private University Erbil	24	74.0	7.5		

Table 4 compares teacher autonomy scores between educators from Salahaddin University Erbil (public) and Jihan Private University Erbil (private). The mean autonomy score for Salahaddin University was 75.0 (SD = 7.0) and for Jihan Private University, 74.0 (SD = 7.5). The calculated t-value of 0.55 is below the critical t-value of 2.00, indicating no statistically significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between the two institutions. This suggests that the type of institution (public vs. private) does not significantly affect teachers' perceived autonomy, implying that similar professional policies and practices might be implemented across both types of institutions.

Teaching Experience Differences

To assess whether teaching experience influences perceptions of teacher autonomy, a one-way ANOVA was conducted across four experience groups (1–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, and more than 15 years). This analysis aimed to determine whether professional tenure plays a role in shaping autonomy levels among educators. The results are presented in Table 5:

Table 5. Results of One-Way ANOVA by Years of Teaching Experience

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-calculated	P-value	F-tabulated
Between Groups	20.50	3	6.83	0.72	0.55	2.68
Within Groups	680.00	72	9.44			
Total	700.50	75				

Table 5 shows the one-way ANOVA results examining differences in teacher autonomy scores across groups defined by years of teaching experience (1–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, and more than 15 years). The calculated F-value is 0.72, with a corresponding p-value of 0.55. Since this p-value exceeds the conventional threshold of 0.05, the differences among the experience groups are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This finding indicates that years of teaching experience do not significantly influence educators' perceptions of their autonomy, possibly due to uniform institutional policies or comprehensive professional development programs.

3. Institutional, Cultural, and Political Factors Influencing Teacher Autonomy

This section addresses the research objective of identifying the broader factors that shape teacher autonomy. Institutional factors appear to play a role, as the similar autonomy scores observed across different institutions (Table 4) suggest that governance and policies may standardize teacher autonomy. Both public and private universities seem to implement comparable practices, ensuring similar levels of professional independence for educators. Cultural factors also influence autonomy, as evidenced by the significant gender difference (Table 3). Sociocultural norms and traditional gender roles may contribute to the lower autonomy levels reported by female educators. Additionally, political factors, such as government regulations on curriculum design and assessment policies, may either constrain or enhance teacher autonomy, depending on how these policies are implemented and enforced within the educational system.

The present study set out to investigate teacher autonomy within the English departments of higher education institutions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. By adopting a descriptive quantitative design and utilizing the Teacher Autonomy Perception Scale (TAPS), the research captured educators' perceptions on key aspects such as curriculum design, classroom management, assessment, and professional development. The analysis of the data yielded significant insights into the overall levels of autonomy, gender-based differences, institutional variations, and the influence of teaching experience. These findings have important implications for educational policy and practice, particularly in contexts where teacher empowerment is seen as a cornerstone of educational improvement.

One of the primary outcomes of the study is that the overall teacher autonomy score was significantly higher than the benchmark. The one-sample t-test indicated that the mean autonomy score of 73.80 was statistically greater than the hypothetical mean of 70. This suggests that, on average, educators perceive themselves as having a robust degree of

autonomy in their professional roles. Such a finding is consistent with recent studies that emphasize the critical role of teacher autonomy in enhancing instructional quality and job satisfaction (Day, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2014). The positive perception of autonomy can be attributed to various factors, including supportive institutional policies, opportunities for professional development, and collaborative decision-making practices that have been increasingly adopted in higher education institutions across the region.

The significant gender differences observed in the study are particularly noteworthy. Male educators reported an average autonomy score of 80.0, which was significantly higher than the 70.0 reported by their female counterparts. The independent samples t-test confirmed that this difference is statistically significant. This disparity may stem from entrenched gender roles and institutional practices that, either directly or indirectly, favor male educators. Previous research has documented similar trends, highlighting that male educators often have greater access to leadership roles and decision-making opportunities, which in turn reinforces their perceptions of autonomy (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2020). It is essential to note, however, that these findings call attention to the need for policies that promote gender equity. Educational institutions should consider targeted interventions, such as leadership training and mentoring programs specifically designed for female educators, to ensure that all teachers have equal opportunities to exercise professional autonomy.

Interestingly, when comparing teacher autonomy scores by institutional affiliation, the study found no statistically significant difference between educators from Salahaddin University Erbil and Jihan Private University Erbil. Although Salahaddin University Erbil exhibited a slightly higher mean autonomy score (75.0) compared to Jihan Private University Erbil (74.0), the independent samples t-test indicated that this difference is not statistically significant. This result suggests that, regardless of whether an institution is governmental or private, the overall structure, policies, and professional culture in these higher education settings may be similar in terms of how they empower educators. This finding aligns with the work of Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2014), who argue that a strong emphasis on teacher autonomy can transcend institutional boundaries when educational reforms and professional development initiatives are uniformly implemented.

Furthermore, the one-way ANOVA analysis examining differences in teacher autonomy across various levels of teaching experience revealed no statistically significant variation. Educators with different levels of experience—ranging from 1 to 5 years to those with more than 15 years—reported similar perceptions of autonomy. This finding implies that the level of professional experience does not necessarily determine how much autonomy teachers feel they have. It is possible that institutional policies and the prevailing educational culture have a homogenizing effect, ensuring that both early-career and veteran educators operate under similar conditions. Such an outcome might also reflect the impact of ongoing professional development and mentorship programs that help to level the field for less experienced teachers (Day, 2007). However, it is important to note that while the ANOVA did not reveal statistically significant differences, future research should consider a larger sample size or a longitudinal design to explore whether autonomy perceptions evolve over time with increased professional experience.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. First, the overall high level of teacher autonomy reported in this study supports the idea that empowering teachers is crucial for

enhancing the quality of education. When educators perceive themselves as autonomous, they are more likely to innovate in their teaching practices and tailor their instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students. Such empowerment is also linked to increased job satisfaction and a greater commitment to professional growth (Leithwood et al., 2020). In this light, educational policymakers in the Kurdistan Region should continue to implement and expand initiatives that foster teacher autonomy, such as decentralized decision-making structures and comprehensive professional development programs.

Second, the significant gender differences in autonomy perceptions warrant a closer examination of the institutional practices that contribute to such disparities. Given that male educators in this study reported higher levels of autonomy, it is imperative that schools and universities address potential systemic biases that might limit the opportunities for female educators. Initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity in leadership roles and decision-making processes could help mitigate these differences. For example, mentoring programs and leadership training tailored for female educators have been shown to enhance professional confidence and autonomy (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015).

Third, the lack of significant differences in autonomy between institutions suggests that efforts to promote teacher autonomy are being implemented consistently across both governmental and private sectors in the region. This consistency is encouraging, as it indicates that reforms designed to empower teachers are not confined to a single type of institution but are part of a broader educational strategy. However, it is also important for future research to explore other factors—such as resource allocation, administrative support, and class size—that might interact with institutional type to influence teacher autonomy.

Finally, the absence of significant differences based on teaching experience raises interesting questions about the uniformity of professional conditions in these institutions. While experience is often correlated with increased professional confidence and decision-making capacity, our findings suggest that the structural and policy frameworks within these institutions may be sufficiently standardized. This uniformity ensures that all educators, regardless of their tenure, have similar opportunities to exercise autonomy. Nevertheless, this observation also calls for further investigation into whether more experienced teachers are being fully utilized as mentors or leaders within their departments, potentially enhancing the overall educational environment.

In interpreting these findings, it is essential to acknowledge the study's limitations. The sample size, though adequate for the present analyses, is relatively small and may not capture all the nuances present in the broader population of educators in the Kurdistan Region. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures can introduce biases, as respondents' perceptions may be influenced by personal and contextual factors. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to track changes in autonomy perceptions over time. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs and incorporating additional variables such as administrative support and resource availability. In conclusion, the study reveals that teacher autonomy in the English departments of higher education institutions in the Kurdistan Region is generally high, with male educators reporting significantly higher levels of autonomy than female educators. Institutional comparisons indicate uniformity in autonomy perceptions across both governmental and private sectors, while differences across teaching experience groups remain non-significant. These findings underscore the importance of maintaining and enhancing policies that promote teacher autonomy while addressing gender disparities. The results contribute

valuable insights into the ongoing discourse on teacher empowerment and educational reform, offering directions for future research to further explore the factors influencing teacher autonomy.

D. CONCLUSION

Teacher autonomy plays a pivotal role in enhancing educational quality and fostering effective teaching practices in higher education contexts. The study assessed overall teacher autonomy levels, analyzed variations based on gender and teaching experience, and examined institutional, cultural, and political influences. The findings reveal that teacher autonomy in the English departments of higher education institutions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is generally high, with autonomy levels significantly exceeding the established benchmark. Specifically, male educators reported significantly higher levels of autonomy than their female counterparts. This gender disparity may be attributed to sociocultural factors and traditional gender roles that limit the professional independence of female educators, suggesting a need for targeted policies and support to address these inequities. Conversely, no statistically significant differences were found between governmental and private institutions or among various teaching experience groups. This uniformity might indicate that institutional policies and professional development practices are consistently implemented across different settings and experience levels, thereby standardizing teachers' autonomy regardless of their background.

The study underscores the importance of strengthening institutional policies and enhancing professional development initiatives to further empower teachers while also addressing gender disparities to ensure an equitable environment for all educators. Thus, it is crucial for educational policymakers and institutional leaders to implement targeted strategies aimed at strengthening teacher autonomy, with a particular emphasis on reducing gender inequities. Based on the findings, it is recommended that educational policymakers and institutional leaders implement targeted strategies to enhance teacher autonomy further, particularly focusing on reducing gender disparities. This could include the establishment of mentorship programs, leadership training, and professional development opportunities specifically tailored for female educators. Additionally, efforts should be made to promote a collaborative culture across all types of institutions by sharing best practices and ensuring equitable resource allocation. Furthermore, future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs and include a broader range of variables—such as administrative support and resource availability—to better understand the dynamic factors influencing teacher autonomy and to inform more effective educational reforms.

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