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Research Paper

English Language Teachers' Autonomy for Professional Development: A Narrative Account of Self-direction, Capacity, and Freedom

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Abstract

Despite many studies on the concept of learner autonomy and the relationship between teacher autonomy (TA) and learner autonomy, scant attention has been devoted to TA on its own. To bridge this gap, the present study used narrative accounts to discover language teachers' autonomy in terms of self-directed professional development (PD), capacity for self-directed PD, and freedom from control over PD. To this end, eight English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers narrated their past stories regarding these three dimensions. The thematic analysis of their narratives showed that their main activities for self-directed PD included peer observation, peer coaching, making use of technology, continuing education, action research, interacting with professionals, and attending workshops. Regarding capacity for their self-directed PD, the teachers claimed they had the capacity and willingness to self-direct their teacher learning. External support, experience, motivational factors, and reading books and articles were instrumental in teachers' capacity development. Moreover, the findings revealed that although teachers viewed financial problems,

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conference attendance, lack of time to do PD activities, and rules of the institutes as obstacles to their freedom over PD, they employed strategies to change them into opportunities. The findings suggest implications for teachers and teacher educators to acquaint themselves with different PD strategies and to raise teachers' awareness about the value of PD, respectively. The findings might bear implications for institute managers as well.

***Keywords**:* English Language Teachers, Teacher Autonomy, Professional Development, Self-directed Professional Development, Narrative

The concept of teacher autonomy (TA) can be traced back to the conceptualization made by Allwright (1990, as cited in Benson, 2006). Little (1995) later expanded it, reconceptualized TA with a further definition of the concept as a teacher's prerequisite characteristic for fostering learner autonomy. Following Little, other scholars have investigated TA in terms of its role in fostering learner autonomy (e.g., Jiménez Raya, & Vieira, 2015; Manzano Vázquez, 2019). A different definition of TA, though, was proposed by McGrath (2000), who characterized it as comprising two dimensions: "teacher autonomy as self-directed professional action" (p.109) or "development" (p.100)," and "teacher autonomy as freedom from control by others" (p.101). Three years later, Smith (2003) unpacked McGrath's classification and presented a multidimensional view of TA including "professional action" and "professional development" (p. 4). With this new definition, TA has gained the attention it deserved as all its dimensions, including political, psychological, and technical, were discussed, and TA came to be dealt with independently without considering its relationship with learner autonomy. Moreover, Smith (2003) used the term teacher-learner autonomy in the new conceptualization to accentuate the teachers' role as learners in their own teaching profession. He viewed teacher-learner

autonomy as an engine of professional development (PD). He further stated that by defining TA in terms of teacher-learner autonomy, space is created to scrutinize teachers' PD distinctly. In this regard, Smith and Erdögan (2008) pointed out the importance of TA and ongoing PD. Similarly, Manzano Vázquez (2017) proclaimed that teacher learning is a lifelong process that helps teachers be cognizant of their own learning needs and helps them develop a professional identity. In the context of Iran, which is the focus of the present study, teachers' PD has recently gained prominence in teacher education research. For instance, Soodmand Afshar et al. (2017) found that PD is a crucial issue when teachers experience educational reforms such as the introduction of technology in the educational system. As such, they argued that teachers need to seek PD opportunities to "keep pace with the changing world" (p. 189).

The significance of TA is evident in the body of research conducted (e.g., Kaplan, 2017; Yu, Wang, & Zhang, 2014). However, most of these studies have not investigated TA itself and concentrated on its role in fostering learner autonomy instead (e.g., Alonazi, 2017; Feryok, 2013; Núñez et al., 2014). Moreover, most studies have failed to fully elucidate TA as they dealt with one dimension of TA only, in particular, the political dimension (e.g., Benson, 2010; Lundström, 2015). Thus, there is a clear need for research on TA as a construct on its own while considering all its dimensions, embracing technical, psychological, and political. Against this backdrop, the main aim of this study was to fill this gap by exploring EFL teachers' autonomy development in terms of their self-direction, capacity, and freedom for PD in the context of private language institutes in Iran, where English is learned as a foreign language.

Literature Review

Teacher Professional Development

Teacher PD has always been the focus of attention among researchers (e.g., Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jiménez, 2019; Mak, 2019; Thurlings & den Brok, 2017). To characterize PD, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) analyzed 35 studies and uncovered characteristics of constructive PD, which consists of being content-focused, embodying active learning, underpinning cooperation, role modeling, providing expert support, and reflection. Kyndt et al. (2016) similarly reviewed 74 studies and identified several informal PD activities as follows: collaboration, learning by doing, observation, reading books, using technology, and reflection. Broad and Evans (2006) referred to six sources of PD as follows: "collegial learning, peer-assisted learning, teacher-researcher, teacher-as-student, independent learning, and integrated approaches" (p. 14). Borg (2018) discussed the central role PD plays in teachers' profession. He propounded that PD impacts teachers' classroom practices, sense of satisfaction, language proficiency, knowledge, instructional skills, and beliefs.

A line of research has been carried out to examine the effect of different PD programs on teachers. Santos and Miguel (2016) ran a study in Hong Kong to investigate the impact of a peer observation program on teachers' professional growth. They used semi-structured interviews to collect data from six teachers whose participation was based on purposive sampling. Their findings revealed that although the teachers knew about the benefits of peer observation, they employed it only when the schools made it mandatory. Bell and Mladenovic (2015) set out a three-year-long study to find out how teachers benefited from peer observation. They collected data through peer observation, self-reflection, survey, focus group, and interview. The results

showed the very positive impact of peer observation on teachers' PD. Moreover, the teachers viewed peer observation as a constructive activity as it encouraged reflection. As to peer coaching, Parker et al. (2014) argued that peer coaching is an invaluable source of PD, which is low-cost but at the same time highly advantageous. To scrutinize the learning outcomes of peer coaching, Thurlings and den Brok (2017) reviewed 51 articles and found out that peer coaching resulted in teachers' PD in terms of "teacher knowledge, teacher skills, and student learning" (p. 554). Alsaleh et al. (2017) explored how peer coaching would lead to teachers' PD. After collecting qualitative data through interviews with 12 pre-service teachers and 6 supervisors, they found that peer coaching contributed to teacher learning, teachers' self-confidence, and autonomy growth. To investigate teachers' perceptions of peer coaching, Castañeda-Londoño (2017) conducted a small-scale study with three teachers. After analyzing narratives and audio-recording of the peer coaching sessions, she concluded that the teachers benefited from peer coaching as it led to teacher learning. Additionally, the findings showed that peer coaching helped the teachers affirm their own knowledge or learn new techniques.

Recently, Rosell-Aguilar (2018) examined the effects of technology on teachers' PD. He utilized a survey and an interview to collect data. A total of 116 teachers filled out the survey comprising 22 questions. Afterward, he interviewed 11 teachers who had participated in the survey phase. Eventually, the results of the study indicated that the teachers highly benefited from Twitter and would pursue it as a PD activity. Visser et al. (2014) also conducted a survey study among 342 teachers whose participation was based on snowball sampling. After data collection through a survey, they analyzed the data and concluded that teachers appreciated Twitter as a PD activity from

which they benefited considerably. The findings indicated that teachers did not face previous obstacles to their PD as, for example, they could attend any conference virtually without being worried about the time or venue of the conference. Regarding workshops, Sehrawat (2014) argued that an autonomous teacher feels responsible for growing professionally, improving skills and knowledge in her profession by attending workshops, cooperating with her colleagues, and using virtual learning. However, Abu-Tineh and Sadiq (2018) doubted the efficacy of attending workshops due to the fact that they last for several days at most and, in turn, do not integrate reflection.

A line of research has been carried out to uncover teachers' viewpoints about their PD. Hismanoglu (2010) examined ELT teachers' perceptions of their PD and their strategies to foster their profession. To this end, he administered a questionnaire to 50 ELT teachers and analyzed it through descriptive statistics. The findings showed that although most of the participants appreciated PD, only 30% of them applied PD activities. The teachers mainly used portfolios and study groups as strategies to develop in their teaching life. Yurtsever (2013) carried out a questionnaire among 91 teachers to discover their perspectives regarding traditional and constructivist models of PD. The results revealed that the participants were concerned about traditional PD and preferred the constructivist ones to enjoy collaborative activities. Similarly, Seyma Dogan and Yagiz (2015) studied teachers' viewpoints about their PD. To collect data, first, they administered a questionnaire among a sample of 168 teachers and then interviewed 40 of the teachers chosen from the questionnaire phase. After quantitative and qualitative data analysis, they concluded that the entire population had positive attitudes towards ongoing PD. Moreover, their study found monetary problems along with lack of support from the institute as major obstacles to

teachers' PD. Avidov Ungar (2016) interviewed 43 teachers and identified two PD dimensions that resulted in four PD patterns. His analysis revealed that the teachers perceived their PD in terms of both their motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) and their aspiration (lateral and vertical).

Some have sought into the factors helping teachers in PD. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is a social interaction during which teachers construct knowledge by providing scaffolding to each other. Hord and Tobia (2012) viewed teacher learning as a social process where relationships matter and emphasized the importance of developing collegiality among teachers. Richards and Farrell (2005, p.14), on the other hand, listed six factors principal to self-directed PD as follows: "inquiry", "self-appraisal", "experience", "personal construction", "contextualized learning", and "planning and managing." Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) viewed experience as an advantageous resource that helps teachers enhance their PD. Vermunt and Endedijk (2011) pinpointed theoretical, experiential, and practical knowledge as three resources from which teachers would learn. Additionally, they proposed a model of teacher learning which is centered on devoting to learning patterns, comprising four components: learning activities, regulation activities, teacher beliefs, and teacher motivation. Based on this model, teachers' learning activities are regulated by regulation activities and afterward are affected by teachers' system of beliefs and their motivation to learn. Personal and contextual factors further influence these four components.

Teacher Autonomy

TA entered the field of teacher education in line with a change of focus on teachers' roles in language teaching and learning (Benson, 2011). With this

shift of focus from a transmission-oriented model of teacher education to a reflective one, teachers were granted leading roles rather than passive ones and were seen as self-directed learners in their profession. The other side of the idea of TA has arisen from the field of learner autonomy with Little's (1995) argumentation on the role teachers can play in helping learners experience autonomy development. He argued that teachers themselves should be autonomous in order to be able to aid their learners in autonomy development. Additionally, he noted that teachers should be acquainted with TA from their pre-service courses. He believed that teachers who have experienced being autonomous could be more successful in helping their learners develop autonomy.

Other scholars have also conceptualized TA. For McGrath (2000), TA means self-directed PD covering two mutually constitutive components: "self-directed professional action" (p.109) and "freedom from control by others" (p. 101). The former dimension, a psychological perspective, is assumed to be related to teacher development, action research, and teacher reflection (Benson, 2011), whereas the latter, a political perspective, refers to the experience of self-directed action free from authorities' interferences. A further definition of TA, though, has been proposed by Smith (2003), who used the term "teacher-learner autonomy" (p. 1) to describe teachers' endeavors to be learners in their own profession of teaching. Smith has broadened McGrath's conceptualization to put forward a multidimensional view of the concept while taking into account all the three dimensions of autonomy, i.e., technical, psychological, and political. This conceptualization consists of professional action and PD. While professional action incorporates self-directed professional action, capacity for self-directed professional action, and freedom from control over professional action, PD consists of self-

directed PD, capacity for self-directed PD, and freedom from control over PD. Smith and Erdoğan (2008, pp. 84-85) added that self-directed professional action equates "self-directed teaching" while self-directed PD equals "self-directed teacher learning;" besides, they elaborated that capacity for self-directed professional action is identical to "teacher autonomy (capacity to self-direct one's teaching)" whereas capacity for self-directed PD equates "teacher-learner autonomy (capacity to self-direct one's learning as a teacher)". Freedom from control over professional action has been described as "teacher autonomy (freedom to self-direct one's teaching)" while freedom from control over PD has been referred to as "teacher-learner autonomy (freedom to self-direct one's learning as a teacher)". Recently, Grant et al. (2020) proposed a model of graduated TA which establishes a link between teacher proficiency and TA. The model is based on the Danielson Framework for Teacher Education (Danielson, 2007) and autonomy theory, describing multiple dimensions. According to this framework, the higher the level of teacher proficiency, the more autonomy the teacher has. Nevertheless, as its name suggests, it is a graduated model and, in turn, accounts for the cases where a proficient teacher lacks proficiency in a particular domain. More guidance and support are needed in such cases to help teachers experience continuous PD. Overall, the newly proposed framework heavily supports the provision of feedback and assistance in response to teachers' needs in different domains.

A body of research has been conducted to identify the obstacles to the development of TA. In this regard, Benson (2000) pointed to school rules, textbooks, policy factors, and the language itself. Nevertheless, Ramos (2006) noted fear of change, fear to release control, educational authorities, and teachers' function as constraints on the practice of TA. In 2010, Benson

conducted an interview-based study with four cases from four secondary schools in Hong Kong and found the scheme of work, the syllabus dictated by school authorities, and fear of supervision as major obstacles in teachers' decision-making ability. He further related TA to teacher identity and the fact that their identity may affect their autonomy and, in turn, how they would deal with the constraints to exercise their professional autonomy. Erss (2018) investigated teachers' perceptions of their curricular autonomy and freedom from control. To this end, she interviewed 33 school teachers from Germany, Finland, and Estonia. Eventually, she concluded that teachers' autonomy is constrained by the country's education system they work in. Salokangas et al. (2019) examined Irish and Finnish teachers' beliefs about their autonomy. To collect data, they interviewed 14 Finnish and 17 Irish teachers. The results indicated that teachers experienced high levels of autonomy in educational, social, and development decisions in Finland. In Ireland, however, the teachers had autonomy in educational and social decisions only as Irish principals were more involved in decision-making. Finally, they referred to the education system as a factor hindering teachers' autonomy. Recently, Körkkö et al. (2020) conducted a study to scrutinize the process of applying a model of PD on 16 teachers and 10 principals in Finland. After analyzing individual and focus group interviews qualitatively, they reported that lack of support from principals and colleagues and schools themselves were obstacles to the implementation of the PD program. Kesler (2020) also studied 100 teachers and found principals' indifference toward teachers' PD needs as an obstacle to teachers' PD. Principals who supported collaboration and provided opportunities for peer observation and coaching, on the other hand, motivated teachers to do teacher learning. Soodmand Afshar and Ghasemi (2020) drew on a researcher-made questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to

uncover the hindrances to Iranian EFL teachers' PD. After interviewing 50 teachers and developing and administering their questionnaire among 250 teachers, the data went through the procedures of qualitative and quantitative analyses. The findings showed that "teachers themselves, managers of the language institutes, and the policymakers" (p. 109) were the main barriers teachers face in their journey of PD. Although many studies have described TA's concept, only a few have referred to it on its own without establishing a connection between TA and learner autonomy. Additionally, those who studied TA have concentrated on only one of its dimensions. Consequently, the main purpose of the present study was to scrutinize TA on its own. To achieve this goal, the researchers chose Smith's (2003) framework as the conceptualization provides an opportunity for dealing with all the three dimensions of TA, i.e., technical, psychological, and political. This multidimensional framework embraces two components, each including three subcomponents, corresponding to the three versions of TA. However, to have a deeper and more detailed view of the attribute, this study focused on the second component of Smith's conceptualization, i.e., self-direction, capacity, and freedom for PD. To this end, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are language teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of their self-directed PD?
2. What are language teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of their capacity for their self-directed PD?
3. What are language teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of their freedom from control for self-directed PD?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were EFL teachers whose participation was on a voluntary basis and provided their consent for participating in the study. The first author sent emails to 25 EFL teachers and invited them to join the study, and eight teachers accepted the invitation. Each of them was invited to her office to narrate their stories regarding their self-direction, capacity, and freedom for PD. As presented in Table 1, all the participants were females whose ages ranged from 18 to 40. While two of them had completed their M.A. in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), one of them was still an M.A. student of TEFL. Two EFL teachers were B.A. students of English Translation, and one had a B.A. in English Literature. Two participants were non-English major teachers, one had B.S. in Physics and M.A. in TEFL, and the other held B.A. in Computer. The one majoring in Computer received her advanced certificate in English along with FCE and CAE. She started teaching English after passing a twenty-session-TTC course. All the teachers had been teaching English in language institutes and their teaching experience ranged from five months to 18 years.

Table 1

Demographic Features of the EFL Teachers

Name (all pseudonyms)	Age	Teaching experience	Major
Raheleh	36	18 years	B.A. in English Translation
			M.A. in TEFL
Samira	36	14 years	B.A. in English Literature
			M.A. in TEFL
Somayeh	36	14 years	B.A. in English Literature

Name (all pseudonyms)	Age	Teaching experience	Major
Raana	34	12 years	B.A. in English Translation
			M.A. Student of TEFL
Azam	40	5 months	B.S. in Physics
			M.A. in TEFL
Masoomeh	30	1 year	B.A. in Computer
Mobina	18	6 months	B.A. Student of English Translation
Kimia	21	1 year	B.A. Student of English Translation

Instrumentation

The significance of narrative inquiry is evident in Craig's (2011) statement, where he maintained that "sitting at the root of the teacher knowledge conception of teacher education as studied through the narrative inquiry lens is a different understanding of expertise" (p.2). Moen (2006) also proposed narratives as one of the best methods to represent a qualitative study with a focus on an individual teacher's experience. Barkhuizen (2008) viewed narrative inquiry as a golden opportunity for teachers to reflect on their actions and, in turn, understand the complexity of teaching and learning and simultaneously gain the capability to express this complexity to the public. Additionally, Gao (2018) explicitly recommended researchers do further studies to scrutinize teachers' narratives. In the present study, the narrative inquiry was used to explore EFL teachers' past stories regarding their autonomy for their PD. To do so, narrative questions based on the second component of Smith's (2003) framework of TA, i.e., self-directed PD, capacity for self-directed PD, and freedom from control over PD, were generated in a session, where all the three authors were present to discuss and decide on the content of the questions. Eventually, three different questions

were generated for each individual subcomponent of the aforementioned framework. Two experts in the field were also asked to check the final questions to ensure the validity of the questions. The narratives were conducted orally in the teachers' native language, Persian. As each narrative interview lasted almost sixty minutes, its total length equated to eight hours. While doing the narratives, the first author tried to establish rapport with the participants as, according to Cole and Knowles (2001), mutual trust is a vital element in narrative sessions, where we expect the participants to share and talk about their lives.

Data Collection Procedure

To collect data, 25 EFL teachers were invited to take part in the study. Those eight teachers who accepted the invitation were invited individually. Based on the narrative guide, they were asked to narrate their past stories regarding their self-direction, capacity, and freedom for PD. During the narrative session with each teacher, more elaboration was provided in case a misunderstanding happened. Moreover, the participants' narratives were recorded and transcribed for further reflection and analysis. Eventually, the participants were asked to check the final transcription emailed to them. The content of the transcriptions was confirmed, and no change was applied. All the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the required time they had to spend, the remuneration provided for the valuable time they were going to allocate, and the fact that their anonymity would be protected. They were also briefed on the duration of the study and were ensured that the data would be used for research purposes only.

Data Analysis

To answer all three research questions, the narratives were transcribed and subjected to the thematic analysis procedure introduced by Riazi (2016). For instance, for the second research question regarding teachers' narratives in terms of their capacity for self-directed PD, codes like "having a sense of self-satisfaction," "being in love with English," and "being motivated to learn" were extracted in open coding. All these codes were sorted into "having positive attitudes" in axial coding. Finally, at the selective level, "motivational factors" were termed as the final theme. It should be noted that open, axial, and selective coding were applied simultaneously as the data were coded through the constant comparative method. Furthermore, member checking proposed by Birt et al. (2016) was employed to ensure that the authors' understanding of the narratives was approved by the teachers.

Results

Self-directed Professional Development

The first research question was raised to discover teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of their self-directed PD. The in-depth thematic analysis of the narratives uncovered eight PD activities depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

EFL Teachers' Narrative Accounts of Autonomy in terms of Their Self-directed PD

Theme	Teachers
Peer Observation	Raheleh, Samira, Somayeh, Raana, Azam, Masoomeh, Mobina

Theme	Teachers
Peer Coaching	Samira, Raana, Azam, Masoomeh, Mobina, Kimia
Making Use of Technology	Somayeh, Raana, Mobina, Kimia
Continuing Education	Raheleh, Samira
Action Research	Raheleh, Samira
Interacting with Professionals	Raheleh, Raana
Attending Workshops	Samira, Somayeh

All the teachers regarded PD as an important issue in their professional lives. In what follows, the themes akin to their PD are described.

Peer Observation: As a leading theme, most EFL teachers specified peer observation as their self-directed PD activity. Masoomeh pointed to the first weeks of her teaching experience when she self-directed her teacher learning by asking nearly all her colleagues to allow her to observe their classes.

> *When I first started teaching, I observed so many classes, even those which were not at the level I taught then. All the time, I was observing my colleagues' classes. It had good effects on me. I learned lots of things like class and time management.* (Masoomeh)

As the excerpt reveals, Masoomeh's first attempts to self-direct her PD embraced observing peers, which has had "good effects" on her and has resulted in teacher learning for class and time management.

Peer Coaching: The second theme was noted by Samira, Raana, Azam, Masoomeh, Mobina, and Kimia. For instance, Mobina began peer coaching when her burning ambition to have interesting classes was frustrated by her problems in class management.

I always like having interesting classes where students don't become tired. But my students did not listen to me at all. They did whatever they liked. I shouted at them and I believed if I frown at them they would listen to me. Unfortunately, the effect was the opposite, they did what they liked. I was really disappointed. (Mobina)

However, undertaking peer coaching as a self-directed PD activity helped her learn how to tackle her problem.

One day, I asked for help from my colleague whose classes were always active and she had good relationship with her students. We were sitting in the teachers' room and I started speaking with her. She shared great ideas with me and surprisingly the problem was solved. I understood how to have good relationship with my students. (Mobina)

Implementing peer coaching, where her colleague "*taught*" and she "*understood*" what to do, was so beneficial that she employed this strategy whenever she faced a problem.

Making Use of Technology: Technology was highlighted by Somayeh, Raana, Mobina, and Kimia. For Kimia, technology use was her first resort to do teacher learning:

The first thing I did was searching the Net, by just a click you have access to anything you need. I used You Tube all the time. The first time I had class I didn't know how to teach simple past, I searched "how to teach simple past?" Then I watched two or three films which gave me some ideas. I applied them and the result was perfect. (Kimia)

The above excerpt reveals how her attempts to learn teaching grammar through *"YouTube"* were successful as they resulted in teacher learning. Therefore, using technology became the first strategy she employed in her journey of self-directed PD.

Continuing Education: This theme was specified by Samira and Raheleh. Samira started teaching English after her four-year B.A. program in English literature. She had many problems in teaching. As she narrated,

> *They just sent me to a class and I didn't know what to do. I faced many difficulties since my major was literature and not teaching.*

Then she attempted to self-direct her PD by continuing her academic education.

> *As you know, when you study, you are in touch with the latest issues and theories of your major. For example, before M.A. I didn't know anything about action research. In B.A. I knew nothing about articles in our field but in M.A. I understood their value and how much a person can learn from them. It was during my education that I learned about reflection and action.* (Samira)

Continuing education has helped her to *"learn"* the real value of many concepts, e.g., *"action research"* and *"reflection"*. Moreover, continuing education proved so valuable that she was thinking of studying Ph.D..

Action Research: Similar to the previous PD activity, the same teachers pointed to action research. Raheleh distinctly narrated a story about a problem and how she tackled it through action research:

> *Once I realized that learning passive tense is too difficult for my learners. I wanted to know the reason because I can say most of them had this problem. First, I checked the way I taught. Then I found it was*

ok. After that I taught deductively then inductively. But none of them could help. I applied the next method but none of those helped that much. Finally, I concluded that their problem was in active tense… their knowledge lacked there. I never forgot what I had done. (Raheleh)

Raheleh's application of action research is evident in her informed movements between action and research to change the situation, e.g., "*I applied the next method.*"

Interacting with Professionals: This PD activity was pointed out by Raheleh and Raana. In this regard, Raana narrated how she analyzed her university teachers to find out who was appreciated by the students. Then she tried to interact with them to learn new things.

When I entered university, I paid attention to our university teachers' characters a lot. I was conscious to see how they taught, how they were different from one another. I wanted to know who the most favorite teacher was and I tried to be in touch with them. One of them was Mr. Habibi. He taught in a language institute too, some days I went there and we spoke about different things. He taught me how to do research and even how to do case studies. I learned a lot from him. Being in touch with great people has been always important to me and it helped me learn a lot of things. Generally, I think when you are in touch with great people of your field, you can grow more compared with the time you are alone. (Raana)

Here, Raana stated the value of interacting with professionals and how that has helped her "learn many *things.*" Moreover, in her last sentence, she

clearly noted that one could learn more in collaboration with professionals in the field.

Attending Workshops: Samira and Somayeh noted workshops as their PD activity. Somayeh argued that the time she started teaching, workshops were not common but as soon as they got the place they deserved, she attempted to participate in them.

> *I try not to miss any workshop. In our institute, 10 to 20 teachers sit and talk about the problems they have. For example, they talk about their students' weaknesses in reading and ask for some suggestions to solve them. Most of the time, when they are speaking, I think and very easily I can solve them. That is, I know the answer. Of course there are occasions when I really learn new techniques. Overall, in those workshops I do learn new things. I also become aware of the things I myself do in my classes. Then I work on them more and this way workshops give me a better understanding of my own teaching.* (Somayeh)

Although Somayeh could *"easily"* solve the mentioned problems in the workshops, she still benefited from the workshops as the discussions not only provided her with *"a better understanding"* of her own teaching but also helped her learn *"new techniques."* Furthermore, she became more *"conscious"* of her place in the teaching profession. On the other hand, the fact that she did never *"miss any workshop"* reveals her engagement in continuous PD.

Capacity for Self-Directed Professional Development

The second research question sought to discover language teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of their capacity for PD. All the teachers uttered that they had both the capacity and willingness to self-direct their PD. However, the factors they named as constructive in helping them develop such capacity varied. The thematic analysis gave rise to four factors presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

EFL Teachers' Narrative accounts of Autonomy in terms of Their Capacity for Self-directed PD

Theme	Teachers
External Support	Samira, Somayeh, Raana, Azam, Mobina, Kimia
Experience	Raheleh, Samira, Somayeh, Azam, Masoomeh
Motivational Factors (Self-satisfaction, Motivation)	Somayeh, Raana, Masoomeh, Mobina, Kimia
Reading Books and Articles	Raheleh, Samira

External Support: Regarding external support, most teachers pointed to other-regulation where they relied on their supervisors' and colleagues' suggestions while developing their PD capacity. In Raana's case, she pondered over the time she thought good knowledge of English sufficed to be an English teacher.

> *At first, I thought as my general English was good, I could be a great teacher. But as time passed, I understood I needed help from others. So I asked for help from my colleagues. I even asked for help from my uncle's wife who was an English teacher. I spoke with her a lot and she*

gave me lots of tips. If these people didn't help me, I would never be where I am now. (Raana)

As she had been learning English since age 5, Raana considered herself to be highly proficient in English. As she stated elsewhere, she was "*proud*" of it and thought she did not need anything other than good knowledge of general English to teach English. However, she understood something was missing; therefore, she sought support from her "*colleagues*" and even her "*uncle's wife*".

Experience: Experience as the second leading factor in assisting teachers in developing capacity for PD was specified by Raheleh, Samira, Somayeh, Azam, and Masoomeh. Azam, who had just started teaching English, believed in her capabilities and willingness to develop such capacity. However, she viewed experience as a vital factor in developing such capability.

I think I have the ability to help myself and I really want to become a better teacher but because I don't have that much experience I have to teach 4 or 5 years to gain more experience. Yes, I need more experience, I think. (Azam)

The above excerpt reveals that although Azam believed she has "*the ability to help*" herself "*and become a better teacher,*" she immediately named experience as an important factor in helping her develop such capacity.

Motivational Factors: Motivational factors which implied a sense of self-satisfaction and love for teaching along with having the motivation to learn were specified by Somayeh, Raana, Masoomeh, Mobina, and Kimia. In this regard, Kimia remembered the time when she was completely frustrated

and wanted to abandon teaching as she failed to manage her classes despite all her attempts.

> *I really love teaching and being a teacher and this is always a motivation for me to keep going and improving myself. Once, I wanted to quit teaching because I could not succeed although I tried a lot. I was too sad but the love for teaching gave me the power to stay in the profession and continue.* (Kimia)

Here, she argued that she *"loves"* teaching and that this feeling acts as a *"motivation"* to assist her to *"keep going and improving"*. Therefore, her *"love for teaching"* has made her *"stay in the profession and continue"* notwithstanding the problems she has faced.

Likewise, Mobina referred to her dreams and pondered how motivation helped her develop the capacity to self-direct her PD.

> *From the time I remember I wished to be a teacher. In this very short time that I'm teaching I have experienced some moments that I wanted to quit teaching. But I stayed because I am so motivated to learn new things. I really like and want to learn new things. I cannot stop this feeling and it gives me the energy and the ability to become better and better.* (Mobina)

Mobina, who has always wished to be a teacher, has thought about quitting her dream job. However, being "*motivated to learn new things*" helped her develop her "*ability to become better and better.*"

Reading Books and Articles: Only Raheleh and Samira referred to reading books and articles as a factor contributing to their capacity

development. In this regard, Raheleh remembered the time she read a book and the effects it had on her capacity development:

> *When you read books and articles, you become aware of lots of issues. When I read a book by Kumara, I saw the gap between myself and who I can be. Then, I noticed a great power and ability in myself. I noticed I am able to and I really want to develop myself by the things I learned from the book. Sometimes I wish I had read more and more books.* (Raheleh)

Here, Raheleh explained how reading a book has made her realize her potentiality as she felt the ability and the willingness to "*develop*" herself. Additionally, she wished she could read "*more books.*"

Freedom from Control for Self-Directed Professional Development

The last research question aimed at discovering teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of their freedom from control for self-directed PD. While all the teachers claimed they had freedom to self-direct their PD, the obstacles to such freedom differed slightly. The analysis of their responses resulted in four obstacles depicted in Table 4.

Table 4
EFL Teachers' Narrative Accounts of Autonomy in Terms of Their Freedom from Control over PD

Theme	Teachers
Financial Problems	Raheleh, Samira, Somayeh, Raana, Azam
Conference Attendance	Raheleh, Somayeh

Lack of Time to Do Professional Development Activities	Mobina, Kimia
Rules and Regulations of the Institutes	Samira, Somayeh,Masoome

Financial Problems: As to the leading obstacle, most teachers narrated that they could do more for their PD if they did not have financial problems. For example, Azam had always wished to be an English teacher. These flames of passion made her change her major in university and study English.

> *I always like to be a teacher from the time I went to English classes. Also I'd like to teach only. But it is not well-paid. I can't buy the books I really like to read. I can't go to conferences. At the moment I'm working in a company to make more money. Of course, I try to attend all the workshops we have in our institute to learn more and more.* (Azam)

As it is clearly stated, what made her view teaching as a second job was the low payment she received. However, she did not stop teacher learning and attended all the workshops in order to "*learn more and more.*"

Conference Attendance: The second theme was underlined by Raheleh and Somayeh where they reported on the difficulty they had to commute to the venues of conferences as an obstacle for their PD.

> *Once there was a conference in Tehran and I decided to go. I arrived late and missed half of the conference. I made use of it but commuting is really important. I live in Karaj and all the conferences are in Tehran so it is difficult for me to attend them. Now I join some webinars to be in touch with the society of teachers.* (Somayeh)

Although Somayeh enjoyed conferences, she could not fully take advantage of them as the conference venues were far from the city she lived. Therefore, this obstacle deprived her of the freedom to self-direct her learning. However, she changed the problem into an opportunity by not missing any webinar.

Lack of Time to Do Professional Development Activities: Mobina and Kimia specified lack of time. Mobina, a university student who worked part-time at the time of the study, had enough time to self-direct PD. However, lack of time became an obstacle when she had exams at university:

> *This term I myself am too busy with my classes in university. I have many classes and I don't have time but I try to use Telegram channels to be in touch with teaching.* (Mobina)

Notwithstanding this hindrance, she tried to compensate for that by following teaching channels in social media.

Rules and Regulations of the Institute: Samira, Somayeh, and Masoome regarded the institute rules as the main barrier to PD. Samira, for example, pondering over the obstacles and remembered the rules of the institutes that did not allow her to observe a class.

> *There was a very good teacher in our institute. He taught advanced levels and I really wanted to see how he taught. I asked the supervisor to let me observe his class. But she didn't agree … I became very sad. We didn't teach the same level, I taught children and he taught advanced. Anyway, she didn't let me. Therefore, I got the permission and sat outside his class and observed him that way. I learned good techniques of class management that day.* (Samira)

Despite being rejected by the supervisor, Samira insisted on self-directing her PD and changing the obstacle into a learning opportunity, where she "*learned good techniques of class management*".

Discussion

Many studies have shed light on the concept of TA in terms of its relationship with learner autonomy (e.g., Kaplan, 2017; Yu, Wang, & Zhang, 2016). However, studies centered on TA and all its dimensions are rather scarce. Hence, the current study explored EFL teachers' narrative accounts of their autonomy in terms of self-direction, capacity, and freedom for PD, a component from Smith's (2003) framework of TA. The findings related to the study's first objective showed that EFL teachers undertook the activities of peer observation, peer coaching, using technology, continuing education, action research, interacting with professionals, and attending workshops to self-direct their PD. These findings are in line with Broad and Evans' (2006) review in which they listed PD practices. Researcher/practitioner and independent learning from their classification are comparable with four extracted themes of our study, embracing action research, peer observation, making use of technology, and attending workshops. Nevertheless, the present study uncovered peer coaching, continuing education, and interacting with professionals as other PD activities, absent in Broad and Evans's (2006) classification. Furthermore, the findings are in agreement with those of Richards and Farrell (2005) where they referred to attending a workshop, peer observation, peer coaching, and action research as teachers' PD strategies.

The findings related to peer observation revealed that the teachers experienced teacher learning, e.g., time management, due to the implementation of peer coaching. This is supported by Bell and Mladenovic

(2015), who reported the effectiveness of peer observation on teachers' PD and maintained that this PD activity led to reflection, conceptual growth, and modifications to practice. Besides, the teachers of the current study highly valued the constructive role of peer observation in their PD, which contradicts Santos and Miguel's (2016) findings. Their study, which aimed to explore teachers' beliefs about peer observation in Hong Kong, revealed that although the teachers were aware of the advantages of peer observation, they postponed employing it until they were under pressure by the schools to undertake it. It was also revealed that the teachers applied peer observation to please their school authorities, which is in contrast to our teachers, who appreciated peer observation to the extent that they did it voluntarily. As to peer coaching, our findings showed that the teachers' application of this PD strategy resulted in teacher learning, i.e., class management, which is supported by Parker et al. (2014), Thurlings and den Brok (2017), and Alsaleh et al. (2017). Alsaleh et al. (2017) pointed to teacher learning and autonomy development as a result of applying a cycle of peer coaching on 12 teachers in Kuwait. Further, they suggested that peer observation should become an obligatory part of the education system due to its salient role in teachers' PD. Likewise, Castañeda-Londoño (2017) investigated teachers' ideas about peer coaching and found out that teachers valued peer coaching as a PD activity as it engaged them in in-depth teacher learning. Similar to our findings, they maintained that peer coaching proved to help teachers learn new techniques. Regarding technology, the finding resonates with Rosell-Aguilar's (2018) study, which reported on the effectiveness of social media in teachers' PD. While the teachers of our study did not refer to collaborative learning through technology use, the teachers in Rosell-Aguilar's study enjoyed being members of a group and learning collaboratively. Overall, both studies indicated that the teachers

viewed technology as an inseparable part of their PD. Supporting our findings, Visser et al.'s (2014) study confirmed the effect of technology on teachers' PD and reported teacher learning in the lesson plan, teaching practice, online learning resources, and pedagogical knowledge. They also announced that one of the advantages of technology use was that the teachers would self-select the domains in which they like to do teacher learning.

As to action research, whereas many scholars have recognized the contribution of action research as a PD activity (e.g., Al-Mahdi, 2019; Cordingley, 2015; Ulvik & Riese, 2015), only two teachers of the current study underlined it. Being in touch with professionals, on the other hand, has been supported by Dierking and Fox (2013), who examined how mentoring and being in contact with professionals would lead to PD. In this longitudinal study, the authors collected data from eight teachers, using interviews, surveys, observations, and teachers' conversations with the professional coaches. The findings uncovered that the teachers benefited considerably from the mentoring process and being in touch with the professionals. Additionally, they argued that interaction with professionals led to teacher learning, which, in turn, helped teachers gain confidence. Those teachers whose knowledge was increased felt more self-confident and supported. Concerning workshops, Sehrawat (2014) argued that TA can be developed by attending workshops. Abu-Tineh and Sadiq (2018) argued that workshops are not good PD activities as there is usually a lack of reflection.

The second purpose of the current study was to investigate if EFL teachers had the capacity to engage in self-directed PD and what factors afforded this capability. The fact that all the teachers confirmed their ability and their willingness to develop this capacity can be used as a modification of Smith's (2003) framework, which concentrated on teachers' capacity only and

ignored their willingness to self-direct their PD. Gottesman (2000) similarly viewed willingness as a central characteristic of a teacher who attempts to learn. The analysis of the gathered data in this part of the study led to the discovery of external support, experience, psychological factors, and reading books and articles as factors that afforded them the capacity for PD. As to the value of external guidance, Grant et al.'s (2020) newly proposed framework of TA placed assistance among the main factor enabling teachers to move towards PD. This scaffolding has the potential to support teachers' needs, help them experience PD, and increase their sense of self-satisfaction. Moreover, they proclaimed that as support encourages collaborative learning and, in turn, collegiality, it would lead to teacher retention too. They argued that the teachers provided with constructive guidance successfully address lifelong plans. Besides, external support indicates that learning, here teacher learning, is a social process (Vygotsky, 1978) during which teachers share knowledge and learn in collaboration. These interactions allow teachers to know each other and build strong collegial relationships (Hord & Tobia, 2012), which, in turn, can be beneficial for their lifelong journey of PD. Regarding experience, Richards and Farrell (2005) argued that teachers' personal experience has a principal role in their self-directed teacher learning as it can become the "stimulus for learning" (p. 14). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) pinpointed how experience can be useful for the forthcoming flow of information. The findings related to motivational factors are in line with Vermunt and Endedijk's (2011) study, which has also placed psychological factors like motivation in their four-component model of teacher learning. Their argument that teachers' learning and regulation activities are directly controlled by their beliefs and motivation confirms our psychological factors.

As to the last aim of the study, the findings revealed that all the teachers had the freedom to self-direct their PD but faced some constraints relevant to financial problems, conference attendance, lack of time to do PD activities, and rules of the institutes. As to rules and regulations, Benson (2000) and Körkkö et al. (2020) named school rules as an obstacle for teachers' PD. Likewise, Seyma Dogan and Yagiz (2015) referred to financial problems and lack of external support from the institutes as impediments to teachers' PD. Despite all the barriers, the teachers of the present study attempted to find solutions and make opportunities for their PD, which is supported by Lamb's (2000) suggestion that teachers have to be aware of the hindrances to their autonomy and try to find opportunities to help themselves develop professionally.

Conclusion

This study revealed EFL teachers' autonomy in terms of their self-direction, capacity, and freedom for PD. The findings showed that the teachers used certain strategies to self-direct their PD. The most favorite activity was peer observation, while the least favorite ones included continuing education, action research, interacting with professionals, and attending workshops. Moreover, the findings revealed that continuing education and action research were used only by the participants with an M.A. degree. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a connection between continuing education and PD activities. Regarding capacity for PD, the teachers pointed to both their capacity and willingness to self-direct their PD. This can be considered a modification of the original framework in which Smith (2003) merely referred to teachers' ability to self-direct PD. However, the teachers of the current study distinctly named both their capability and willingness to do teacher

learning. Additionally, from the four extracted themes, external support was the most beneficial in helping teachers develop such capacity, indicating that the teachers preferred learning in a social process. Further, the findings suggest that teachers knew about the obstacles on their way to PD and employed certain strategies to empower themselves for this journey.

The first implication of this study is for teacher educators, teachers, and institute managers. They can make teachers conscious of their own power and agency by making them aware of the significance of self-directed PD and TA. The second implication is the need to make teachers aware of different strategies they could employ for their PD, which can be achieved through strategy training courses. Teachers should learn about different PD activities and pursue PD despite the barriers they might face. Moreover, institute managers should set the stage for setting sessions where teachers can freely talk about their PD activities, needs, and the ways in which institutes can help them.

This study suffered from limitations. The first limitation was the number of participants. More informative results will be gained if more participants are invited for future research. The second limitation is that all the participants were institute teachers. Different results might be gained if state school teachers are studied. Moreover, as the participants were only female, further studies are required to be conducted on male teachers. Some comparative studies regarding age, teaching experience, gender, state school vs. institute teachers could be conducted.

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