

Investigating the Role of Secondary Language Teachers in Promoting Autonomy in the English Language Classroom

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Article Details:

Received: 16 April 2026

Revised: 18 April 2026

Accepted: 20 April 2026

Published: 26 April 2026

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Recommended Citation:

Agot, MC. J. (2026). Investigating the Role of Secondary Language Teachers in Promoting Autonomy in the English Language Classroom. *The International Review of Multidisciplinary Research*. 1 (4), 422-429.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19785568>

Index Terms:

learner autonomy, english language teaching, secondary education, teacher roles, classroom management

Abstract. Learner autonomy has gained increasing prominence in contemporary English language education as schools shift toward learner-centered and lifelong learning orientations. In this context, teachers are expected to assume expanded roles that support students' capacity to manage and direct their own learning. This study examined the role of secondary English language teachers in promoting learner autonomy, with particular focus on their functions as facilitators, counselors, resource providers, and classroom managers. A descriptive survey research design was employed to capture teachers' classroom practices, perceived challenges, and suggested approaches related to autonomy-oriented instruction. Data were gathered through a researcher-adapted questionnaire based on Alonazi's (2017) framework and administered to a purposive sample of ten English teachers, consisting of five Junior High School and five Senior High School teachers from a public secondary school in Bukidnon, Philippines. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze the responses. Findings revealed that teachers frequently engaged in practices supportive of learner autonomy across all four roles. Classroom management and counseling emerged as the most strongly performed functions, reflected in teachers' consistent provision of clear task instructions, opportunities for student voice, study planning guidance, and supportive feedback. Despite these positive practices, teachers identified persistent challenges, including students limited autonomous learning skills, inadequate use of technology in instruction, and a lack of specialized training related to autonomy-supportive pedagogy. Teachers strongly agreed that continuous reflective practice, targeted professional development, and greater institutional flexibility are essential to strengthening learner autonomy. The study underscores the multifaceted role of secondary English language teachers in fostering learner autonomy and highlights the need for sustained professional and institutional support to ensure the effective development of autonomous learners in secondary education contexts.

Introduction

Learner autonomy has remained a central concern in language education, receiving renewed scholarly attention in recent decades as institutions increasingly emphasize learner-centered and lifelong learning approaches. Contemporary research conceptualizes learner autonomy as learners' capacity to take responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning processes through informed decision-making and self-regulation (Teng, 2019; Alrabai, 2021). Rather than viewing autonomy as complete learner independence, recent scholars stress its dynamic and socially mediated nature, shaped by instructional contexts, teacher support, and learner agency (Oxford, 2018; Little, 2020).

Recent studies highlight learner autonomy as a multidimensional construct integrating metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral components. Teng and Zhang (2020) argued that autonomy involves learners' ability to set goals, select strategies, and reflect critically on learning outcomes. Similarly, Oxford (2018) emphasized that autonomy develops through guided practice, collaborative interaction, and scaffolded support, particularly in foreign language classrooms. These perspectives position autonomy as a developmental capacity rather than an innate learner trait.

The growing interest in learner autonomy is closely linked to its educational benefits. Empirical evidence demonstrates that autonomy enhances learner motivation, engagement, language achievement, and lifelong learning skills (Teng, 2019; Alrabai, 2021). Autonomous learners are more capable of transferring learning strategies beyond classroom contexts, adapting to new learning demands, and sustaining motivation over time (Nguyen & Habók, 2021). Furthermore, in an era of rapid technological and societal change, autonomy has been identified as essential for learners' adaptability and academic resilience (OECD, 2020).

Within this framework, teachers play a pivotal role in the development of learner autonomy, particularly in secondary education where learners are still acquiring self-regulated learning skills. Recent literature consistently emphasizes that autonomy does not emerge without pedagogical support; rather, it is cultivated through autonomy-supportive teaching (Reeve, 2018; Alrabai, 2021). Teachers' instructional choices, classroom discourse, and attitudes toward learner responsibility significantly influence the extent to which autonomy is realized in practice (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2019; Teng, 2022).

Contemporary research identifies multiple teacher roles that facilitate learner autonomy. Studies in EFL and secondary contexts show that teachers act as facilitators, counselors, resources, and managers, each role contributing uniquely to autonomy development (Wiraningsih & Dewi, 2020; Nurkamto, 2021; Azhariah et al., 2023). As facilitators, teachers design learner-centered tasks, encourage choice, and promote reflection and strategy use (Teng & Zhang, 2020). In their counseling role, teachers provide feedback, emotional support, and individualized guidance, helping learners overcome challenges and build confidence in self-directed learning (Reeve, 2018; Alrabai, 2021).

Teachers also function as resource providers by guiding learners toward appropriate learning materials, digital tools, and independent learning strategies, especially in technology-enhanced environments (Nguyen & Habók, 2021; Susanti et al., 2023). As managers or organizers, teachers structure classroom activities, clarify learning objectives, and create opportunities for student voice and shared decision-making, which are crucial for cultivating responsibility and agency among learners (Teng, 2019; Belmekki & Baghzou, 2022).

Despite the recognized importance of learner autonomy, recent studies reveal persistent challenges in its implementation. These include learners' limited self-regulated learning skills, exam-oriented educational cultures, insufficient technological resources, and teachers' lack of practical training in autonomy-supportive pedagogy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2019; Belmekki & Baghzou, 2022; Algwil, 2024). Teacher beliefs remain a determining factor: educators who hold traditional, teacher-centered views often struggle to relinquish control or involve students in decision-making (Alwasidi & Alnaeem, 2022; Teng, 2022).

Despite these challenges, there is a growing call for context-specific research focusing on how teachers perceive and enact their roles in promoting autonomy, particularly at the secondary level where empirical evidence remains limited. While existing studies largely focus on university contexts, fewer investigations examine secondary school English classrooms, where learners' autonomy is still emerging and highly dependent on teacher support.

Given this context, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how secondary school English language teachers promote learner autonomy in classroom practice. Specifically, it investigates teachers' roles as facilitators, counselors, resource providers, and managers, as well as the challenges they encounter in fostering learner autonomy among secondary learners.

Methodology

Research Design

For this study, the researcher used a descriptive survey approach. According to Babbie (2019, p. 45), descriptive research focuses on documenting the traits, actions, attitudes, or viewpoints of a certain population, group, or phenomena. Moreover, the descriptive technique is suited for addressing the research questions and determining the research outcomes since this study focuses on the real roles that English language teachers perform in encouraging learner autonomy.

Participants / Sampling

The study was carried out among secondary English language teachers at one of the public schools in Bukidnon. Five (5) junior high school and five (5) senior high school teachers make up the research sample. In this study, gender is not considered a variable. The present study is conducted during the academic year 2022-2023. The participants' educational backgrounds and teaching experiences vary.

Data Gathering Procedure

For the data gathering procedure, the researcher observed the following process. A letter of permission was sent to the school principal to conduct the said research. After the approval, the respondents were provided a permission letter notifying them of the study's objective. After the proper protocol was followed, the implementation of the study was done.

Instrument

The research instrument employed in this study was a questionnaire adapted from the validated instrument developed by Alonazi (2017), which examined the roles of teachers in promoting learner autonomy. The adaptation process was carried out to ensure the instrument's relevance to the secondary English language classroom and its alignment with the specific objectives of the present study. Minor revisions were made to the wording of selected items to reflect the context of Philippine public secondary schools, while the original structure and core constructs of the instrument were maintained. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part included 20 items that measured teachers' roles in fostering learner autonomy, organized into four domains: facilitator, counselor, resource provider, and classroom manager. Teachers were asked to indicate the frequency with which they implemented each practice in their classrooms using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *always* (1) to *never* (5).

The second part comprised five items designed to identify perceived constraints that hinder the development of learner autonomy. These items were rated using a five-point agreement scale. The third part consisted of four items that elicited teachers' perceptions of the most effective approaches to promoting learner autonomy within their instructional context.

The adapted questionnaire was administered to secondary English language teachers and served as the primary data-gathering instrument. It was used to obtain quantitative data on teachers' autonomy-promoting practices, the challenges they encounter, and their perceived support needs in fostering learner autonomy.

Results and Discussion

No	Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Description	Ranking
1	Helping students to set up their own learning objectives.	4.00	0.94	Often	4
2	Helping students select their learning materials.	4.20	0.79	Often	3
3	Helping students to evaluate their own learning and progress.	4.40	0.52	Always	1.5
4	Encouraging students to reflect on their learning process.	4.40	0.70	Always	1.5
Overall		4.25	0.58	Always	

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Never, 1.81-2.60- Seldom, 2.61-3.40- Occasionally, 3.41-4.20- Often, 4.21-5.00- Always

Table 1. Teacher's Role as Facilitator

Table 1 reveals the frequency with which English language teachers performed their role as facilitators in promoting learner autonomy. Consistently demonstrating facilitative practices, the teachers garnered an overall mean of 4.25, interpreted as always. Among the four items, encouraging students to reflect on their learning process and helping them evaluate their own progress emerged as the most frequently practiced behaviors, both receiving the highest mean scores, while helping students set their own learning objectives and select their learning materials, though slightly lower, were still performed frequently. These results are telling — when teachers guide learners to assess their own progress and think critically about how they learn, they nurture metacognitive awareness that is central to autonomous learning. This finding aligns with Alonazi (2017), who asserts that a teacher who genuinely facilitates autonomy prioritizes encouraging students' decision-making over simply directing them, affirming that facilitation is not a passive role but an intentional and transformative pedagogical commitment. Similarly, Benson (2022) reinforces that reflective practices embedded in everyday classroom interactions are among the most effective tools teachers have in developing students who are capable of managing their own learning independently and confidently.

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Description	Ranking
5	Making students aware of the skills and strategies needed to learn on their own.	4.51	0.71	Always	3
6	Identifying psychological problems that inhibit students' progress.	4.10	0.88	Often	5

7	Making dialogues with students to find solutions for their learning difficulties.	4.50	0.85	Always	4
8	Encouraging students to make study plans.	4.80	0.42	Always	1
9	Being positive and supportive, especially when giving feedback	4.60	0.70	Always	2
Overall		4.50	0.62	Always	

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Never, 1.81-2.60- Seldom, 2.61-3.40- Occasionally, 3.41-4.20- Often, 4.21-5.00- Always

Table 2. Teacher's Role as Councilor

Beyond facilitation, the data in Table 2 further illustrate how the sampled teachers consistently provided emotional and academic guidance, reflected in an overall mean of 4.50, interpreted as always. Encouraging students to make study plans and being positive and supportive when giving feedback ranked highest among the five items, followed closely by making students aware of the strategies needed to learn independently. Notably, identifying psychological problems that inhibit students' progress was the only item rated often, suggesting that while teachers are broadly supportive and encouraging, addressing deeper psychological barriers may require more specialized training and stronger institutional support. This finding is particularly meaningful in the context of learner autonomy, as students who feel emotionally secure and academically guided are far more likely to take ownership of their learning. As Nakata (2020) observed, the affective dimension of teaching — including how teachers respond to students' emotional needs and learning difficulties — plays a decisive role in shaping learners' willingness and capacity to become autonomous. The counseling role, therefore, is not merely supplementary to instruction; it is foundational to building the kind of learner confidence and resilience that self-directed learning ultimately requires.

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Description	Ranking
10	Suggesting tools and techniques for self-assessment.	4.50	0.71	Always	2
11	Using computer-based learning materials.	4.20	0.92	Often	6
12	Selecting and evaluating resources according to students' needs and levels.	4.32	0.95	Always	3
13	Suggesting websites, videos, or online dictionaries that motivate students to use the target language outside the classroom.	4.30	1.06	Always	4.5
14	Encouraging students to read English books, magazines, and newspapers outside the classroom.	4.30	1.08	Always	4.5
15	Encouraging students to study with their peers.	4.90	0.32	Always	1
Overall		4.42	0.73	Always	

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Never, 1.81-2.60- Seldom, 2.61-3.40- Occasionally, 3.41-4.20- Often, 4.21-5.00- Always

Table 3. Teacher's Role as Resource

Complementing their facilitative and counseling functions, Table 3 demonstrates how the sampled teachers also served as active learning resources, earning an overall mean of 4.42, interpreted as always. Encouraging students to study with their peers ranked highest, followed by suggesting self-assessment tools and selecting materials appropriate to students' needs and proficiency levels. A closer look at the data, however, reveals a notable exception — the use of computer-based learning materials was the only item rated often, pointing to possible constraints in technology access or digital integration within the local school context. This gap deserves serious attention, particularly as digital tools have become indispensable in extending language learning beyond the physical classroom. Reinders and Benson (2017) affirm that teachers who function effectively as resources in the digital age go beyond sharing print-based materials—they actively guide learners toward online environments, digital platforms, and technology-enhanced experiences that make independent language use that is both accessible and sustainable. Schools that invest in digital infrastructure and equip their teachers with the competencies to integrate technology purposefully into instruction stand to significantly expand students' opportunities for autonomous and self-directed learning.

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Description	Ranking
16	Organizing different kinds of games and activities in the classroom.	4.30	0.82	Always	5
17	Providing clear instructions on the tasks assigned to students.	4.60	0.70	Always	2

18	Explaining the purposes and the significance of the tasks assigned to students.	4.60	0.52	Always	2
19	Giving learners opportunities to tell their opinions in classroom management.	4.50	0.53	Always	4
20	Giving learners opportunities to tell their opinions in their learning activities.	4.60	0.52	Always	2
Overall		4.52	0.52	Always	

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Never, 1.81-2.60- Seldom, 2.61-3.40- Occasionally, 3.41-4.20- Often, 4.21-5.00- Always

Table 4. Teacher's Role as Manager

Notably, the highest overall mean among the four roles belonged to classroom management, as shown in Table 4, where all five items were consistently rated always, yielding a mean of 4.52. Providing clear instructions for assigned tasks, explaining the purpose and significance of those tasks, and giving learners opportunities to voice their opinions in learning activities ranked at the top. What makes this finding particularly significant is not simply the high scores, but what they reveal about the nature of effective autonomy-promoting teaching—that structure and student agency are not in opposition but are deeply complementary. Teachers who establish clear expectations while simultaneously creating space for learner input build the kind of organized yet empowering classroom environment in which autonomy can genuinely take root and grow. This resonates with Little et al. (2017), who emphasize that students are not inherently self-directed; rather, they develop autonomy within well-managed learning environments that carefully scaffold independence while progressively and deliberately transferring responsibility to the learner over time.

N	Role	Mean	SD	Ranking
1	Facilitator	4.25	0.58	4
2	Counselor	4.50	0.62	2
3	Resource	4.42	0.73	3
4	Manager	4.52	0.52	1

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Never, 1.81-2.60- Seldom, 2.61-3.40- Occasionally, 3.41-4.20- Often, 4.21-5.00- Always

Table 5. Summary on Roles of Teachers in Developing Learner Autonomy

Taken together, Table 5 presents a coherent and encouraging picture of how English language teachers in public secondary schools perform across all four autonomy-promoting roles. Ranked from highest to lowest, teachers performed most strongly as managers, (M=4.52), followed by counselors (M=4.50), resources, (M=4.42), and facilitators (M=4.25) — all consistently falling within the "always" range. While the differences in means are modest, their significance lies in what they collectively affirm: that promoting learner autonomy is not the product of a single teaching behavior but the cumulative result of sustained, multidimensional engagement across complementary roles. This is consistent with Alonazi (2017), who positions the autonomy-promoting teacher as one who fluidly integrates the functions of facilitator, counselor, and resource into their daily practice. The present study extends this framework by foregrounding classroom management as an equally vital dimension. For teachers and school administrators alike, these results serve as a compelling reminder that nurturing autonomous learners demands a holistic, role-integrated approach to teaching—one that cannot be reduced to isolated strategies or occasional interventions.

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Description	Ranking
21	Students lack the skills for autonomous learning.	4.10	0.57	Agree	1
22	Teachers lack the essential strategies to promote learner autonomy.	3.70	0.95	Agree	3
23	Teachers themselves are not autonomous.	3.20	1.40	Neutral	5
24	Technology is not effectively implemented in language learning.	3.90	0.74	Agree	2
25	Rules and regulations of the schools restrict the teachers' freedom in making choices regarding their teaching.	3.40	1.17	Neutral	4
Overall		3.66	0.79	Agree	

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Strongly disagree, 1.81-2.60- Disagree, 2.61-3.40- Neutral, 3.41-4.20- Agree, 4.21-5.00- Strongly agree

Table 6. Challenges that English Language teachers meet in promoting learner autonomy

Despite the consistently strong performance across all four roles, the findings in Table 6 surface a set of real and pressing challenges that introduce important nuance into an otherwise optimistic picture. With an overall mean of 3.66, interpreted as "agree," teachers acknowledged that several barriers continue to hinder the development of learner autonomy in their classrooms. The most pressing concern was the perceived lack of autonomous learning skills among students, followed by the ineffective integration of technology in language instruction and insufficient strategies among teachers themselves for promoting autonomy. Two items — institutional rules that restrict teacher freedom and the belief that teachers themselves are not fully autonomous — were rated neutral, reflecting more divided and cautious opinions on these matters. These findings introduce a significant tension worth reflecting on: teachers report high levels of autonomy-promoting practice, yet simultaneously perceive their students as underprepared for independent learning. As Utami et al. (2023) suggest, this gap may reflect a broader conceptual ambiguity surrounding learner autonomy — teachers may be enacting autonomy-supportive behaviors without fully recognizing or naming them as such, which in turn limits their ability to build on and deepen those practices intentionally. Addressing this gap calls for more targeted professional development programs that help teachers not only implement but also critically understand the principles underlying autonomous learning.

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Verbal Description	Ranking
26	Introducing learner autonomy to Teachers	4.30	0.48	Strongly Agree	4
27	Offering teachers with professional development programs on learner autonomy	4.30	0.48	Strongly Agree	3
28	Reducing the institutional rules that restrict teacher autonomy.	4.20	0.63	Agree	1.5
29	Teachers' continuous reflection and analysis of their own teaching process.	4.40	0.52	Strongly Agree	1.5
Overall		4.30	0.42	Strongly Agree	

Legend: 1.0-1.80- Strongly disagree, 1.81-2.60- Disagree, 2.61-3.40- Neutral, 3.41-4.20- Agree, 4.21-5.00- Strongly agree

Table 7. Approaches that help English language teachers promote learner autonomy

Mindful of these challenges, the teachers in Table 7 expressed strong agreement on the approaches they believe can meaningfully advance learner autonomy, reflected in an overall mean of 4.30, interpreted as "strongly agree." Teachers' continuous reflection on their own teaching practices ranked highest, affirming that self-aware and critically engaged teachers are far better positioned to cultivate the same reflective habits in their students. Offering professional development programs on learner autonomy and formally introducing the concept to teachers followed closely, while reducing institutional restrictions on teacher autonomy, though ranking lowest, was still firmly and meaningfully endorsed.

These results carry clear and actionable practical implications: promoting learner autonomy is not a classroom-level endeavor alone — it requires deliberate, sustained, and systemic institutional investment. As Little et al. (2017) argued, autonomous learning must be supported by autonomous teaching, and autonomous teaching can only flourish within an institutional culture that genuinely values and protects teacher agency. This view is further reinforced by Benson (2022), who underscores that teachers empowered to reflect critically on and continuously refine their own practices are ultimately the most effective and enduring cultivators of learner independence. What this study makes visible, then, is both the remarkable strength of English language teachers as frontline agents of learner autonomy and the broader systemic conditions that must be thoughtfully put in place—at the school, institutional, and policy levels—to allow that strength to deepen, sustain, and truly transform the learning experiences of the students they serve.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine the roles that English language teachers in public secondary schools play in promoting learner autonomy, and what it found is both encouraging and instructive. Across all four dimensions investigated—facilitation, counseling, resource provision, and classroom management—teachers consistently demonstrated autonomy-promoting practices, all rated within the "always" range. Of these, classroom management emerged as the most prominently performed role, though the narrow differences across all four dimensions suggest that these roles do not operate in isolation but rather work in concert, reinforcing one another in the daily rhythm of classroom life. Teachers who help students set learning goals, reflect on their progress, plan their studies, seek out resources, and participate meaningfully in classroom decisions are not performing separate tasks — they are, collectively, building the conditions under which autonomous learning becomes possible.

Equally important are the study's findings on the challenges and approaches surrounding learner autonomy. While teachers acknowledged barriers such as students limited autonomous learning skills, the underutilization of technology, and gaps in their own pedagogical preparation, they also expressed strong agreement on the value of continuous reflection,

professional development, and greater institutional flexibility as pathways forward. This layered picture—of teachers who are already doing meaningful work yet navigating real and persistent constraints—captures something honest and important about the state of learner autonomy in the secondary school context. Autonomy is not an endpoint that has been reached; it is a direction that is being actively pursued, and the teachers in this study are among its most committed navigators.

The implications of these findings extend well beyond the classroom walls. For teachers, the most immediate takeaway is the value of intentionality—of not only practicing autonomy-promoting behaviors but also consciously recognizing, naming, and building upon them. Teachers who understand the full scope of their roles as facilitators, counselors, resources, and managers are better equipped to make deliberate instructional choices that deepen rather than merely maintain learner independence. Reflective practice, as the study's respondents themselves affirmed, is one of the most powerful tools available — and it costs nothing but the willingness to look honestly at one's own teaching and ask what more can be done.

For school administrators and policymakers, the findings call for a more enabling institutional environment. Reducing bureaucratic restrictions that limit teacher autonomy, investing in relevant and sustained professional development programs, and integrating technology meaningfully into language instruction are not peripheral concerns — they are structural prerequisites for a school culture in which both teachers and learners can genuinely thrive. A teacher who is trusted, supported, and professionally empowered is far more likely to pass those same qualities on to the students in their care. Autonomous teaching, as the literature and this study both affirm, is the most natural and enduring foundation for autonomous learning.

Ultimately, what this study affirms is that the promotion of learner autonomy in the secondary English language classroom is neither a distant ideal nor an unrealistic expectation—it is already happening, carried forward by teachers who show up every day and play far more roles than they are often given credit for. What remains is to deepen that work, to support the people doing it, and to build the kind of schools where independence — in teachers and in learners alike — is not simply encouraged but genuinely made possible.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the colleagues and institutional partners whose insightful guidance and constructive feedback were instrumental in the development of this research. Their support throughout the investigative process and the refinement of this manuscript has been invaluable. Notwithstanding this collective assistance, any remaining errors, omissions, or inaccuracies are the sole responsibility of the author.

Funding

This research was conducted without external financial assistance. No grants or sponsorships were received from public, commercial, or non-profit funding agencies to support the study's design, authorship, or the publication of this article.

Competing Interests Statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest. There are no financial, professional, or personal affiliations that could be viewed as having influenced the integrity or objectivity of the research presented in this study.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no original datasets were generated or analyzed. All empirical evidence and information utilized in this study were derived from existing, peer-reviewed literature and publicly available sources, all of which are documented in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.