

Learner Autonomy in Online EFL Teaching: Desirability and Feasibility from University Instructors' Perspectives

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is widely recognized as an important goal in language education, yet its practical implementation may remain challenging, particularly in online teaching contexts. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examined EFL instructors' views about the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy and the factors that might explain the discrepancy between these perceptions. Quantitative data were collected from 69 EFL instructors using an adapted questionnaire, followed by semi-structured interviews with four instructors. The findings showed that learner autonomy was perceived as significantly more desirable than feasible. Qualitative findings identified five groups of constraints related to instructors, students, institutions, curriculum, and the online teaching context. Overall, the findings suggest that positive perceptions of learner autonomy do not necessarily correspond to perceptions of its feasibility and highlight the importance of learner readiness, teacher autonomy, institutional support, curricular flexibility, and appropriate online learning conditions. The findings have implications for teachers, institutions, and the design of curricula and online learning environments.

Key Words: learner autonomy, desirability, feasibility, EFL instructors, online EFL teaching



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1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of unprecedented access to information, the ability to identify where and how to find relevant information, determine how to learn from it, and evaluate one's own learning has become increasingly important. This is particularly relevant for foreign language learning, in which learners have a broad set of linguistic resources and learning opportunities beyond language learning classrooms. As language learning increasingly extends beyond the boundaries of formal classroom instruction, the need for taking more responsibility for one's own learning becomes more visible and vital for success in language learning. This ability is closely associated with learner autonomy, which refers to "the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (Little, 1991, p. 4). Learner autonomy in the language learning context refers to the ability to take responsibility for defining learning goals, selecting effective strategies, monitoring development, and evaluating the outcomes of learning. The importance of learner autonomy in language learning has also been clearly demonstrated in recent research (Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıklı, 2019; Namaziandost et al., 2024; Saral & Balçıklı, 2026).

In terms of language learning, language teachers are instrumental in fostering and supporting learner autonomy (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Research on learner autonomy has shown that teachers can create environments where students are encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning (Işık & Balçıklı, 2020). Benson (2011) argued that learner autonomy is not a natural attribute of a learner but a feature that could be gained by the learner in the learning process. In this respect, teachers can increase the level of autonomy by involving learners in decision-making processes in language teaching and stimulating independent language practice out of class.

However, teachers' recognition of the importance of learner autonomy does not necessarily guarantee the successful implementation of autonomy-supportive practices in their classrooms. In other words, even if they wish to adopt practices promoting autonomous learning, the implementation of these practices can be complex and challenging. Reinders and Balçıklı (2011) argued that teacher autonomy and teachers' knowledge and skills related to learner autonomy are important for their ability to foster learner autonomy. This suggests that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and pedagogical competence are important conditions for the effective promotion of learner autonomy. However, teachers' capacity to foster autonomy is not the only factor determining whether autonomy-supportive practices can be successfully implemented. Previous research has identified a range of contextual and learner-related factors that may constrain teachers' efforts to promote learner autonomy, including students' readiness for autonomous learning, curriculum requirements, assessment practices, institutional expectations, and limited time and resources (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Boudouaia et al., 2022; Senouci, 2018). For instance, although teachers may value students' involvement in decision-making, they may perceive such practices as difficult to implement when students are accustomed to teacher-directed learning or when curricular and assessment requirements leave limited room for learner choice.

Thus, the promotion of learner autonomy involves not only teachers' willingness to support it, but also their perceptions of what is feasible within their teaching contexts. The distinction between the desirability of learner autonomy and its feasibility in practice suggests that teachers' perceptions should be examined not only in terms of the extent to which they value learner autonomy, but also in terms of whether they perceive its promotion as feasible within their particular teaching contexts. This distinction between the desirability of learner autonomy and its feasibility in practice becomes particularly significant in online teaching contexts, where teaching and learning processes are mediated primarily through digital technologies. In such environments, learners may need to assume greater responsibility for managing their time, organizing learning resources, monitoring their progress, and regulating their engagement with learning tasks (Susanti et al., 2023). In the present study, online teaching refers to instructional practices conducted through digital technologies in which teachers and learners interact without sharing the same physical classroom, either synchronously or asynchronously.

From teachers' perspectives, promoting learner autonomy may require the adoption of student-centered approaches and the provision of appropriate activities, materials, and instructions that enable learners to exercise greater control and responsibility over their learning (Reinders & White, 2016). While online teaching may therefore create conditions that make learner autonomy particularly relevant, it may also present a range of challenges that constrain teachers' efforts to promote it. Previous research has identified various learner-related, pedagogical, technological, and contextual factors that may hinder the implementation of autonomy-supportive practices in

online teaching environments (Golzar et al., 2024; Susanti et al., 2023). These include learners' limited experience with independent learning, low motivation and engagement, difficulties with self-regulation, technological limitations, and teachers' challenges in adapting their pedagogical practices to online settings. Thus, although learner autonomy may be particularly desirable in online teaching contexts, its desirability does not necessarily indicate that teachers perceive its promotion as feasible.

Despite the growing body of research on learner autonomy in online language education, there remains a need for a more nuanced understanding of teachers' views about the desirability and feasibility of promoting learner autonomy in such contexts. While previous studies have examined teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and identified various challenges that may constrain its implementation, limited attention has been given to the discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy, particularly in online teaching contexts, and to the factors that might explain this discrepancy. Examining this discrepancy is important because teachers may value learner autonomy while simultaneously perceiving its implementation as difficult or constrained by contextual factors. A discrepancy between desirability and feasibility may therefore provide important insights into the conditions under which teachers can translate their positive beliefs about learner autonomy into practice.

Against this background, the present study aims to investigate EFL instructors' views about the desirability and feasibility of promoting learner autonomy in an online teaching context. Specifically, the study examines the extent to which learner autonomy is perceived as desirable and feasible and investigates whether there is a significant difference between instructors' perceptions of its desirability and feasibility. The study further explores the factors that might explain the discrepancy between these perceptions.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do EFL instructors perceive learner autonomy as desirable in online teaching contexts?
2. To what extent do EFL instructors perceive learner autonomy as feasible in online teaching contexts?
3. Is there a significant difference between EFL instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in online teaching contexts?
4. What factors might explain the discrepancy between the perceived desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in online teaching contexts?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner autonomy, which has gained increasing significance with the rise of learner-centred approaches in language education, is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). It plays a key role in language learning, as autonomous learners are considered better able to cope with obstacles that may diminish their motivation (Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıklanlı, 2019). Additionally, according to Little (2003), effective communication requires complex procedural skills that develop through language use. Learners who exercise greater social autonomy within their learning environments may therefore be better equipped to communicate effectively. The literature also suggests that autonomy should not necessarily be understood as a teaching approach or considered simply as a kind of self-directed learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). It mostly means that an autonomous learner can organize and evaluate his/her own learning process effectively with the guidance of a teacher.

Building on this conceptualization, the present study views learner autonomy as a developable and context-dependent capacity whose realization is shaped by learners' willingness and ability to assume responsibility, teacher support, and the pedagogical and contextual conditions in which learning takes place (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991). Within this perspective, Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) distinction between the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy provides the conceptual framework for examining instructors' perceptions in the present study. Accordingly, this framework guides the examination of learners' involvement in decision-making and their capacity to assume greater responsibility for learning and helps interpret the discrepancy between the perceived desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in online EFL teaching.

Teachers are major supporters of learner autonomy in the language teaching process. Reinders and Balçıklanlı (2011) emphasize that teachers play a crucial role in fostering learner autonomy as their

understanding of autonomy and their pedagogical knowledge and skills are essential for creating learning opportunities that enable students to develop greater control over their own learning. Teachers can foster learner autonomy by involving learners in decision-making, providing guidance and advice, encouraging peer collaboration, and supporting them in setting goals, monitoring their learning, and evaluating their progress (Reinders & Balçıklanl, 2011; Işık & Balçıklanl, 2020). Teachers are not simply facilitators who provide opportunities for autonomy; their beliefs about learners' abilities, their own role, and the feasibility of autonomy-supportive practices can shape how autonomy is promoted. Thus, teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy may influence not only whether they value autonomy, but also whether they view autonomy-supportive practices as possible in their teaching contexts.

In that vein, Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) argued that previous research has generally reported positive teacher attitudes towards learner autonomy (Nakata, 2011; Duong, 2014), while also highlighting the influence of institutional and learner-related factors on the implementation of autonomy-supportive practices.

Similarly, studies examining what teachers believe about learner autonomy have generally found positive attitudes toward learner autonomy among pre-service English teachers, who valued learners' involvement in decisions about learning methods, course content, objectives, materials, and assessment (Çakıcı, 2017; Er, 2014; Balçıklanl, 2010). However, while student teachers recognized the importance of learner autonomy, they also perceived practical limitations in involving learners in such decision-making processes, suggesting a potential gap between the desirability and feasibility of autonomy-supportive practices (Balçıklanl, 2010). Teachers may value learner autonomy and believe that learners should be given greater responsibility while simultaneously believing that implementing such practices is difficult or constrained. In this context, desirability refers to teachers' perceptions about the value and importance of giving learners greater responsibility and control over their learning, whereas feasibility concerns whether such autonomy-supportive practices can realistically be implemented within a particular teaching context. Additionally, Erel and Bedir (2023) found that teachers generally held positive views of learner autonomy, while their perceptions varied to some extent across teaching contexts.

Learner autonomy may become particularly important in online teaching because learners are often required to take greater responsibility for managing their own learning. Compared with traditional classroom settings, online learning may require learners to manage their time, organize learning resources, monitor their progress, and take greater initiative in completing learning tasks (Susanti et al., 2023). Therefore, while online teaching may increase the need for learner autonomy, it also makes teachers' views about the desirability and feasibility of autonomy-supportive practices particularly relevant. In this sense, online learning environments may create opportunities for learners to exercise greater control over their learning and develop autonomous learning practices (Ludwig & Tassinari, 2023). However, the online learning environment does not necessarily provide learners with choices over what, how, and when they learn, as highly structured programmes may considerably restrict their choices and decision-making. The extent to which such programmes can foster learner autonomy therefore depends largely on the quality of learning materials, learners' approaches to these materials, and the skills and strategies they possess or develop throughout the course (Hurd et al., 2001). Ludwig and Tassinari (2023) found that language teachers viewed online learning as creating opportunities for greater learner autonomy, while also emphasizing the important role of teachers in fostering autonomy in online environments. On the other hand, teachers differed considerably in their understanding of and experience with promoting autonomy online.

Thus, although online environments may provide opportunities for learner autonomy, its implementation may be constrained by a range of learner-related, pedagogical, technological, and contextual factors. Learners' readiness for autonomous learning, motivation and self-regulation, teachers' pedagogical knowledge, technological limitations, institutional requirements, and assessment practices may all influence the extent to which autonomy-supportive practices can be implemented effectively (Susanti et al., 2023; Demir & Mede, 2024; Golzar et al., 2024). Furthermore, Chan (2000) notes that promoting autonomy may be more challenging in exam-oriented cultures such as China, Japan, and Türkiye, where competitive educational systems can limit teachers' opportunities to foster autonomy in the classroom.

Similarly, Saral and Balçıklanl (2026) found a discrepancy between an EFL teacher's stated beliefs about learner autonomy and her actual classroom practices, with the teacher experiencing difficulties in implementing autonomy-supportive approaches in online teaching despite

recognizing their potential. This finding further illustrates that positive beliefs about learner autonomy do not necessarily translate into autonomy-supportive practices, particularly in online teaching environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The present study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate EFL instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in online teaching contexts. In an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, quantitative data are collected and analysed first, followed by a qualitative phase designed to provide further insight into the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, the quantitative phase of the present study examined instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy, while the subsequent qualitative phase explored the factors that might explain the discrepancy between these perceptions.

Accordingly, the researchers first administered the desirability and feasibility section of the questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain further insight into the quantitative findings, particularly the discrepancy between instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy. The qualitative phase was informed by the questionnaire items and quantitative findings and was designed to explore the factors that might account for this discrepancy.

3.2. Participants

A total of 69 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors working at the schools of foreign languages of different state universities participated in the quantitative phase of the study. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby initially contacted instructors were invited to share the questionnaire with other EFL instructors who met the participation criteria (Cohen et al., 2007).

Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, four instructors who had volunteered to participate in the qualitative phase were interviewed. These four instructors constituted all of the participants who indicated their willingness to take part in a follow-up interview. Their questionnaire responses indicated that they perceived learner autonomy as desirable while expressing reservations about its feasibility in online teaching contexts. Their participation in the qualitative phase therefore provided an opportunity to explore the factors that might account for the observed desirability–feasibility discrepancy. The demographic and professional characteristics of the interview participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Interview Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Experience in Teaching English
T1	Female	36	9 years
T2	Female	30	6 years
T3	Female	40	15 years
T4	Female	36	11 years

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The desirability and feasibility section of the questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) was administered online to the participants. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire only if they considered themselves knowledgeable about learner autonomy. At the end of the questionnaire, they were invited to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview and were informed that their personal information would remain confidential.

The questionnaire consisted of 14 items, each rated separately on two four-point Likert scales assessing instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy (see

Appendix A). For desirability, response options ranged from 1 (undesirable) to 4 (very desirable), whereas for feasibility, they ranged from 1 (unfeasible) to 4 (very feasible). The items addressed two broad aspects of learner autonomy: learners' involvement in decisions concerning teaching and learning and their capacity to take greater responsibility for their own learning. The original questionnaire was developed on the basis of established literature on learner autonomy and previous research on teachers' beliefs and was piloted with university EFL teachers before its finalization (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). The desirability and feasibility section was selected for the present study because its items directly represented the constructs examined in the research questions. The questionnaire demonstrated good overall internal consistency across the 28 desirability and feasibility ratings in the present sample, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .855. Following the quantitative phase, online semi-structured interviews were conducted with four EFL instructors to explore the factors that might account for the discrepancy between their perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in online teaching contexts. The interview questions were developed based on the questionnaire items (see Appendix B). The semi-structured format was particularly suited to the explanatory purpose of the qualitative phase, as it allowed the researchers to follow a focused set of questions while probing participants' responses for further clarification and elaboration. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent qualitative analysis. To protect their identities in the reporting of the findings, participants were identified as T1, T2, T3, and T4.

3.4. Data Analysis

The first three research questions were addressed through quantitative data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas the fourth research question was addressed through thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data.

The quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Overall desirability and feasibility scores were calculated separately based on participants' responses to the 14 questionnaire items. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to examine instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy. A paired-samples t-test was then conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the desirability and feasibility scores.

Following the quantitative analysis, the interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning across participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were read repeatedly, and codes were generated from meanings emerging from participants' responses. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the factors participants associated with the discrepancy between the perceived desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy.

To assess the consistency of the coding, 15% of the interview transcripts were independently coded by a second researcher with a PhD in English Language Teaching. The independently generated codes were then compared, and inter-coder agreement was calculated using the procedure described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The resulting agreement rate was 90%.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Results of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire results revealed a difference between instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in the online teaching context. Descriptive statistics for the two scores are presented in Table 1.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Desirability and Feasibility Scores

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD
Desirability	32	56	44.47	5.84
Feasibility	21	52	35.42	7.31

As shown in Table 2, the desirability scores ranged from 32 to 56, with a mean of 44.47 (SD = 5.84), whereas the feasibility scores ranged from 21 to 52, with a lower mean of 35.42 (SD = 7.31). The mean difference between the two scores was approximately 9.05 points. A paired-samples t-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($p = .008$). Taken together, these findings show that the instructors perceived learner autonomy as more desirable than feasible in the online teaching context.

4.2. Results of the Semi-Structured Interviews

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified a range of factors that participants associated with the discrepancy between the perceived desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in the online teaching context. These factors were grouped into five themes: instructor-oriented, student-oriented, institution-oriented, curriculum-oriented, and context-oriented factors. The findings for each theme are presented in the following subsections.

4.2.1. Instructor-Oriented Factors

The interview data revealed several teacher-related factors that were perceived as limiting the feasibility of promoting learner autonomy, including limited confidence in students' ability to learn autonomously, restricted teacher autonomy, limited awareness of alternative resources for online teaching, and insufficient knowledge of strategies for fostering learner autonomy.

Regarding students' involvement in decisions about course objectives and content, T1 expressed doubts about their readiness to participate in such decisions: *"Students do not make an effort to participate in such decisions, and they may not have the necessary skills to do so. They are not even aware that they can take part in these decisions."*

Restricted teacher autonomy also emerged as a factor. When discussing students' involvement in assessment-related decisions, T2 explained that she had limited influence over the assessment methods used at her institution: *"Leaving the students aside, even the instructors have no say in the type of assessment used at the institution. The questions are prepared by other instructors, and we simply use them."* Her response illustrates how limited teacher autonomy over assessment could restrict opportunities to involve students in assessment-related decisions. T2 also reported having limited choice over teaching resources, further illustrating the restrictions on instructors' autonomy. Similarly, T4 remarked: *"We imposed on our students what the institution imposed on us; as instructors, we had limited autonomy ourselves."*

Regarding learner involvement in material selection, T4 reported that instructors had limited knowledge of alternative teaching materials that could be used in the online teaching context beyond the coursebook and its accompanying tests. Her response pointed to limited awareness of the range of resources available for online teaching, which could restrict the options instructors were able to offer learners when involving them in material selection.

Regarding opportunities for student self-assessment, T3 reported having no prior experience with this practice. She also expressed limited confidence in her ability to promote self-assessment, which she attributed to insufficient professional knowledge: *"I have never considered implementing self-assessment. I also do not think that the students themselves are very willing to assess their own learning. They do not really reflect on what they know and what they do not know. Even if they did, I do not think I would be able to promote self-assessment effectively because I do not have sufficient professional knowledge about it."*

4.2.2. Student-Oriented Factors

Analysis of the interview data indicated that low levels of student motivation, reluctance to participate, and limited engagement were identified as barriers to fostering learner autonomy. In addition, students' previous learning experiences, traditional learning habits, dependence on teachers, and cultural habits were identified by participants as challenges in the online teaching context. T4 particularly highlighted the role of motivation and engagement: *"Less motivated and less engaged students often found excuses for not completing assignments, participating in lessons, or carrying out other online learning tasks. These excuses were generally related to technological issues, such as internet connection problems, power outages, or audio problems. Despite my efforts, I was not always able to encourage these students to attend the online classes."*

The instructors also noted that students' previous learning experiences appeared to reinforce dependence on the teacher. Students were perceived as expecting teachers to provide knowledge directly rather than taking greater responsibility for their own learning and as viewing the teacher as the primary source of knowledge. This dependence could also limit their willingness to engage in peer learning activities. In this regard, T3 stated: *"Students do not seem to believe that they can learn from their peers. For example, when I asked them to provide peer feedback on each other's writing, they were reluctant to correct their peers' mistakes because they were not accustomed to this kind of activity and lacked confidence in doing so."*

4.2.3. Institution-Oriented Factors

Regarding institution-oriented factors, reduced instructional time in the online teaching context was identified as a factor limiting the feasibility of fostering learner autonomy. One participant reported that the institution had reduced the amount of instructional time available for online lessons compared with face-to-face teaching, creating time constraints and concerns about falling behind the prescribed syllabus. The participant explained: *"Normally, we had one hour for each class in face-to-face teaching. In online teaching, the institution reduced this to half an hour, without providing a reason. In an environment where communication is particularly important, this made our work more difficult."*

Institutional assessment requirements were also perceived as limiting opportunities to promote learner autonomy. As students were required to take mid-term and final examinations based on the content of the institutionally selected coursebook, instructors felt pressure to adhere closely to the coursebook and examination requirements. T1 stated: *"There was not much time to take students' views about the content or activities of the lesson, as students' main aim was to get a sufficient mark on the exam at the end of the year."*

4.2.4. Curriculum-Oriented Factors

With regard to curriculum-oriented factors, the interview data indicated that the intensity of the existing curriculum and the absence of a curriculum specifically designed around learners' needs were perceived as factors limiting the feasibility of fostering learner autonomy. When discussing the provision of additional materials, T2 stated: *"The syllabus we are required to follow is already quite extensive, which leaves us little time to incorporate additional materials."* She further explained that developing a curriculum suited to the online teaching context would require a thorough needs analysis, which she considered both time- and effort-intensive.

4.2.5. Context-Oriented Factors

Regarding context-oriented factors, features of the online teaching environment were perceived as limiting the feasibility of fostering learner autonomy, including the limited range of activities supported by the institutional online teaching platform, the pressure associated with recorded lessons, and students' perceptions of the virtual environment. In this respect, T4, T1, and T2 reported that the Blackboard system did not provide opportunities for implementing the same variety of activities available in face-to-face teaching. T1 stated: *"Our course books were uploaded to Blackboard (LMS system), so we follow it as if we did in face-to-face teaching. We have limited choices of activities in online lessons, so it is not possible to provide learners with a wide range of materials for their choice."*

T3 highlighted another issue associated with the online environment. She reported that students experienced difficulty expressing themselves because they were aware that the lessons were being recorded, which made them reluctant to express their opinions regarding activities and tasks. She stated: *"We always recorded our online lessons and uploaded them to the LMS so that students who missed a class could watch it later. However, knowing that the lessons were being recorded put additional pressure on students. They sometimes refrained from answering even relatively simple questions."* T3 further stated: *"As students attend the lessons through a screen, I think they may perceive the virtual environment as less real than a face-to-face classroom. As a result, they may not take the lessons as seriously."*

5. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated EFL instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in an online teaching context. A key finding was the significant discrepancy between these perceptions, with learner autonomy perceived as more desirable than feasible. This pattern is broadly consistent with previous research showing that teachers may view the desirability of learner autonomy more positively than its feasibility (Amirian & Azari Noughabi, 2017; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). To further explore this discrepancy, the qualitative phase was used to examine the factors underlying the quantitative findings by revealing a range of instructor-, student-, institution-, curriculum-, and context-related factors that might account for the gap between desirability and feasibility. Taken together, the findings suggest that perceiving learner autonomy as desirable does not necessarily mean perceiving it as equally feasible within the conditions of online EFL teaching.

The instructors' positive perceptions of the desirability of learner autonomy are consistent with previous research showing that language teachers generally value learner autonomy and recognize the importance of learners taking greater responsibility for their own learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Boudouaia et al., 2022). These studies suggest that teachers are generally positively oriented toward the principles underlying learner autonomy, including greater learner involvement and responsibility in the learning process. The present findings support this broader pattern by showing that learner autonomy continues to be perceived positively as a pedagogical principle in an online EFL teaching context.

However, the significantly lower feasibility scores demonstrate an important distinction between instructors' endorsement of learner autonomy and their views about whether it can actually be implemented. The qualitative findings further suggested that this gap was associated with multiple constraints related to instructors, learners, institutional conditions, the curriculum, and the online teaching context. Similar findings were reported by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019), who found that although teachers in a tertiary EFL context generally regarded learner autonomy as desirable, they were significantly less positive about its feasibility, particularly due to learner-related and curricular constraints. This situation suggests that instructors' positive views about learner autonomy do not necessarily reflect its practical feasibility, particularly when opportunities to promote autonomy are constrained by the conditions in which teaching and learning take place.

Similarly, Boudouaia et al. (2022) found that teachers' perceptions of the desirability of learner involvement in decision-making and the development of learning-to-learn abilities were generally higher than their perceptions of feasibility. This distinction becomes especially important in online language education. Online environments may appear, at least theoretically, to provide favorable conditions for learner autonomy because learners have greater access to digital resources, increased flexibility, and more opportunities to manage aspects of their learning independently. Ludwig and Tassinari (2023), for instance, found that the shift to online language education created new spaces for both teachers and learners to become more autonomous, while also emphasizing the vital role of teachers in supporting the development of learner autonomy. Similarly, Demir and Mede (2024) found that learners generally held positive views of online learning, particularly valuing its flexibility, convenience, and opportunities for self-paced learning. However, they also identified a discrepancy between learners' perceptions of autonomy and its actual enactment in online classes, where practices frequently remained teacher-centred.

The findings of the present study both support and extend this line of research. Consistent with Ludwig and Tassinari (2023), the findings highlight the potential of online learning environments for supporting learner autonomy. However, the present findings also indicate that such potential does not automatically translate into perceived feasibility. In other words, even when learner autonomy is viewed positively, instructors may perceive its promotion as difficult within the conditions of online teaching. The qualitative findings provide further insight into this tension by identifying a range of factors that might account for the gap between the perceived desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy. This suggests that positive beliefs about learner autonomy alone may be insufficient when teachers operate within conditions that constrain its promotion. In this respect, the present findings are particularly consistent with the tension identified by Demir and Mede (2024). A similar tension emerged in the present study, but the qualitative findings provide further insight into the conditions that may underlie the discrepancy between perceived desirability and feasibility. Instructors referred to restricted teacher autonomy, limited student readiness and motivation, curricular demands, institutional constraints, and technological limitations. These

factors may help explain why the potential affordances of online learning do not necessarily translate into greater perceived feasibility of learner autonomy in this context.

The qualitative findings provide further insight into this discrepancy, showing how an instructor may support learner autonomy as an educational principle while simultaneously perceiving substantial barriers to its implementation. Importantly, these barriers extended beyond instructors' personal beliefs and pointed to the broader conditions within which learner autonomy was expected to be promoted. The findings therefore suggest an important distinction between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their perceived conditions for action. This interpretation is compatible with research showing discrepancies between teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and their actual or reported classroom practices (Sara! & Balçıkanlı, 2026).

A similar context-sensitive pattern has been reported in previous research. Ahmadianzadeh et al. (2020) found that teachers' autonomy-promoting practices were constrained not only by learner-related factors, such as limited familiarity with autonomy and differing expectations, but also by institutional and curricular conditions, including policy restrictions, dense curricular demands, and standardized materials. More recently, Sara! and Balçıkanlı (2026) identified mismatches between an EFL teacher's professed beliefs about learner autonomy and her observed classroom practices in online teaching, linking these discrepancies to constraints such as limited interaction, platform restrictions, centralized curriculum requirements, and insufficient instructional time. These studies support the present finding that the perceived feasibility of learner autonomy needs to be understood in relation to the conditions in which teaching takes place, rather than solely in terms of teachers' positive or negative orientations toward autonomy.

The first set of constraints identified in the interviews concerned the instructors themselves. Some instructors expressed limited confidence in learners' capacity to act autonomously, while others reported insufficient knowledge of strategies, technological resources, and practices such as learner self-evaluation. Importantly, teacher autonomy also emerged as an important concern, as participants reported having limited control over materials, assessment, and other curricular decisions. This finding points to the close connection between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy: teachers who have limited opportunities to make decisions concerning their own teaching may find it difficult to transfer meaningful decision-making responsibilities to their learners. Reinders and Balçıkanlı (2011) emphasized that teachers' understanding of learner autonomy and their ability to implement autonomy-supportive practices are central to fostering learner autonomy in the classroom. Similarly, Yang (1998) highlighted the changing role of the teacher in autonomous learning, describing teachers as facilitators, advisers, and guides who support learners in setting goals, monitoring their progress, and evaluating their own learning. However, the findings of the present study suggest that enacting such roles may be difficult when instructors themselves have limited pedagogical autonomy or insufficient preparation for autonomy-supportive teaching. This issue becomes particularly important in online environments, where greater opportunities for independent learning do not necessarily reduce the need for teacher support. As Ludwig and Tassinari (2023) emphasize, teachers continue to play a vital role in fostering learner autonomy in online language learning. The present findings support this view by suggesting that realizing the potential for autonomy in online learning may depend partly on teachers' ability to guide learners in using available resources and managing their learning effectively.

Student-oriented factors may partly be understood in relation to learners' previous educational experiences and their readiness to assume greater responsibility for learning. In the Turkish context, Yumuk (2002) similarly reported teacher-dependent learning habits and traditional, recitation-based views of learning among university students, while Sert (2006) identified limitations in EFL student teachers' ability to direct, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Similar concerns have been reported in Borg and Alshumaimeri's (2019) study, which identified learner-related factors, particularly lack of motivation and independence and low language proficiency, as major constraints on the perceived feasibility of promoting learner autonomy. These findings are also consistent with Susanti et al. (2023), who found that although students demonstrated some capacity for autonomous learning in an online EFL context, teacher support remained necessary, while motivation and collaboration played important roles in fostering autonomy. Taken together, these findings suggest that learner autonomy should not be assumed to develop automatically simply because online environments provide learners with greater flexibility and control over aspects of their learning. Rather, the participants' concerns regarding students' traditional learning habits and dependence on teachers suggest that autonomy may need to be

developed progressively. Learners who have had limited previous experience with self-assessment, peer evaluation, or decision-making may initially resist or feel insecure about these practices. This supports the view of learner autonomy as a capacity that can be developed progressively through appropriate pedagogical support and scaffolding (Benson, 2007; Susanti et al., 2023). The reluctance reported by the instructors in the present study may therefore reflect limited previous opportunities to exercise autonomy rather than an inherent inability or unwillingness among learners to become autonomous.

Institutional and curriculum-related constraints further highlight the role of the broader educational context in shaping the perceived feasibility of learner autonomy. Participants' accounts pointed to restrictions associated with instructional time, assessment, prescribed materials, and curricular demands. These findings suggest that opportunities to promote learner autonomy are shaped not solely by individual teachers but also by the institutional and curricular conditions within which they work. Ahmadianzadeh et al. (2020) similarly identified institutional policies and learner expectations among the factors influencing teachers' autonomy-related practices, while Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) showed that contextual and institutional conditions affected teachers' perceptions of feasibility.

The online context introduced an additional layer of constraints, particularly in relation to the technological environment, available learning activities, and students' experiences of the virtual classroom. These findings are particularly relevant when interpreted alongside research on learner autonomy in distance and online learning. Hurd et al. (2001) had already noted that distance language learning can simultaneously demand greater autonomy from learners while limiting their choices when courses are highly structured. More recent research similarly points to the complexity of this relationship. Demir and Mede (2024) emphasized the continuing importance of guidance and support in the development of learner autonomy in online EFL learning, while Alfares (2024) found that asynchronous online learning may provide opportunities for greater autonomy and self-regulation while also requiring greater self-control, self-motivation, and autonomous learning skills. Taken together with the present findings, these studies suggest that online learning environments are not inherently autonomy-enhancing; rather, their potential to foster learner autonomy may depend on how technological affordances, learning activities, and support mechanisms are pedagogically designed and implemented.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings converge on a central conclusion: perceiving learner autonomy as desirable does not necessarily mean perceiving it as equally feasible in online teaching. The qualitative findings further indicate that this discrepancy needs to be understood in relation to the broader conditions in which teaching and learning take place. In this respect, the present study extends earlier discussions of the desirability–feasibility gap by examining how it is experienced within an online EFL teaching context. Rather than assuming that positive attitudes toward learner autonomy are sufficient for its implementation, the findings highlight the importance of considering the pedagogical and contextual conditions that may enable or constrain its promotion. Thus, understanding learner autonomy in online language education requires attention not only to whether teachers value it, but also to the conditions under which they perceive it as feasible.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study examined EFL instructors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy in an online teaching context. The findings showed that although instructors generally regarded learner autonomy as desirable, they perceived it as significantly less feasible. This discrepancy indicates that positive perceptions of learner autonomy do not necessarily correspond to equally positive perceptions of its practical feasibility.

The qualitative findings provided further insight into this discrepancy by identifying instructor, student-, institution-, curriculum-, and context-oriented constraints that might account for the lower perceived feasibility of learner autonomy.

Overall, the findings suggest that learner autonomy in online EFL education needs to be understood in relation to the conditions in which teaching and learning take place rather than as an automatic outcome of online learning. Its perceived feasibility may be shaped by teacher guidance, learner readiness, institutional support, curricular flexibility, and the pedagogical use of technology.

6.1. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the quantitative phase involved 69 EFL instructors recruited through snowball sampling, which limits the generalizability of the quantitative findings, while the qualitative phase included only four interview participants who were female, limiting the breadth of perspectives represented in the qualitative findings. Second, the study relied on instructors' self-reported perceptions rather than observations of actual autonomy-supportive practices. Third, the study focused exclusively on instructors' perspectives. Consequently, learner-related factors such as motivation, teacher dependence, and reluctance to participate represent instructors' perceptions rather than learners' own accounts.

6.2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings have several implications for online EFL education. First, professional development should move beyond raising teachers' awareness of learner autonomy and provide practical preparation in autonomy-supportive strategies, including goal-setting, self- and peer assessment, progress monitoring, resource selection, and the pedagogical use of digital tools. At the same time, institutions should provide teachers with greater flexibility to adapt materials, assessment, and learning activities to learners' needs. Second, learner autonomy should be developed progressively rather than expected to emerge automatically in online environments. Learners, particularly those accustomed to teacher-centred instruction, may require structured opportunities for choice, reflection, self-regulation, and responsibility as they develop greater autonomy. Finally, curricula, assessment systems, and technological platforms should provide sufficient flexibility to support such practices. Online technologies should therefore be used not merely for content delivery, but to facilitate meaningful learner choice, interaction, reflection, and independent learning.

6.3. Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should examine the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy across larger and more diverse samples and in different online EFL and institutional contexts. Combining teachers' reported perceptions with classroom observations and learner perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how perceived feasibility relates to actual autonomy-supportive practices. Longitudinal studies could also explore how learner autonomy develops over time with systematic pedagogical support. Finally, future research could examine how factors such as teacher autonomy, institutional support, curricular flexibility, learner readiness and motivation, digital competence, technological affordances, and assessment practices are associated with the perceived feasibility of learner autonomy.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: Desirability and Feasibility Questionnaire**

Items	Desirability				Feasibility			
	Undesirable	Slightly Desirable	Quite Desirable	Very Desirable	Unfeasible	Slightly Feasible	Quite Feasible	Very Feasible
1.Learners are involved in decisions about the objectives of a course								
2.Learners are involved in decisions about the materials used								
3.Learners are involved in decisions about the kinds of tasks and activities they do								
4.Learners are involved in decisions about the discussed topics								
5.Learners are involved in decisions about how learning is assessed								
6.Learners are involved in decisions about the teaching methods used								
7.Learners are involved in decisions about classroom management								
8.Learners have the ability to identify their own needs								
9.Learners have the ability to identify their own strengths								
10.Learners have the ability to identify their own weaknesses								
11.Learners have the ability to monitor their progres								
12. Learners have the ability to evaluate their own learning								
13. Learners have the ability to learn cooperatively								
14. Learners have the ability to learn independently								

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Online eğitim sürecinde öğrenci özerkliğini ne kadar ve nasıl destekleyebildiğinizi düşünüyorsunuz?
2. Sizce bu süreçte ders amaçları belirleme konusunda öğrenciler söz sahibi olmalı mı, neden?
3. Sizce öğretmenler kullanılan materyaller konusunda söz sahibi olmalılar mı, neden?
4. Sizce bu süreçte ders konusu seçiminde öğrenci söz sahibi mi, neden?
5. Sizce bu süreçte öğrencilerin nasıl değerlendirileceğine dair onlardan fikir alınmalı mı, neden?
6. Sizce bu süreçte öğrenciler öğretme yöntemlerine dair söz sahibi olmalılar mı, neden?
7. Siz bu süreçte öğrencilerin güçlü ve güçsüz yönlerini belirlemede onları iyi yönlendirebildiniz mi? Nasıl? Neden?
8. Bu süreçte öğrencilerin kendilerini değerlendirme konusunda onlara yardımcı olabildiniz mi, nasıl? Olamadıysanız neden?