

# Preservice Teachers' Self-Efficacy Beliefs for Promoting Learner Autonomy in English Language Education

Creencias de autoeficacia de docentes en formación para promover la autonomía de los estudiantes en la enseñanza de inglés

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Preservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs influence their willingness and ability to promote learner autonomy in schools. This study aimed to investigate the self-efficacy beliefs of a group of preservice teachers in an initial English language teacher education programme, where they were prepared and encouraged to promote pedagogy for autonomy. Data were gathered through questionnaires and focus group interviews. Findings indicate a relatively high sense of self-efficacy regarding the promotion of learner autonomy. Personal and contextual factors that enable or constrain those beliefs were identified, with implications for how initial teacher education programmes may foster preservice teachers' readiness to value and enact learner-centred pedagogies.

*Keywords:* English language education, initial teacher education, pedagogy for autonomy, self-efficacy beliefs

Las creencias de autoeficacia de los docentes en formación influyen en su disposición y habilidad para promover la autonomía en las escuelas. Este estudio investiga las creencias de autoeficacia de un grupo de docentes en formación en un programa de formación docente inicial en enseñanza de inglés que promovía la pedagogía para la autonomía. Los datos se recopilaron mediante cuestionarios y grupos focales. Los resultados indican un sentido relativamente alto de autoeficacia con respecto a la promoción de la autonomía. Se identificaron factores personales y contextuales que permiten o limitan estas creencias, con implicaciones sobre cómo los programas de formación docente inicial pueden fomentar la preparación de futuros docentes para valorar e implementar pedagogías centradas en el aprendiz.

*Palabras clave:* creencias de autoeficacia, enseñanza del inglés, formación docente inicial, pedagogía para la autonomía

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## Introduction

The constant changes undergone by modern societies underline the pressing need for learners to develop lifelong learning competences associated with the notion of learner autonomy. Autonomy has become a central goal of language education; however, pedagogy for autonomy remains far from being a mainstream practice in schools. It calls for a reconceptualisation of language pedagogies by replacing teacher-centred approaches with learner-centred ones, and teachers need to develop their agency in fostering a view of education as a space for (inter) personal empowerment (Jiménez Raya et al., 2017).

Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes can play an important role in promoting an autonomy-oriented view of teaching and developing preservice teachers' (PTs) self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to implement it. Self-efficacy beliefs were defined by Bandura (1997) as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Teachers who believe they are capable of implementing a particular teaching approach are more likely to do it, while those who doubt their ability are more likely to resist implementing it (Berg & Smith, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand the influence of ITE programmes on PTs' perceptions of their ability to promote learner autonomy, which is the major aim of this study.

This research was conducted within a master's degree in teaching English in primary education at the University of Minho (Portugal), where the PTs are prepared and encouraged to promote pedagogy for autonomy. Two research questions were formulated:

1. What are the PTs' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to promote learner autonomy?
2. What factors enable and constrain the PTs' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to promote learner autonomy?

We begin the paper by exploring the concepts of pedagogy for autonomy, teacher education for autonomy, and teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Next, we present the

study methodology and results. Finally, we discuss the findings in relation to the research questions and draw implications on how ITE can foster self-efficacy beliefs for the development of learner autonomy.

## Pedagogy for Autonomy, Teacher Education, and Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Autonomy is here defined as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter) personal empowerment and social transformation" (Jiménez Raya et al., 2017, p. 17). Therefore, pedagogy for autonomy is concerned with an ideological position on the purposes of education and requires teachers to become transformative intellectuals who strive for educational change and personal transformation, both for themselves and for their learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

Pedagogy for autonomy entails expanding learners' voices through engagement in negotiation and decision-making processes, experimentation with learning strategies, and self-regulation of learning experiences and outcomes (Cotterall, 2017; Jiménez Raya et al., 2017). It further involves developing learners' communicative and intercultural competences in realistic learning environments that foster authentic, autonomous use of the language to express personal meanings and identities, along with a deep respect for cultural diversity and the ability to interact in multicultural societies (Council of Europe, 2018; Jiménez Raya et al., 2017). Furthermore, pedagogy for autonomy should be inclusive and promote learners' self-esteem and self-confidence, within a positive learning atmosphere where they feel supported and motivated to learn (Arnold & Fonseca-Mora, 2017; Palfreyman & Benson, 2019; Tassinari, 2016). Formative learning assessments (including learner self-evaluation) and inquiries into teaching through analyses of collected classroom data are particularly useful to connect teacher and learner development.

To promote pedagogy for autonomy as a transformative and empowering experience, language teacher education must also be transformative and empowering by fostering self-directed professional learning and action. This entails the ability to question dominant practices, manage contextual constraints (e.g., large classes, limited resources), enact pedagogical change, and engage in the professional community (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015; Jiménez Raya et al., 2017; Manzano Vázquez, 2017). Accounts of language teacher education initiatives for autonomy report different strategies for developing (prospective) teachers' understanding and competence of pedagogy for autonomy—such as case pedagogy, action research, and the use of reflective tools (e.g., portfolios, diaries)—which are grounded in an experiential, inquiry-oriented approach that seeks to empower teachers to become reflective professionals and agents of change (see Benson, 2011; Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015; Jiménez Raya et al., 2024; Manzano Vázquez, 2024).

Being willing and able to promote pedagogy for autonomy requires developing a positive sense of self-efficacy. Research on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs has underlined the significant influence of these beliefs on teaching since they can determine teachers' willingness to innovate their practice and face potential obstacles and challenges (Thompson & Woodman, 2019; Wyatt, 2018). As noted by Gregoire (2003), "teachers with a low sense of efficacy are less likely to try new methods for meeting their students' needs" (p. 171), even when they consider that these teaching methods could be more effective.

Bandura (1997) points out four factors shaping self-efficacy beliefs: *mastery experience*, which is concerned with teachers' experiences in dealing successfully with a particular task; *vicarious experience*, which can be promoted through observation and analysis of teaching practices implemented by others; *social persuasion*, referring to the influence exerted by the appraisal or feedback provided by others (e.g., teacher educators,

peers, or learners); and *physiological and affective states* (e.g., anxiety or excitement). Woolfolk Hoy et al. (2009) underline that teachers' efficacy beliefs are built based on their analysis of the teaching task in context, that is, their "appraisal of the factors that make accomplishing a specific teaching task easy or difficult" (p. 628), and the analysis of their teaching competence (i.e., their personal evaluation of their teaching capabilities and limitations regarding the task).

Despite the growing attention to teachers' beliefs, little research has been conducted on self-efficacy beliefs to promote learner autonomy in language education. A few studies have shown that, although teachers value learner autonomy, their self-efficacy beliefs tend to be rather low. Nakata (2011) examined the importance that 80 Japanese high school teachers gave to learner autonomy and their readiness to foster it. The results showed that learner autonomy was considered an important educational goal; however, many participants were not yet ready to foster it. Lin and Reinders (2019) analysed 182 teachers' beliefs and concluded that "the teachers appeared psychologically, but not technically or behaviourally, ready for autonomy" (p. 69). Manzano Vázquez (2021) investigated PTs' self-efficacy beliefs and the factors affecting them. Most of the 24 participants in the study held low self-efficacy beliefs about their ability to develop pedagogy for autonomy, primarily due to difficulties in translating theoretical principles into practice and their lack of teaching experience, confidence, and prior experience with pedagogy for autonomy as learners.

To address the lack of research on self-efficacy beliefs to promote learner autonomy in language education, the study described below looked at prospective teachers' self-efficacy beliefs regarding the promotion of learner autonomy within a programme that explores pedagogy for autonomy at a theoretical and practical level, thus problematising the role of teacher education in developing autonomy-oriented professionals.

## Method

### Context and Participants

Since the Bologna reform was introduced in Portugal in 2006, qualification for teaching requires an undergraduate degree in the subject field and a master's degree in teaching. The master's degree in teaching English in primary education was introduced in 2015, following the implementation of English as a compulsory subject in Grades 3 and 4. Before that, English was an optional subject, and teachers qualified to teach it at upper school levels were allowed to teach in primary schools; therefore, candidates for the master's degree may have had previous experience in teaching English to young learners (TEYL).

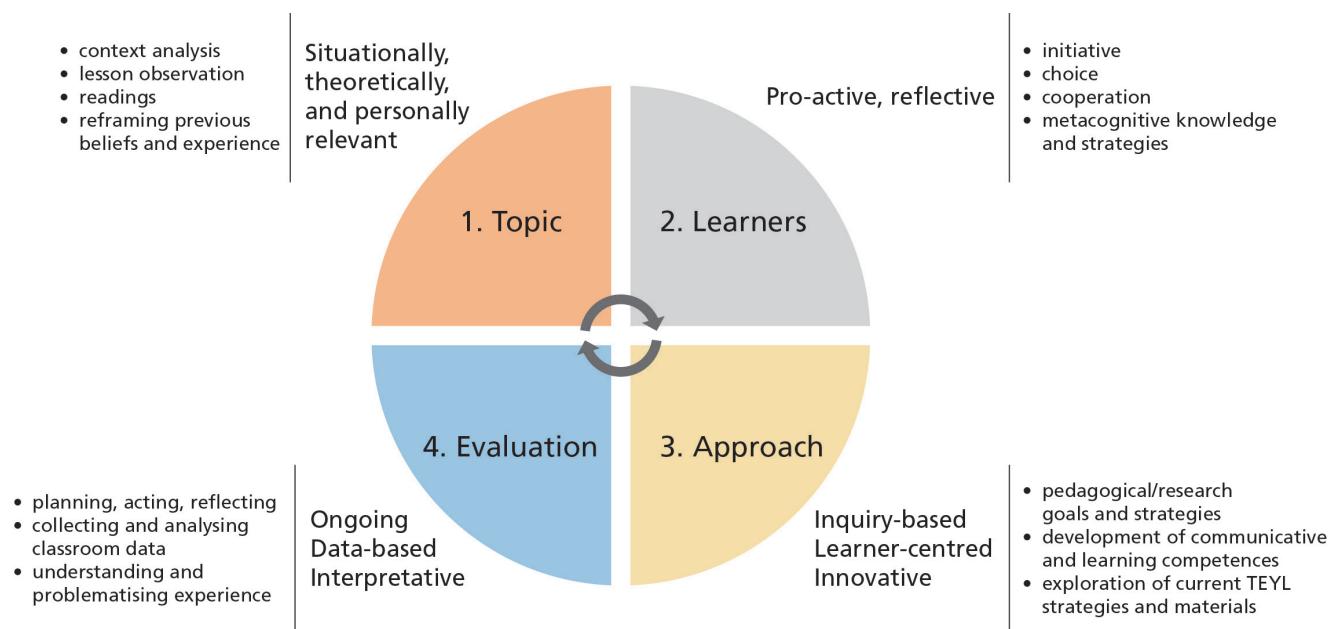
The programme has 90 credits distributed across three semesters and includes courses in four training areas: Teaching Subject (English language, culture, and literature), General Education (e.g., primary education curricula and developmental psychology), Didactics (TEYL), and Initiation to Professional Practice (school-based internship in a school mentor's classes, supervised by a faculty professor, in the second and third semesters).

At the University of Minho, this programme has been offered since the 2015/16 academic year. It is globally aligned with a transformative view of education aimed at enhancing inclusiveness, democratic citizenship, and lifelong learning; therefore, learner-centredness and teacher agency are seen as central aspects of teacher education. The study plan includes three courses on TEYL where pedagogy for autonomy is one of the main curricular topics explored both theoretically and through practical tasks, such as analysing teacher narratives and designing teaching plans and materials. The internship fosters inquiry-based, learner-centred teaching through action research. PTs are expected to teach a total of 24 hours in their mentor's classes, and a minimum of nine hours is devoted to the development of a small-scale, autonomy-oriented action research project in one class. The project involves several tasks:

context analysis, observation of mentors' lessons in Grades 3 and 4, project design, guided readings on the project topic, project development (including the collection and analysis of classroom data), and the production of a reflective portfolio and a final report that is defended publicly. Action research in this context is understood as a learning-to-teach experience that allows PTs to develop a critical view of language education and their agency to enact and interpret pedagogical change (Crawford-Garrett et al., 2015; Edwards, 2020; Vieira, 2024). Figure 1 (Vieira, 2024, p. 67) illustrates the key elements of action research projects, including topic choice, learner role, teaching approach, and project evaluation. Faculty supervisors are responsible for supporting project design and implementation in collaboration with school mentors.

The study involved a class of 15 PTs who were in the second internship semester and also attended a TEYL course on materials design and evaluation that supported the development of action-research projects. The study was presented to the PTs by the second author, who taught that course. All the students agreed to participate. Although the data were anonymous and used strictly for research purposes, participation was regarded as a self-development task that allowed participants to reflect on their training experience and their identity as future teachers. Therefore, this was taken into account in their final assessment by adding 0.5 points to the students' marks (on a scale of 0–20 points).

The group of participants (12 women and three men) was heterogeneous regarding age, previous training, and teaching experience. Most of them (11) were over 30 years old, and the rest were in the 20–24 age range (3) and in the 25–30 age range (1). Except for five PTs, the rest already had experience in teaching English before obtaining their master's degree, ranging from 1.5 years to 18 years, in pre-school, primary, and secondary education, in state and private schools located in both urban and rural settings. Most PTs (13) also had teaching experiences while completing their master's degrees.

**Figure 1.** Key Elements of TEYL Action-Research Projects

Their previous academic training was quite varied: Modern/European Languages and Literatures (9), Teaching of Portuguese–English (2), Teaching of English–German (1), Teaching of Portuguese (1), Applied Languages (1), and Social Communication, as well as a postgraduate course in TESOL (1). Six PTs had attended courses in TEYL prior to obtaining their master's degree, and three had received some training in this field during their master's programme. Prior to the programme, none of the PTs had conducted action research, and their theoretical knowledge of pedagogy for autonomy was either null or reduced.

### Data Collection Procedures

The investigation was an exploratory case study of PTs' self-efficacy beliefs to promote learner autonomy, involving the collection of self-report data through questionnaires and interviews. Insofar as the study highlights the worthiness (potential value and shortcomings) of a particular ITE programme, it shares features of an

evaluative case study by providing an understanding of the effectiveness of that programme (Bassey, 1999).

Data were collected in late 2019 by the first author, who was not known to the participants. The second author, who was their teacher and the supervisor of some of them, only had access to anonymised data after the end of the semester to avoid bias in data analysis.

### Questionnaires

Two anonymous questionnaires were emailed to the students: a background questionnaire to collect information on their previous training and teaching experience, and a questionnaire on their self-efficacy beliefs regarding the promotion of learner autonomy. Both questionnaires included information regarding the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and anonymity, and participants were asked to provide their consent to participate in the study.

The content of the self-efficacy beliefs questionnaire drew on the enabling conditions contributing to

“centring teaching on learning” identified by Jiménez Raya et al. (2017, p. 72). The questionnaire included 11 questions regarding the PTs’ beliefs about the following aspects:

- value attached to autonomy as an educational goal in TEYL;
- ability to design and implement activities and materials that promote children’s communicative competences, cultural awareness, citizenship and respect for diversity, and learning competences;
- ability to create a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom, respond to learner diversity (in terms of language/cultural backgrounds, life experiences, learning needs, interests, abilities, and difficulties), undertake formative learning assessments, and make teaching learner-centred through collecting and analysing classroom data.

For each question (e.g., “Do you think you are able to design materials/activities that foster children’s learning competences?”), the PTs had to choose one option on a scale from 1 (*not sure at all*) to 5 (*absolutely sure*) and justify their answers. In their justifications, they could refer to personal experiences, competences, feelings, ideas, aspirations or difficulties, as well as to external constraints or challenges. The questionnaire was written in English, but they could answer in Portuguese.

### Interviews

After the submission of the questionnaires, two focus group interviews were conducted, each with five volunteer students. To understand the influence of previous teaching experience or lack of it on their self-efficacy beliefs, the groups were formed based on teaching experience: five PTs who lacked teaching experience before the master’s degree (Group 1), and five who had over five years’ experience in TEYL before the master’s degree (Group 2). Both interviews included eight questions which addressed the PTs’ perceptions on three themes:

- *The master’s programme courses*: importance of the courses for professional development towards the promotion of learner autonomy; improvements in the programme to better prepare them to develop learner autonomy.
- *The internship experience*: role of the internship experience, the university supervisors, and the school mentors in professional development towards the promotion of learner autonomy; importance of teaching experience, or lack of it, to develop learner autonomy in the internship.
- *Their future teaching*: willingness and ability to develop learner autonomy in future teaching; obstacles to the development of learner autonomy in schools, and their ability to overcome them.

The questions were sent in advance to the PTs so that they could reflect on their experiences and feel more confident about participating. They were formulated in English, but the PTs could answer in Portuguese, which they all did. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted from 66 to 79 minutes. They were audio-recorded and later transcribed by a third party who had no contact with the PTs. The PTs were identified by numbers (ST1 to ST5 in each group).

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the quantitative data obtained from the self-efficacy questionnaire was based on calculating the mean (ranging from 1 to 5) for each question. The qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews were analysed inductively by two authors to ensure inter-rater reliability, through an iterative process of reading and re-reading the data for coding. Two broad categories were previously established: *enabling factors* (i.e., factors perceived to have a positive influence on self-efficacy beliefs) and *constraining factors* (i.e., factors perceived to have a negative influence on self-efficacy beliefs). The factors identified in these categories were classified into *personal factors* (factors related to the self,

such as personal convictions, beliefs, and perceptions of experience) and *contextual factors* (factors external to the self, such as educational policies, school cultures, and training opportunities). Although the qualitative data were not quantified, the number of aspects identified for each factor indicates that some factors are probably more significant than others.

## Findings

The findings respond to the two research questions. The first two sections present an overview of self-efficacy beliefs and the factors that influence them. The remaining sections focus on the following aspects: the role of the ITE programme, the impact of having or lacking previous teaching experience, and the importance of personal convictions about the value of autonomy. PTs' interview accounts were translated into English.

### Self-Efficacy Beliefs

The questionnaire's quantitative results (Table 1) indicated that the PTs believed in the value of autonomy

as an educational goal in TEYL ( $M = 4.53$ ) and their sense of self-efficacy for promoting learner autonomy was relatively high, with mean values ranging from 3.27 to 4.07.

Nevertheless, about half of the PTs (eight to nine) were just "sure" or "slightly sure" on some aspects: designing materials and activities that foster children's cultural awareness, citizenship, and respect for diversity ( $M = 3.6$ ), and implementing them ( $M = 3.53$ ); implementing materials and activities that foster children's learning competences ( $M = 3.27$ ); and responding to learner diversity ( $M = 3.6$ ). Response variability was higher as regards their ability to undertake formative learning assessments ( $M = 3.47$ ), which is something the participants do very occasionally, given the limited number of lessons they teach. Except for the development of learners' communicative competence, the participants' beliefs regarding the design of materials and activities, which is supported by supervisors and mentors, were more positive than their beliefs regarding implementation, suggesting the existence of practical difficulties in teaching.

**Table 1.** Participants' Self-Efficacy Beliefs ( $N = 15$ )

Beliefs about...	1	2	3	4	5	<b><i>M</i></b>
the value of autonomy as an educational goal in TEYL	0	0	2	3	10	4.53
<b>Beliefs about the ability to design materials/activities fostering children's...</b>						
willingness and ability to communicate in English	0	2	0	12	1	3.8
cultural awareness, citizenship, and respect for diversity	0	1	7	4	3	3.6
learning competences	0	3	3	7	2	3.53
<b>Beliefs about the ability to implement materials/activities fostering children's...</b>						
willingness and ability to communicate in English	0	1	2	9	3	3.93
cultural awareness, citizenship, and respect for diversity	0	0	9	4	2	3.53
learning competences	0	3	6	5	1	3.27
<b>Beliefs about the ability to...</b>						
create a positive learning atmosphere	0	1	2	7	5	4.07
respond to learner diversity	0	1	7	4	3	3.6
undertake formative learning assessments	1	2	4	5	3	3.47
make teaching learner-centred through collecting and analysing classroom data	0	2	4	6	3	3.67

*Note.* 1 = not sure at all; 2 = slightly sure; 3 = sure; 4 = very sure; 5 = absolutely sure.

### Factors Enabling and Constraining Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Data collected through open-ended responses (questionnaire and interviews) allowed for the identification of enabling and constraining factors that influenced PTs' self-efficacy beliefs.

Enabling factors were personal and contextual (Table 2). Personal factors primarily refer to personal

convictions regarding the educational value of learner autonomy and a positive experience in developing particular aspects of pedagogy for autonomy. Contextual factors were primarily related to the learning opportunities offered in the master's programme, including the internship. Reference was also made to the role of continuous professional development and interaction with peers.

**Table 2. Factors Enabling Participants' Self-Efficacy Beliefs**

Personal enabling factors	Contextual enabling factors
<i>Personal convictions about learner autonomy:</i> Value attached to learner autonomy, learner differentiation, cultural awareness and citizenship skills, positive learning atmosphere and learners' well-being, creativity in teaching, and reflective attitude towards the learning process	<i>Educational policies (focused on learner-centredness)</i>
<i>Positive experience in particular aspects of pedagogy for autonomy, especially in the internship:</i> Designing and implementing materials and activities; promoting learners' cultural awareness, learning competences, metacognitive knowledge, and self-assessment; responding to learner diversity and supporting learners with special needs; undertaking formative assessments; collecting and analysing classroom data; and positive results of teaching (learning processes and outcomes)	<i>Master's programme:</i> Awareness of the need for a learner-centred approach, learning to analyse the teaching context and respond to learner diversity, learning about learning competences, practice in creating and implementing learner-centred materials and activities, readings on project topics, action research, and supervisory support <i>Interaction in the professional community:</i> Peer support at school ("critical friends") and teacher network on the Internet <i>In-service teacher education</i>
<i>Ongoing professional growth to meet professional demands</i>	

Constraining factors were also personal and contextual (Table 3). Personal factors were mostly related to practical difficulties encountered in enacting pedagogy for autonomy and the need for further teaching experience, whereas contextual factors were related to mainstream teaching cultures that reduce teachers' freedom and time to develop learner autonomy (large classes, use of syllabi and textbooks, and summative assessment practices), and the need for further training and support.

### Role of the ITE Programme

All the PTs acknowledged the value of the programme in promoting learner autonomy, particularly

the TEYL courses and the development of autonomy-oriented action-research projects during the internship. In the interviews, they pointed out several aspects that appeared to enhance self-efficacy beliefs:

- learning about and being encouraged to promote learner autonomy
- learning about and confronting different TEYL perspectives and approaches
- designing and experimenting with learner-centred materials and activities
- analysing learner data to improve teaching and individualise learning
- understanding learners, what they think, and their cognitive development

**Table 3.** Factors Constraining Participants' Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Personal constraining factors	Contextual constraining factors
<p><i>Personal difficulties in implementing pedagogy for autonomy:</i></p> <p>Selecting, designing, and implementing context-sensitive and effective learner-centred materials and activities; managing learner diversity and attending to learners from disadvantaged families; undertaking formative assessment and assessment of learners' development of competences; and interpreting learner data</p> <p><i>Need for more teaching experience</i></p>	<p><i>Teaching cultures (leading to a lack of freedom and time to develop pedagogy for autonomy):</i></p> <p>Pressure to meet national curriculum objectives and cover the syllabus, need to follow textbooks, emphasis on summative assessment of learning, and large classes</p> <p><i>Learners' insecurity about their abilities and learning</i></p> <p><i>Need for further training and supervisory support</i></p>

- developing observation and reflection skills
- analysing other peers' internship narratives and lesson plans
- discussing their own lesson plans with others and receiving advice from others (peers, teacher educators, mentors, and supervisors)
- improving teaching practices

Some PTs, however, recommended a stronger practical focus on TEYL in the programme. The PTs with no previous teaching experience also suggested that teaching time in the internship should be extended to allow for a more extensive exploration of pedagogy for autonomy. Their colleagues with experience, on the other hand, recommended that the teaching time in their case should be reduced to focus on the development of the action-research project and pointed out the time constraints resulting from holding teaching jobs while completing the internship.

Regarding supervisory support, its importance was fully acknowledged, even though school mentors were perceived to be more sceptical or less willing than supervisors to promote learner autonomy. Supervisors were seen as authoritative figures who support and validate autonomy-oriented action-research projects, which increased the PTs' confidence to implement them:

The university supervisor's support is important because sometimes, to innovate the practice, with the school

mentor, we have a certain negotiating power because we have support from the university, so to speak. For example, many times there is a certain scepticism and university support gives us validation, a basis to justify our innovation. And since we don't have experience, there's that perception that, "Ah, that's all theory, that's in the head, it won't work in practice." And with the support of the university, we have more strength in our arguments. (Group 1, ST1, Interview)

The PTs with previous teaching experience were particularly critical of prevalent teaching practices focused on following the syllabus and textbooks, which limited their creativity and freedom to develop their projects. They sometimes felt that reconciling different rationalities was hard, especially because they are evaluated by both supervisors and mentors:

My project topic is to develop learning to learn, children's autonomy. And the school mentor immediately limits it by asking that everything in the textbook be taught within the teaching unit, which cuts off my creativity, or [the possibility of] extending some activities a little further, because I am being marked by the rhythm of time, and at the end of this unit something has to be completed because next they are going to do a test. And then, in other activities that I sometimes try to do, the school mentor doesn't always agree, because it will make noise, it will destabilise. I don't think noise is bad... In [autonomous work], they have to make

noise; otherwise, they have no chance of working. In this sense, I feel more support from the university than from the school mentor, and sometimes in managing the work that we have to present here, but also pleasing the school mentor, who is also evaluating us and accompanies us every day. We remain in the midway. (Group 2, ST1, Interview)

### Impact of Having or Lacking Previous Teaching Experience

Table 4 summarises the PTs' views on whether having or lacking previous teaching experience exerted a positive or negative influence on self-efficacy beliefs regarding the promotion of learner autonomy.

The PTs with previous teaching experience did not point out any disadvantages arising from it. The other group saw their lack of practical knowledge both as a disadvantage and an opportunity since they were able to enter the profession with a more open and candid attitude towards learner autonomy, relying on the specialised literature and on supervisory support, and not feeling too affected by "teaching vices" and dominant school practices. As one of the PTs put it, they "innovated without intending to innovate":

I noticed that, inadvertently, we innovated without intending to innovate. I don't know if others feel this way, but sometimes I feel that to the suggestions we give,

they often go "doing that?!" We don't have certain vices from practice. I at least feel this way, that we come without vices. Another thing is that the support we have is not from practice, it is not empirical, but rather theoretical; we come [to the internship] with a literature baggage that helps guide us. I notice that many times, I spend a lot of time investigating. I want to take this approach, but what have authors done before? What do they say about this matter? I notice that I investigate a lot more. (Group 1, ST1, Interview)

Both groups believed that previous teaching experience facilitated practice, particularly in terms of classroom management issues. However, the PTs with no experience referred more explicitly to the relationship between classroom management and learner autonomy. The following account shows how one of them perceived time management to be particularly difficult in a learner-centred approach where learning paces are not necessarily synchronised with the teacher's "clock":

Personally, I don't think my clock and the children's clock are in synchrony. I prepare the class, I prepare it in detail: the time dedicated to that activity, the time I want to explain... Children work in a different way and, as I have no experience, I haven't found one yet; a middle ground in which my clock and that of the children can

**Table 4.** Impact of Teaching Experience Before the Master's

PTs with previous experience		PTs without previous experience	
Enabling factors		Enabling factors	
Personal	Personal	Contextual	Personal
<i>Practical knowledge</i> (classroom management, ability to anticipate problems)	<i>Being more open to learner autonomy</i> (entering teaching as a tabula rasa with no "teaching vices"; being closer to the learner role and more able to attend to learner interests and needs)	<i>Getting support from an experienced teacher (mentor)</i>	<i>Lack of practical knowledge</i> (difficulties in classroom management, encouraging learner autonomy, adapting to learners' learning pace, and reaching teaching goals)
<i>More self-confidence</i>	<i>Relying on theoretical knowledge and personal research</i>		

coincide so that they can work more autonomously and I can work so that I can accomplish what I have to do. It is what I think. I don't think I've found this synchrony yet. (Group 1, ST4, Interview)

Although the PTs with previous teaching experience appeared to feel more confident in developing learner autonomy, action research was new to them, and, for example, they realised the importance of collecting learner data to become more learner-centred teachers:

We, in our practice, and I speak because I have been teaching for some time, we focus a lot on the more immediate feedback that we have in the classroom, on direct observation, but then we don't have data, we don't collect data. There are students who are more reserved and don't show so much that they have so many difficulties, and over time, we may worry too much about the content, and whether they are learning, but then we forget to stop for a moment and think: "What do they think about this activity? Did they like it? Didn't they like it?" Because sometimes, two or three may not be enjoying it... and it's not because they are two or three that we have to ignore that those children are not understanding or not enjoying the activity. I think individual questionnaires help us to focus and increasingly individualise our practice. (Group 2, ST3, Interview)

### Importance of Personal Convictions on the Value of Autonomy

Self-efficacy beliefs cannot be dissociated from the value attached to autonomy as an educational goal in TEYL. The PTs' accounts (Table 5) revealed that autonomy was valued from learning and teaching perspectives. They underlined connections between learner autonomy and the development of lifelong learning competences, along with the need to implement learner-centred approaches and understand learner autonomy as a collective, cross-curricular educational goal.

Despite believing in the value of learner autonomy and their ability to promote it, the participants raised some doubts regarding future teaching and identified certain constraints (Table 6). The PTs with previous teaching experience stressed contextual constraints to teacher autonomy in schools, whereas those who lacked experience tended to focus on their own insecurities and learners' low readiness for autonomy.

The isolation and low status of English teaching in primary schools were mentioned in both groups, especially by the experienced PTs, as a significant constraint to pedagogical innovation. They mentioned that because English is a relatively recent compulsory subject in primary education, which is taught two hours a week by a specialist teacher who moves between schools, it tends to be undervalued by the teacher responsible for all the other school subjects and who interacts with the

**Table 5.** Convictions on the Value of Autonomy in English Language Teaching/Learning

Learning perspective: Autonomy enhances learners'...	Teaching perspective: Teachers should...
<p>active role and engagement in learning.</p> <p>learning to learn (learning strategies, problem-solving, reflection, self-direction).</p> <p>voice, initiative, responsibility, freedom, empowerment</p> <p>sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem.</p> <p>personal and academic development.</p> <p>readiness and ability to learn independently.</p> <p>readiness to face future challenges.</p>	<p>create a positive atmosphere in the classroom.</p> <p>provide individualised support to learners.</p> <p>foster differentiated instruction.</p> <p>acknowledge the importance of learner autonomy in the English teaching field.</p> <p>see learner autonomy as an interdisciplinary goal and a collective endeavour.</p>

**Table 6.** The Development of Learner Autonomy in Future Teaching: Constraining Factors

PTs with previous experience		PTs without previous experience
Contextual	Personal	Contextual
<p><i>Lack of teacher autonomy due to school constraints</i> (teacher-pupil ratio in class, overdependence on textbooks, shortage/inadequacy of resources, and inadequate space organisation)</p> <p><i>Isolation and low status of English teaching in primary schools</i></p>	<p><i>Insecurities in promoting learner autonomy</i></p>	<p><i>Learners' low readiness for autonomy</i> (lack of learner autonomy as an interdisciplinary goal; learners' dependence on the teacher, need for teacher validation, and low self-efficacy beliefs)</p> <p><i>Isolation and low status of English teaching in primary schools</i></p>

children on a daily basis. Therefore, the participants often found it hard to get collaboration and support from the school mentors, as they were working in isolation. An imbalance of decision-making power was seen to emerge in this context, even in apparently minor aspects like who may erase the classroom board:

I have also been in a context where I went in to teach a class and [the school teacher] forbade me to erase the board, which for me is already an affront, isn't it? I mean, I can't erase the board? I mean, how can we practice and develop learner autonomy if we do not have the autonomy to do what we want? (Group 2, ST2, Interview)

Despite the anticipated constraints, the PTs showed a strong sense of determination to make their voices heard and foster the importance of English teaching in primary schools, underlining the need to enhance the roles of the school, parents, and the community in educational change.

## Discussion

The study aimed at investigating PTs' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to promote learner autonomy, and the factors that enable and constrain those beliefs. The findings revealed that the participants' sense of self-efficacy was relatively high, which dif-

fers from results reported in previous studies (Lin & Reinders, 2019; Manzano Vázquez, 2021; Nakata, 2011). Positive self-efficacy beliefs were mainly attributed to the fact that the ITE programme explicitly prepared them to understand, value, and implement pedagogy for autonomy, which underlines the significant role of teacher education in developing autonomy-oriented professionals (Jiménez Raya et al., 2024).

The enabling factors related to the ITE programme illustrate the importance of mastery experience, vicarious experience, and social persuasion (Bandura, 1997). Mastery experience through engagement in the design of learner-centred approaches and in pedagogical inquiry was highly valued by the PTs and developed their sense of willingness and ability to promote learner autonomy. Vicarious experience through lesson observation and the analysis of peers' narratives and materials, as well as social persuasion arising from learning about pedagogy for autonomy, interacting with others and getting feedback on teaching, were also perceived as enabling factors, especially by the PTs with no previous teaching experience, who had limited practical knowledge.

It is worth noting, however, that self-efficacy beliefs regarding the design of autonomy-oriented materials and activities were more positive than those regarding

the ability to implement them, especially in future teaching contexts. Practical difficulties in teaching are integral to learning to teach, and they may result from the “problem of enactment” (Kennedy, 2016), which refers to the difficulties that PTs often experience in translating theoretical principles of pedagogy for autonomy into classroom practice (see Manzano Vázquez, 2017). This problem cannot be dissociated from some of the constraining factors that were pointed out, such as the lack of previous teaching experience, insufficient support from school mentors (reported in some cases), and prevailing school cultures (e.g., large classes, overdependence on curricula and textbooks, summative assessment practices, and low status of English teaching in primary schools). The fact that university supervisors were perceived to be more influential than school mentors appears to indicate a mismatch between academic and school rationales, underlining the need to reinforce university-school partnerships to better support PTs' efforts to develop pedagogy for autonomy.

In line with previous literature on self-efficacy, the findings stress the key role of practice and pedagogical inquiry (Henson, 2001). By developing autonomy-oriented action-research projects in a supportive environment, PTs had opportunities not only to understand how learner autonomy can be promoted, linking theory with practice, but also to develop a critical stance towards educational settings and a desire to act as agents of change. Their discourse reveals a strong belief in the educational value of learner autonomy, as well as an awareness of constraints and an attitude of resilience towards them. This is crucial for them to develop a sense of agency, which encourages them to challenge established traditions.

Overall, the findings underline that PTs' self-efficacy beliefs for developing learner autonomy can be fostered by creating conditions that enable them to build a critical view of language education, explore ways of centring teaching on learning, interact with others in the professional community, and develop the ability to

face and manage constraints. These are key competences for professional development towards the enactment of pedagogy for autonomy in schools (Jiménez Raya et al., 2017), and ITE programmes can play a decisive role in enhancing those competences.

## Conclusion

According to Bandura (1986), people's judgements of their capacities to deal effectively with different challenges are the most central and pervasive types of thoughts. Self-efficacy beliefs function as a motivational factor in the forethought phase of self-regulation processes, and students who are self-efficacious set more challenging goals and plan more specific, goal-directed strategies to accomplish these goals (Wigfield et al., 2011). Self-efficacy has also been related to interest and task value (McPherson & Renwick, 2011), mastery orientation (i.e., desire to learn; Zimmerman, 2011), and positive outcome expectations (Bandura, 1986). Furthermore, a strong sense of self-efficacy can be considered one of the key individual protective factors essential for overcoming challenging situations, such as implementing a new and demanding pedagogical approach like pedagogy for autonomy. Higher levels of teacher self-efficacy increase the likelihood that teachers will continue to engage in and persist with challenging, effective teaching practices.

Even though the study reported here is small-scale and exploratory, implications can be drawn regarding how ITE can foster self-efficacy beliefs for the development of learner autonomy, the constraints that can be identified, and possible strategies to address them.

The study indicates that ITE programmes can develop PTs' self-efficacy beliefs regarding pedagogy for autonomy by exploring it at theoretical and practical levels, namely by engaging PTs in autonomy-oriented pedagogical inquiry. Nevertheless, personal and contextual factors that may affect those beliefs were also identified. The problem of enacting pedagogy for autonomy highlights the need to develop practical

skills and strategies through vicarious experience, both in campus-based courses and during internships. Working with others is also crucial to build a sense of efficacy (Henson, 2001; Tschanen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). Therefore, ITE programmes need to foster a collaborative culture of teaching where PTs engage in professional dialogue with peers, teacher educators, supervisors, and school mentors about the development of learner autonomy by sharing ideas and practices, discussing concerns, and providing and receiving feedback. Learners can also be an important source of social persuasion, so it is important that PTs learn about how to collect and analyse learner data.

In addition, ITE for autonomy needs to help teachers identify contextual factors that may act as constraining forces and support them in developing strategies for navigating constraints and finding spaces for manoeuvre. The participants point out the danger of conforming or assimilating to the dominant school culture. In ITE settings, nurturing a “re(ide)alistic” stance towards the profession is a crucial pathway to foster resilience and develop prospective teachers’ identity as autonomy-oriented professionals (Vieira et al., 2024). A “re(ide)alistic” stance entails exploring the space between *what is* (reality) and *what should be* (ideals), within a transformative vision of teaching. Building that vision will help PTs challenge prevailing school cultures once they start teaching, rather than conform to them.

The study suggests that more research is needed on how ITE programmes can influence PTs’ self-efficacy beliefs regarding language education for autonomy. Future studies could focus more closely on exploring different strategies to overcome the problem of enactment due to a lack of mastery experiences, examining various ways to enhance vicarious experiences in both higher education institutions and schools. Vicarious experiences designed to influence teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are crucial for fostering an innovative vision of language education and supporting its enactment. In

addition, further studies are needed to explore how internships can provide opportunities for mastery experiences and social persuasion, as well as the extent to which PTs’ professional learning influences their future practices.

Effective teacher education practices are based on collaborative learning, reflective practice, and ongoing support. By associating these principles with a transformative vision of language education, ITE programmes can create an inclusive and empowering environment for prospective teachers, encouraging them to embrace new pedagogical approaches with confidence and enthusiasm, and to become autonomy-oriented educators.

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