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A phenomenological investigation into L2 teachers' autonomy in AI-enhanced classrooms: Focusing on English language teachers' lived experiences

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Abstract

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into second and foreign language (L2) classrooms has reshaped instructional practices and decision-making processes, yet its implications for teacher autonomy remain underexplored. To address this gap, this phenomenological inquiry examined how English language teachers perceive the influence of AI on their autonomy. The study collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews and narrative frames from a purposive sample of 43 English teachers. Hybrid thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software to analyze participants' lived experiences of autonomy in AI-enhanced classrooms as reflected in their narratives, interpretations, and reflections. Findings indicated that AI enhanced English teachers' autonomy over professional teaching by providing access to a wider range of teaching resources and enabling more flexible, personalized approaches. In managing student learning, many teachers reported increased autonomy as AI tools allowed for more tailored and responsive instructional strategies. Regarding professional learning, AI-supported opportunities for

self-directed learning and reflection further reinforced teachers' autonomy. Nonetheless, some teachers experienced reduced autonomy when institutional requirements or the prescriptive design of AI tools limited their pedagogical freedom. Our study contributes to a deeper understanding of how AI technologies can both empower and constrain teacher autonomy and highlights the importance of mindful integration strategies that prioritize teachers' autonomy.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; AI-enhanced classrooms; autonomy; L2 teachers; phenomenological approach

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the infusion of artificial intelligence (AI) into educational environments has significantly reshaped the dynamics of teaching and learning across different domains, including second and foreign language (L2) education (Derakhshan, 2026; Pan & Wang, 2025; Qin & Derakhshan, 2026). AI-powered tools, including adaptive learning platforms, virtual teaching assistants, and intelligent feedback systems, are increasingly being integrated into L2 classroom practices to enhance instructional efficiency, personalize learning paths, and support assessment processes (Divekar et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023; Zou et al., 2025). These tools promise to augment the pedagogical repertoire of language teachers by offering data-driven insights, streamlining administrative tasks, and facilitating differentiated instruction (Kohnke et al., 2023). However, the growing presence of AI tools in classroom contexts raises important questions about their implications for teachers' professional qualities, particularly their autonomy.

Teacher autonomy, as a foundational component of effective teaching, refers to the extent to which teachers can exercise control over key aspects of their professional practices (Benson, 2001, 2008). According to Cirocki and Anam (2024), teacher autonomy is a multifaceted construct that can be operationalized along three key dimensions, namely, *teachers' capacity for self-directed professional teaching*, *teachers' capacity for self-directed professional learning*, and *teachers' freedom from control by others in relation to student learning*. These dimensions are not exercised in a vacuum but are continuously shaped by contextual or environmental factors (Jiménez Raya et al., 2007, 2017). In AI-enhanced classrooms, teachers' autonomy may no longer rest solely on their initiative and expertise (Duan & Zhao, 2024) but rather emerge from shifting educational norms and ongoing interactions with AI systems (Kohnke et al., 2025). This calls for a critical examination of how autonomy is experienced by teachers within AI-enhanced instructional settings.

While the educational implications of AI tools in L2 classrooms have received growing scholarly attention in recent years, most studies have centered

on students' learning outcomes, such as writing performance and speaking proficiency (Derakhshan, 2025; Guo et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2023; Yang & Chen, 2026). Studies focusing on teachers have typically examined surface-level issues such as digital literacy, technology acceptance, and general attitudes toward AI integration (Huang et al., 2019; Sun & Mei, 2022; Yang & Lou, 2026; Zhi et al., 2024). However, such accounts often neglect deeper pedagogical and professional constructs, particularly teacher autonomy, which plays a crucial role in shaping instructional quality and innovation (Jerrim et al., 2023). Moreover, the existing literature has rarely dissected the nuanced ways in which AI shapes teachers' capacity to make independent decisions, manage the learning environment, and pursue meaningful professional development (Derakhshan et al., 2026). As AI systems increasingly mediate lesson planning, content delivery, assessment, and even feedback, they may subtly reconfigure the boundaries of teacher control and autonomy (Le-Khanh et al., 2024; Toohey, 2007). Yet how these shifts are experienced by teachers themselves, particularly in L2 instructional contexts, remains insufficiently explored.

In response to these gaps, the present study investigates how AI shapes teachers' autonomy in L2 instructional contexts. Guided by a phenomenological perspective, it explores English language teachers' lived experiences of working in AI-mediated classrooms to understand how autonomy is enacted, negotiated, and sometimes reconfigured through engagement with AI tools. Rather than treating AI as an external influence on teaching practice, the study conceptualizes teacher autonomy as a dynamic and contextually mediated construct that emerges through teachers' interactions with AI systems, responses to institutional expectations, and pedagogical decision-making. In doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of teacher autonomy in the digital age by highlighting its fluid, relational, and technology-mediated nature.

2. Literature review

To provide the theoretical foundation for the present study, this section reviews three areas of scholarship. It begins by examining AI-enhanced L2 classrooms as the instructional context of the study, then discusses the concept and dimensions of teacher autonomy as its central construct, and finally reviews empirical evidence on the role of AI in teacher autonomy. Together, these strands of research establish the rationale for the present investigation.

2.1. AI-enhanced L2 classrooms

The integration of AI into L2 education is reshaping traditional classroom dynamics and pedagogical practices (Derakhshan & Alrabai, 2026; Derakhshan & Taghizadeh, 2025; Huang et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025; Solhi et al., 2026; Wang & Guo, 2026; Yang, 2026). AI-enhanced L2 classrooms are characterized by the use of intelligent technologies that assist teachers in performing various instructional and administrative tasks, including personalized content delivery, automated feedback, learner analytics, and adaptive assessment (Kohnke et al., 2025). Tools such as intelligent tutoring systems, speech recognition platforms, and conversational chatbots are now being employed to support both learners and teachers in achieving more efficient and individualized learning experiences (Zhou & Hou, 2024). These technologies are not only transforming how language is taught and learned but also redefining the roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes of teachers (Duan & Zhao, 2024). One of the most notable features of AI-enhanced classrooms is the increased availability of real-time data on student performance, which enables teachers to make more informed instructional choices (Kim, 2024). At the same time, AI tools can offer students personalized pathways and feedback, allowing them to progress at their own pace (Xu et al., 2026). While such affordances may enhance instructional efficiency and learner engagement, they also introduce new challenges. Teachers may find themselves relying on algorithm-generated suggestions or automated systems that partially assume tasks traditionally under their control (Barrios-Beltran, 2024). Moreover, the adoption of AI in L2 classrooms often brings institutional expectations for technology integration, which can influence how teachers manage their classroom practices and professional development (Case et al., 2025). As such, the AI-enhanced classroom is not merely a technologically enriched space but a pedagogical ecosystem where human and machine intelligence intersect. This evolving landscape raises critical questions about control and autonomy. Understanding how teachers experience and respond to these changes is essential for informing more balanced and teacher-developed approaches to AI integration in language education.

2.2. Teacher autonomy: The concept and its dimensions

Teacher autonomy is widely regarded as a fundamental concept in educational practice, contributing significantly to teachers' professional identity and instructional effectiveness (Allwright, 1988; Jiménez Raya et al., 2007, 2017; Lamb, 2008). At its core, teacher autonomy refers to the capacity of educators to make informed, independent decisions about their teaching practices, free from excessive external

constraints (Benson, 2010, 2016). This notion extends beyond freedom in the classroom (Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Little, 1995). Rather, it reflects the broader idea that teachers are professionals capable of exercising judgment, taking responsibility for pedagogical choices, and engaging in self-directed professional growth (Lin & Gao, 2023; Paiva, 2011). Indeed, in the critical conceptualization of teacher autonomy proposed by Jiménez Raya et al. (2007, 2017), autonomous teachers critically locate their position within the multivarious constraints on their practice in order to find ways of navigating their professional actions by working around them.

According to Cirocki and Anam (2024), teacher autonomy comprises three interrelated dimensions: *teachers' capacity for self-directed professional teaching*, *capacity for self-directed professional learning*, and *freedom from control by others in relation to student learning*. These aspects of teacher autonomy are not static, nor are they exercised in isolation (Jiménez Raya et al., 2007, 2017). Rather, they are dynamic and deeply embedded in the social, institutional, and cultural contexts in which teaching occurs. Factors such as curricular mandates, institutional policies, accountability measures, and access to resources all play a role in shaping how teacher autonomy is enacted and experienced (Smith & Erdoğan, 2008). Advances in educational technology, particularly the integration of AI, have introduced new forces that may either expand or restrict teachers' autonomy (Duan & Zhao, 2024). As such, teacher autonomy must be understood as a context-sensitive construct, constantly negotiated through interactions with evolving pedagogical tools and institutional structures.

2.3. Role of AI in teacher autonomy

The role of AI in shaping teacher autonomy can be meaningfully understood through the lens of technological mediation theory (TMT; Verbeek, 2016), which conceptualizes technologies as active mediators of human experience and autonomy. According to this perspective, AI does not merely serve as a passive tool for instructional support but actively shapes how teachers perceive their roles, make decisions, and engage with students (Verbeek, 2012). In AI-enhanced classrooms, intelligent systems such as algorithmic feedback tools, adaptive learning platforms, and analytics dashboards mediate the professional actions of teachers by offering recommendations, filtering information, and setting constraints on instructional pathways (Barrios-Beltran, 2024). Such mediations can both enable and restrict teacher autonomy. For example, AI may support teacher autonomy by reducing cognitive load, offering pedagogical insights, or freeing up time for creative teaching (Duan & Zhao, 2024). Conversely, it may also limit teacher autonomy by embedding standardized instructional routines, privileging data-

driven practices, or pressuring teachers to conform to algorithmic logics (Duan & Zhao, 2024). From the standpoint of technological mediation, teacher autonomy is not simply preserved or lost; rather, it is reconstituted through the entanglement of human autonomy and technological influence (Verbeek, 2012, 2016).

Empirical research on the relationship between AI and teacher autonomy is still emerging but has begun to shed light on this complex interplay. Some studies report that AI tools can enhance teachers' autonomy by supporting more informed pedagogical decisions and streamlining routine instructional tasks. For example, Duan and Zhao (2024) found that AI-assisted language learning platforms enabled teachers to customize learning pathways and provide real-time feedback, thereby reinforcing their independent and self-directed teaching practices. Similarly, Yingsoon et al. (2025) observed that the integration of AI technologies shaped the nature of teachers' duties, empowering them with greater autonomy and control over their instructional approaches. However, other research highlights significant constraints associated with AI integration (Kiaer & Jeon, 2024; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). In the context of South Korea's AI Digital Textbook (AIDT) initiative, Kiaer and Jeon (2024) proposed the MERGE framework to support teachers in AI-enhanced classrooms, while noting that algorithmic systems may mediate classroom practices in ways that conflict with teachers' pedagogical values, particularly when institutional policies encourage unquestioning reliance on AI-generated recommendations. Similarly, based on a systematic review of 146 studies on AI applications in higher education, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) observed that existing research has focused predominantly on technological applications, including intelligent tutoring systems, adaptive learning systems, automated assessment, and learner profiling, while paying comparatively little attention to educators' pedagogical roles, professional judgment, and the broader implications of AI for teaching. They cautioned that greater critical reflection is needed to ensure that AI supports, rather than constrains, teachers' professional decision-making. These findings underscore that AI does not function as a neutral instructional aid but as a mediating force that shapes the exercise of teacher autonomy across instructional, managerial, and professional learning domains.

3. Present study

Despite the growing prevalence of AI in the L2 education domain, few studies have explored how this advanced technology shapes language teachers' autonomy. This gap highlights the need for situated, qualitative inquiries that center teachers' voices and lived experiences in such technologically mediated environments. Responding to this need, the present study set out to examine how

English language teachers experienced the influence of AI on their autonomy within AI-enhanced classrooms. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, this phenomenological inquiry offers a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of how AI-powered tools and platforms intersect with teacher autonomy in practice. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

Based on English language teachers' lived experiences, how does AI influence teacher autonomy?

4. Method

4.1. Research design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to examine how English language teachers perceived the impact of AI on their autonomy. Phenomenology, as a methodological approach, is concerned with capturing the lived experiences of individuals and understanding how they perceive those experiences (Heidegger, 2005). Given that teacher autonomy is a context-sensitive construct (Jiménez Raya et al., 2007, 2017), particularly in AI-enhanced classrooms where autonomy is mediated through interactions with intelligent technologies, a phenomenological design was well suited to uncovering the nuanced ways in which teachers experience autonomy. Consistent with the aims of phenomenological inquiry, the study prioritized depth of understanding over statistical generalizability, seeking to generate rich, detailed, and interpretive accounts of teachers' reflections on how AI influences their autonomy in L2 instructional contexts.

4.2. Setting and participants

This study was conducted in Iran in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) education, where the integration of AI into instructional practices is gradually gaining momentum across various educational institutions. The setting included a diverse range of teaching environments, such as universities, private language institutes, and public high schools, where AI tools have begun to shape classroom practices. These institutions represented different levels of technological adoption and institutional support, providing a rich backdrop for examining how teachers perceived the impact of AI use on their autonomy within varied instructional settings. A total of 43 Iranian EFL teachers (24 females, 19 males) participated in the study (see Table 1).

Table 1 Demographic information

Category	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	19	44%
Female	24	56%
<i>Age</i>		
26-30	21	49%
30-35	9	21%
35-40	8	19%
45+	5	11%
<i>Major</i>		
Teaching English as a Foreign Language	23	53%
English Language and Literature	20	47%
<i>Highest degree obtained</i>		
MA	27	63%
PhD	16	37%
<i>Teaching experience</i>		
1-5	7	16%
6-10	17	39%
11-15	9	22%
16-20	7	16%
20-25	3	7%
<i>Educational institution</i>		
School	10	23%
University	17	40%
Language Institute	16	37%

The participants were selected through maximum variation sampling to ensure a wide range of experiences based on institutional affiliation, teaching experience, and degree of engagement with AI technologies. Their ages ranged from 27 to 52 years, and they had between 4 and 25 years of teaching experience. In terms of academic background, 23 teachers held degrees in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), while 20 held degrees in English language and literature (ELL). Regarding their highest educational qualifications, 27 participants held a master's degree (MA), and 16 had earned a PhD in their respective fields. Participants also varied in their use of AI technologies in the classroom, with some relying on basic tools such as automated writing feedback systems, while others engaged more extensively with AI-based content generation platforms, learning analytics, or adaptive instructional systems. This diversity enabled a more comprehensive exploration of how AI mediates teacher autonomy across different professional, technological, and institutional contexts.

4.3. Data-gathering instruments

4.3.1. In-depth semi-structured interview

As the primary data collection instrument, an in-depth semi-structured interview protocol was developed to explore participants' personal interpretations

and lived experiences of their autonomy in AI-enhanced classrooms. This qualitative method was chosen because it allows for both structure and flexibility, enabling the researcher to cover key topics systematically while also following up on participants' unique experiences. Through this approach, teachers were encouraged to elaborate on how they perceived the influence of AI technologies on their autonomy over professional teaching, professional learning, and student learning.

The interview guide comprised five core questions (see Appendix A), which were carefully aligned with the conceptual framework of the study and addressed the three dimensions of teacher autonomy outlined by Cirocki and Anam (2024) (i.e., capacity for self-directed professional teaching, capacity for self-directed professional learning, and freedom from control by others in relation to student learning). To ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness, the interview protocol underwent a content validation process. Three experts in the fields of applied linguistics and educational technology reviewed the questions for alignment with the objectives of the study. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to refine the wording and enhance the conceptual precision of the questions.

4.3.2. Narrative frame

In addition to the interview, a narrative frame was used as a complementary data collection tool to elicit structured yet personal reflections from participants regarding the impact of AI on their autonomy. Narrative frames are semi-structured written prompts designed to guide participants in recounting specific experiences while still allowing room for individual expression and contextual detail (Barkhuizen, 2015). These frames are valued in language education research for examining individual, situationally grounded accounts (Rui et al., 2025), which aligns well with the phenomenological approach adopted in the present research. Participants were provided with a partially completed paragraph (see Appendix B) and asked to reflect on their personal understanding of teacher autonomy as well as the ways AI tools had either supported or constrained their autonomy.

4.3.3. Procedure

The data collection procedure was carried out in two sequential phases over the course of four weeks. Initially, through common messaging applications (e.g., Telegram, WhatsApp), invitations were extended to English language teachers working at universities, private language institutes, and public high schools in various regions of Iran. This approach ensured a diverse pool of participants in terms of teaching

experience, academic background, institutional affiliation, and degree of engagement with AI technologies in their instructional practices.

In the first phase, participants were invited to take part in interview sessions, which were conducted online through secure videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Skype). Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was guided by five core open-ended questions designed to explore how teachers experienced autonomy in AI-mediated classrooms. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to probe further based on participants' responses, enabling the collection of rich, nuanced accounts of their experiences. All interviews were conducted primarily in English, which served as the main language of interaction. However, where participants experienced difficulty expressing complex or nuanced ideas, they were encouraged to use Persian to ensure accuracy and depth of expression. In such cases, the researchers translated the relevant segments into English, and a back-translation procedure was employed to ensure semantic equivalence and to maintain the integrity and fidelity of the reported data.

In the second phase, the same participants were asked to complete the narrative frame, which served as a follow-up instrument to the in-depth semi-structured interview. While the interviews provided interactive, real-time accounts of teachers' experiences, the narrative frame allowed participants to reflect more deeply and systematically on specific moments when AI influenced their autonomy. The prompts guided them to recount concrete examples and personal stories related to their autonomy in professional teaching, professional learning, and student learning. The narrative frame was administered electronically via Google Forms, approximately one week after the interviews, and participants were asked to submit their responses within five to seven days.

Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with an informed consent letter, which outlined the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Participants reviewed and signed the consent form electronically, confirming their agreement to take part in this study.

4.3.4. Data analysis

The data collected from the in-depth semi-structured interviews and narrative frames were analyzed using a hybrid deductive and inductive thematic analysis, an approach well suited for phenomenological research as it balances theoretical guidance with sensitivity to participants' lived experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis was guided by Cirocki and Anam's (2024) three-dimensional conceptualization of teacher autonomy (i.e., autonomy over professional teaching, student learning, and professional learning), which served as a

sensitizing framework informing both the development of the interview and narrative frame prompts and the initial orientation of the analysis process. At the same time, the analysis remained inductive, allowing for the identification of meanings, nuances, and themes that extended beyond the predefined framework and emerged directly from the participants' lived experiences.

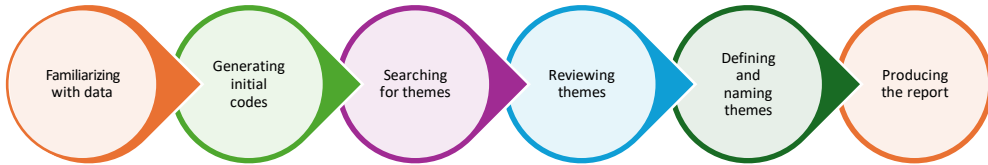


Figure 1 Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure (see Figure 1), the analysis began with data familiarization, during which all interview transcripts and narrative frames were read repeatedly to develop a deep understanding of the content. Initial codes were generated both deductively, based on the autonomy framework, and inductively, from participants' descriptions. These codes were then organized into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the richness and diversity of the data. In the final stages, themes were clearly defined, named, and mapped, and illustrative excerpts from the interviews and narrative frames were incorporated to support the interpretation. All phases of the analysis were jointly conducted by both researchers to reduce individual bias and enhance the overall trustworthiness of the findings. Intercode reliability was assessed on a randomly selected subset of the data. The resulting Cohen's kappa (κ) coefficient was .93, indicating a high level of agreement between the coders.

In line with the criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), several strategies were employed to enhance the *credibility*, *confirmability*, *dependability*, and *transferability* of this study. To enhance credibility, multiple data sources (interviews and narrative frames) were triangulated, and all phases of the analysis were jointly conducted by the researchers. Credibility was further enhanced through member checking, in which a random sample of teachers ($N = 20$) reviewed the identified themes and subthemes in relation to their lived experiences. Moreover, to ensure confirmability, the researchers minimized potential bias through reflexivity by continually reflecting on their own interpretations and ensuring that the themes and subthemes emerged from participants' lived experiences rather than from preconceived assumptions. Furthermore, dependability was addressed by maintaining an explicit audit trail in which all stages of data collection and analysis were documented. Finally, transferability was supported by offering rich

descriptions of the research setting, participants' professional backgrounds, and the educational context, thereby allowing readers to judge the relevance and applicability of the findings to their own contexts.

5. Findings

The analysis of the interviews and narrative frames provided valuable insights into how AI integration influenced teachers' autonomy. Guided by Cirocki and Anam's (2024) conceptualization of teacher autonomy, the findings are organized around three major themes: (1) *autonomy over professional teaching*, (2) *autonomy over student learning*, and (3) *autonomy over professional learning*.

5.1. Autonomy over professional teaching

The findings of the thematic analysis revealed that the integration of AI tools generally expanded participants' autonomy over professional teaching. Most teachers ($N = 37$, 86%) indicated that AI-supported tools provided them with broader access to instructional resources, enhanced flexibility in lesson planning, and greater confidence in adapting teaching methods to meet students' evolving needs. AI enabled teachers to move beyond rigid textbook structures and design more dynamic, personalized lessons. One participant remarked: "AI tools have given me more ideas for designing activities and assessments. Before, I followed the textbook too closely, but now I have been able to create more engaging lessons" (T5; Interview). Likewise, another teacher noted: "I have felt more independent in planning because AI platforms have offered suggestions for content that I can adapt. It has saved time and allowed me to focus on students' interests" (T9; Interview). A completed narrative frame illustrates this further:

Since I started using AI tools in my English language teaching, they have positively influenced my ability to make decisions about classroom content, teaching methods, and assessments by providing a wide range of adaptable materials and innovative ideas. One particular situation where AI has impacted my autonomy over my professional teaching occurred when I have used an AI text generator to modify a reading passage and create discussion questions tailored to my students' level and interests. Reflecting on my overall experience, I believe that AI has strengthened my autonomy as an English teacher because I have felt more empowered to design lessons that suit my students. (T22)

However, a few teachers ($N = 6$, 14%) expressed concerns that AI could limit their autonomy over professional teaching. They reported feeling pressured to rely

on AI-generated suggestions, which sometimes conflicted with their professional judgment and pedagogical beliefs. For instance, one participant stated: "Sometimes, I have felt pressured to follow AI recommendations even when I didn't fully agree. It made me question whether I was losing control over my own instructional choices" (T3; Interview). A narrative frame that reflects this negative experience is as follows:

Since I started using AI tools in my English language teaching, they have negatively influenced my ability to make decisions about classroom content, teaching methods, and assessments by encouraging me to depend heavily on AI suggestions, which sometimes do not align with my pedagogical beliefs. One particular situation where AI impacted my autonomy over professional teaching occurred when I felt compelled to use AI-generated lesson plans that didn't suit my students' specific needs. (T16)

5.2. Autonomy over student learning

The findings showed that almost all participants ($N = 39$, 90%) reported that AI tools had enhanced their control over student learning. The teachers reported that AI systems allowed them to better monitor students' progress, provide timely and personalized feedback, and adjust learning activities based on individual needs. AI-enabled tools facilitated differentiated instruction and empowered teachers to exercise greater control over the learning process, even in large or mixed-ability classes. One participant commented: "AI tools have helped me track which students need extra support. I have been able to plan follow-up activities more effectively, which has made me feel more in charge of their learning" (T11; Interview). Another teacher observed: "Before using AI, I struggled with personalizing learning in big classes. Since then, AI has given me feedback that helps me manage different students' needs more easily" (T6; Interview). A completed narrative frame offers further insight:

These tools have also improved the way I manage students' learning activities by helping me monitor their progress and tailor activities to their needs. A different situation where AI has affected my autonomy over student learning happened when I have used an AI-powered assessment tool to identify areas where certain students need extra practice, and then assigned targeted exercises for them. Reflecting on my overall experience, I believe that AI has strengthened my autonomy as an English teacher because I have had more effective ways to manage and support students' individual learning paths. (T20)

Despite the benefits, some teachers ($N = 4$, 10%) noted that AI tools sometimes constrained their capacity to manage student learning independently. For example, automated feedback systems were occasionally too generic and rigid, limiting teachers' ability to adapt or customize learning activities to meet students' individual needs. A participant remarked: "The AI feedback is useful but sometimes

too generic. I have felt limited in adapting it because the system doesn't allow much customization" (T10; Interview). A corresponding narrative frame reads:

These tools have also restricted the way I manage students' learning activities by providing standardized feedback that doesn't always reflect my students' unique needs. A different situation where AI affected my autonomy over student learning happened when I wanted to modify AI-generated assignments, but the platform didn't allow me to make sufficient changes. (T33)

5.3. Autonomy over professional learning

The data indicated that all participants ($N = 43$, 100%) felt that AI integration positively influenced their autonomy in pursuing professional development. AI tools exposed teachers to new instructional techniques, resources, and ideas, encouraging self-directed learning and continuous skill enhancement. Teachers reported that AI-powered platforms helped them stay updated on emerging trends in language teaching and promoted reflective practice. One participant reflected: "AI tools have constantly introduced me to new ways of teaching. I have been learning more on my own, without waiting for formal workshops" (T8; Interview). In a similar vein, another teacher noted: "With AI, I have been able to explore different teaching strategies online at my own pace. It has given me more freedom in shaping my professional growth" (T4; Interview). A completed narrative frame illustrates this point further:

In terms of professional development, the presence of AI has supported my growth by exposing me to new teaching techniques and resources. A situation where AI has influenced my autonomy over professional learning was when I have joined an online AI teaching community, where I have learned innovative ways to integrate AI tools into my lessons. Reflecting on my overall experience, I believe that AI has strengthened my autonomy as an English teacher because it has empowered me to take charge of my own professional learning. (T7)

Unlike the other aspects of teacher autonomy, in which both positive and negative influences of AI were observed, participants unanimously described the impact of AI on their autonomy over professional learning as wholly positive. Rather than constraining their growth, AI was consistently seen as an enabler of greater access to learning opportunities, resources, and professional networks.

6. Discussion

This study, grounded in a phenomenological approach, set out to illuminate how the adoption of AI technologies shaped the autonomy of L2 teachers. Specifically,

it explored how these technologies affected English language teachers' ability to make autonomous decisions about their teaching practices, manage the dynamics of student learning, and chart their own paths in professional development. The findings derived from thematic analysis revealed that most participants experienced AI as a supportive tool that enhanced their autonomy over professional teaching and student learning. Interestingly, while both positive and negative influences of AI were observed on teachers' autonomy over professional teaching and student learning, participants uniformly perceived AI's impact on their autonomy over professional learning as positive.

The positive influence of AI on various dimensions of teacher autonomy can be theoretically explained through the lens of TMT (Verbeek, 2016), which posits that technologies do not simply function as neutral tools but actively mediate human experiences and practices. From this perspective, technologies such as AI shape how individuals perceive their work environment, make decisions, and engage with their professional roles. In this study, AI tools likely mediated teachers' instructional thinking and classroom practices by offering new possibilities for content delivery, differentiated instruction, and adaptive feedback. This form of mediation, as shown by the findings of the study, empowered teachers to make more informed instructional decisions, manage student learning more flexibly, and pursue professional development by accessing AI-driven resources and networks. Rather than diminishing teacher autonomy, AI acted as a pedagogical partner, broadening the scope of what teachers felt capable of doing. These findings are consistent with those reported by Duan and Zhao (2024) and Yingsoon et al. (2025), who found that the integration of AI technologies enhanced teachers' autonomy across different educational contexts. They further argued that when teachers engaged with AI tools in a reflective and adaptive manner, their sense of autonomy and professional control increased, enabling them to take greater ownership of their instructional and professional development practices.

However, the findings also revealed that, for some teachers, AI integration introduced new constraints on their autonomy, particularly in relation to professional teaching and student learning. Some participants felt that AI-generated recommendations or institutional pressures to adopt certain AI tools restricted their ability to exercise their professional judgment or implement personalized teaching strategies. In these cases, rather than acting as a neutral partner, AI technologies were perceived as subtly narrowing teachers' instructional choices or fostering overreliance on algorithmic suggestions. These insights align with the findings of Kiaer and Jeon (2024), who observed that, in certain contexts, the implementation of AI tools resulted in heightened administrative control, which in turn limited teachers' pedagogical freedom. These insights also support the findings of Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019), who reported that automation driven by AI and

data analytics can restrict teachers' autonomy, particularly when institutional goals prioritize efficiency and standardization over professional discretion. Taken together, these results suggest that while AI has the potential to enhance teacher autonomy, its impact is constrained by broader contextual or environmental factors, including administrative practices and institutional policies.

Interestingly, the study did not reveal any negative experiences related to the impact of AI on teachers' autonomy over professional learning. This absence may reflect the unique nature of teachers' professional growth, which often involves self-directed learning and exploration beyond immediate classroom pressures (Borg, 2018; Richards & Farrell, 2005). AI tools frequently offer personalized learning opportunities, access to vast resources, and platforms for collaboration (Tan et al., 2024), which can naturally align with teachers' intrinsic motivations for professional advancement (Appova & Arbaugh, 2018; Yang, 2021). Moreover, unlike teaching or classroom management practices that may be subject to institutional regulations or constraints imposed by AI systems, professional learning is typically more flexible and directed by teachers (Avalos, 2011). Thus, while AI integration may pose challenges in certain instructional domains, its role in supporting autonomous professional development appears to be largely positive and less contested among teachers.

Despite offering important insights, this study is not without limitations. First, it focused solely on the lived experiences of Iranian English teachers, which limits the transferability of the findings. Cross-cultural studies could help reveal how the interplay between AI and teacher autonomy varies across different cultural or educational contexts. Second, the study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews and narrative frames as primary data sources. Although these instruments elicited rich reflections, they may not fully capture how autonomy is enacted in everyday classroom practices. Thus, complementary data collection methods, such as classroom observations, could offer more comprehensive insights. Third, while this study explored teachers' overall experiences of AI's influence, it did not systematically differentiate between the effects of specific AI applications (such as generative AI tools, automated feedback systems, or adaptive learning technologies). Future research should investigate how different types of AI technologies uniquely influence various facets of teacher autonomy.

7. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, this study advances our understanding of teacher autonomy in AI-enhanced language education by moving beyond viewing autonomy as a stable individual capacity or a fixed set of professional rights. Instead, it conceptualizes

teacher autonomy as a relational construct that is continuously (re)shaped through teachers' engagement with AI systems, responses to institutional expectations, and pedagogical decision-making processes. By applying Cirocki and Anam's (2024) framework within AI-mediated contexts, the findings demonstrate that autonomy is not merely influenced by technology but is actively reconfigured through human-AI interaction, in which AI tools simultaneously enable, structure, and sometimes delimit teachers' autonomy. This reconceptualization offers a more nuanced understanding of autonomy as an emergent and context-dependent phenomenon in digitally mediated educational environments. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of creating educational environments in which AI serves to strengthen rather than diminish teacher autonomy. For language teacher educators, this underscores the need to integrate AI literacy into both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, with an emphasis not only on developing technical competence but also on cultivating teachers' capacity to critically evaluate AI-generated content, make informed pedagogical decisions, and adapt AI tools to the specific needs of their learners and instructional contexts. For practicing teachers, the findings suggest that AI should be used as a pedagogical partner that supports, rather than replaces, professional judgment, creativity, and instructional flexibility. At the institutional level, educational policymakers and administrators should provide sustained professional development opportunities and establish flexible policies that encourage teachers to exercise discretion in selecting, adapting, and implementing AI technologies. Finally, fostering ongoing collaboration among language teachers, teacher educators, AI developers, and educational leaders can facilitate the design and implementation of AI-supported pedagogical practices that enhance instructional quality while preserving teachers' professional autonomy.

8. Conclusions

The current research aimed to examine how AI integration shaped the autonomy of L2 teachers. In particular, it examined how English language teachers experienced changes in their autonomy to make teaching decisions, manage student learning, and engage in professional development within AI-enhanced classrooms. Drawing on teachers' lived experiences, the findings revealed that AI technologies generally supported and enhanced teachers' autonomy in these areas, particularly by providing access to new instructional resources, facilitating more personalized student learning, and broadening avenues for professional growth. At the same time, some teachers reported constraints arising from institutional policies and the standardized nature of certain AI-generated content,

which occasionally limited their autonomy. These results highlight the complex and multifaceted impact of AI on teacher autonomy, suggesting that AI's influence is not uniformly positive or negative but depends heavily on the context in which it is integrated and the teachers who implement it. Teachers' experiences indicate that AI can serve as a valuable tool that empowers educators when aligned with their pedagogical goals and supported by enabling institutional frameworks. Conversely, AI may hinder autonomy when its use is rigidly prescribed or when teachers are not adequately involved in decision-making processes.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions

1. How do you define “teacher autonomy” in your own terms as an English language teacher?
2. In what ways has the use of AI tools influenced your ability to make decisions about classroom content, teaching methods, or assessments?
3. Have AI tools changed the way you manage students’ learning activities? If yes, how?
4. How has the integration of AI in your teaching context influenced your professional development as an English teacher?
5. Can you recall a situation where the integration of AI influenced your autonomy over professional teaching, professional learning, and student learning?

APPENDIX B

Narrative frame

Title: My story of autonomy in the AI-powered English language classroom

Instructions: Please complete the paragraph below based on your own lived experiences. Feel free to describe either positive or negative impacts of AI on your autonomy.

To me, teacher autonomy means _____. Since I started using AI tools in my English language teaching, they have **[positively/negatively]** influenced my ability to make decisions about classroom content, teaching methods, and assessments by _____. These tools have also **[improved/restricted]** the way I manage students' learning activities by _____. In terms of professional development, the presence of AI has **[supported/limited]** my growth by _____.

One particular situation where AI impacted my autonomy over professional teaching occurred when _____. A different situation where AI affected my autonomy over student learning happened when _____. Finally, a situation where AI influenced my autonomy over professional learning was when _____. Reflecting on my overall experience, I believe that AI has **[strengthened/weakened]** my autonomy as an English teacher because _____.