

**Entry-Level English EFL Teachers' Understanding  
and Perceived Realization of Teacher Autonomy**

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**【Abstract】**

Most education experts would agree that good teachers should be given opportunities to develop a high degree of teacher autonomy regarding their professional judgment. This study examines entry-level English teachers' assertion of their autonomy in four areas: the content of their teaching, teaching methodology, assessment, and professional development. Utilizing the descriptive qualitative method, the study investigated a cohort from a teacher professional development program consisting of 14 entry-level English teachers as participants. The data were collected employing a questionnaire, journal entries and interviews where the participants reported the understanding and awareness of teacher autonomy and the level of perceived realization of teacher autonomy. The findings revealed that the participants' understanding of the concept of teacher autonomy was highly influenced by the implementation of top-down educational policies that impacted the extent to which teachers can be autonomous in their professional judgment. The participants tended to have a low level of autonomy concerning the subject content, moderate level of autonomy in assessment, and relatively high level of autonomy in the teaching methodology and teaching strategies used in the classroom. Furthermore, there is an apparent split in the autonomy in the professional development which was highly dependent on whether the participants got financial support and could return to the previous teaching position.

**【Key Words】**

English as Foreign Language, Entry-level Teacher, Teacher Autonomy, Professional Development

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## 1. Introduction

The notion of teacher autonomy has been of interest to teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers who invest in the betterment of the teaching profession. Over a decade ago, Benson (2008) called for more research in the area of teacher autonomy to better understand how instructors develop autonomy and how they are afforded and given opportunities to do so. Early on, Stenhouse (1984) already recognized that teachers are supposed to be autonomous in their professional judgment. In performing their teaching responsibilities, teachers have to deal with other individuals within the teaching environment and parts of institutions that influence their teaching practices and the decisions they have to make (La Ganza, 2008). Furthermore, La Ganza also argues that teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interrelational; teacher autonomy would encourage the development of learner autonomy. In other words, it is hard to expect learners to develop a strong sense of autonomy if the teachers do not have the awareness of their own autonomy and are willing to nurture the proper teaching and learning atmosphere, support, and guidance of how to cultivate autonomy in learners. However, recently there has been more interest in, and a sense of flux regarding research into teacher autonomy, with greater emphasis on the contexts where teacher autonomy and creativity are traditionally lacking due to restrictive policies and an unsupportive sociocultural climate.

In the Indonesian context, policy reforms have had the effect of decentralizing power and control to the periphery, allowing decisions to be made by local actors to better fit their local needs (Asian Development Bank & OEDC, 2015; Sumarto, Suryahadi, & Arifianto, 2004). Where the educational policy has been centralized despite great discrepancies in the educational, sociocultural, and economic situations on the ground, teacher autonomy has been a contested notion. Bjork (2003) pointed out the paradox that while the government takes control over the curriculum, textbook assignments, assessment and other aspects of teaching and learning, which are still largely centralized, the policy declares that local institutions have autonomy in managing education in their areas. Muttaqin et al. (2016) found that since the decentralization officially commenced in 2003, there has been a slight improvement in educational attainment in most provinces but discrepancies among municipalities increased. Moreover, rural areas and less developed municipalities have lagged behind in their educational improvements. Similar findings were reported by Leer (2016), noting that there was no significant improvement in education quality as a result of decentralization. In fact, overall teacher effort was found to decrease, especially in schools with inactive school committees. These studies suggest that even though policies have been put in place to give the municipalities and schools greater authority, the stakeholders (primarily teachers) have been hesitant to exercise greater autonomy. There have been pronouncements from leaders to urge teachers and other stakeholders to revise their roles in an effort to become more autonomous; however, without paying attention to fixing the fundamental aspects that would allow autonomy to flourish, not much can be expected. As a result, the culture of dutiful obedience by teachers which had been asserted for decades remained strong, and that has led to perpetuation of the

*status quo*. To improve the overall condition of education in Indonesia, Alwasilah (2001) admits that it "depends on many variables. Mixed in are the teachers, student motivation, textbooks, bureaucrats' attitudes, and government policy" (p. 48).

Within this educational climate where control over educational decisions remains centralized, it is important to build a greater sense of teacher autonomy from the ground up. Teachers should be trained to assert their teacher autonomy in the best interests of students and learning outcomes. With this in mind, the current study was conducted to examine teacher autonomy among a cohort entry-level teachers who had served in disadvantaged rural areas. Asserting fuller teacher autonomy in these areas is of great importance since teachers need to make critical instructional decisions in dealing with educational and sociocultural contexts which are often challenging. Furthermore, the notion of teachers' new and democratic professionalism is understood to be more personal, contextualized, implicit (Svensson, 2006) and intricately attached to the teachers' ability and performance to make sound pedagogical and other decisions and uphold a responsibility that could go beyond the classroom (Whitty, 2006).

## **2. Teacher Autonomy**

The notion of teacher autonomy is admittedly a western construct that relates to "autonomy as independence" as proposed by Boud in 1981 (Benson, 2008). Apparently, Boud was the first who systematically addressed the issues of autonomy from the perspective of teachers working in formal institutional contexts of higher education. Benson (2000) argues that teacher autonomy can be defined as the right of a teacher to have freedom from control and have the ability to exercise this right. In this case, the notion of autonomy in language learning tends to be inward-looking, requiring the teacher to be reflective in their practice and possess a good understanding of what is expected of the students in the short and long term. Hacker and Barkhuizen (2008) relate the concept of teacher autonomy to the capacity to self-direct one's own professional development. First and foremost it depends on developing a sense of awareness. In addition, it stems from confidence in their personal theories and the development of reflectivity to enable them to reflect on and develop them further. Granted, it is quite a challenge to inculcate transformative teacher autonomy because it demands that the teacher acquires skills and build knowledge to appropriately exercise their autonomy in class and beyond.

In light of efforts to harness learner autonomy, La Ganza (2008) argues that teacher autonomy is actually the prerequisite condition. In fact, these two constructs are interrelated. Little (1995) asserts that, "If... learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, then the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy" ( p. 179, in Mosejko, 2014, p.39). That this is the case follows naturally because it is very difficult to imagine that learner autonomy could be developed to its fullest potential without teachers' awareness and exercise of their own autonomy in making interventions and decisions in the best interests of the students. Hacker and Barkhuizen (2008) also suggest that greater awareness of autonomy as a teacher can potentially lead to more positive attitudes towards learner autonomy.

Moreover, in the post-method era that we find ourselves now, education signifies teacher autonomy; it recognizes teachers' potentials "to know not only how to teach but also know how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula and textbooks" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 10).

However, in more recent years, due to stricter regulations and expectations that larger institutions impose on teachers, which make teachers more accountable toward certain regulations, it has been more difficult to exercise teacher autonomy (Goodwyn & Branson, 2005). In the case of the United States, this can be seen in the pressure that districts have applied on schools, vis-à-vis teachers, to perform according to predetermined standards that require students to meet minimum test scores to be eligible for funding and other resources.

### **3. The Study**

This study was part of a course for entry-level English teachers who had served in schools in the under-resourced areas. The research foci the study is particularly interested in investigating are (1) the participants' awareness of the concept of teacher autonomy, and (2) the participants' perceived level of autonomy in their teaching practices. There were 14 teachers enrolled in this course and they were taught subjects related to content and pedagogical knowledge as well as classroom action research and English test preparation. The topic of teacher autonomy was an integral part of the course, which met for 16 sessions. It was part of the program goal; that is, to help the teachers develop a greater sense of autonomy upon the completion of the program. This present study therefore looked at how the course via readings, discussions, and reflections had provided the entry-level English teachers with an enhanced understanding about teacher autonomy and how they were able to reflect on their asserted autonomy in their previous teaching experience.

The 14 participants consisted of 12 females and two males, coded as P1 – P14, who have been teaching for four to six years at public middle schools in areas of West Java. These teachers served as non-permanent teachers, as the term is used in the Indonesian education system to describe contract teachers who have not been granted full-time status which would provide job security. This status, as it turns out, has a significant impact on their training and educational pursuits as most schools and programs do not cover costs for these non-permanent teachers.

The study employed a qualitative case study research design, one that is generally understood to help find out "how people make sense out of their lives...and describe how people interpret their experience" (Merriam, 2009, p. 14) in the context of "a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. 'a case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident (Yin, 2009, p. 10). The instruments used were a questionnaire with a Likert scale and open-ended items, reflection journals and interviews. The questionnaires asked about perceived teacher autonomy in different aspects of teaching: the content for the English subject, teaching methodology, assessment, and professional development. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate the level of the perceived

autonomy in their previous teaching experiences, on a 0-10 scale (0 being given no autonomy whatsoever, 10 being given full autonomy in all of the decision making). The purpose of assigning 0 to 10 in the questionnaire was to give enough space to solicit the level of perceived autonomy. In the analysis, 0 – 4 is considered low autonomy, 5 – 7 is considered moderate level of autonomy, and 8 – 10 as having high autonomy. The open-ended items asked questions related to their efforts of being autonomous as English teachers. The reflection journals provided the data of illustration and examples of decisions, actions, and thoughts regarding their teacher autonomy.

#### **4. Findings**

The findings reported here correspond to the foci of the study which examines the entry-level-EFL teachers' awareness of teacher autonomy and the perceived realization of the teacher autonomy in their teaching experience.

##### **1. Awareness of Teacher Autonomy**

The findings indicated that after taking several sessions on exploring and discussing the notion of teacher autonomy, the participants had a better awareness of the concept of teacher autonomy. Before taking the course in which they were involved in the discussions on teacher autonomy, most said that they had hardly thought of the concept and its implementation in regard to their teaching. One common thread found throughout the responses in the journals is that teacher autonomy should provide teachers with a sense of empowerment to believe and act based on the best interest of the students and their learning. This can be seen in the responses below taken from the participants' reflection journals:

*Thus, teacher autonomy can be interpreted as the independence and flexibility of the teacher in managing the overall learning activities based on the applicable curriculum, starting from planning, delivering the lessons and learning evaluation. With teacher autonomy, teachers can develop their creativity in using and developing media and choosing effective, efficient and attractive learning strategies. (P5)*

*In the law on the teacher profession, it is stated that teachers should be afforded space to exercise their autonomy. It is part of their professional authority to assert certain level of autonomy for the success of the teaching and learning in their class. (P10)*

*Teacher autonomy should empower teachers to make decisions from planning the lesson to assessment and evaluation. (P13)*

*A teacher has the autonomy or authority to decide what he or she should do with regard to learning activities in the school. Such authority relates to curriculum, content and materials used when teaching; teaching methods or technique; assessment; and professional development. (P14)*

These responses above show that the participants make linkages between autonomy and the authority to manage lessons from the lesson planning stage, implementation, and evaluation. The participants also perceived their professionalism could be seen in the autonomy they could exercise. Professional teachers, in their views, are those who are capable of making sound pedagogical judgment concerning the materials, teaching methods, activities, and assessment depending on the dynamic situation they find in the on-going lessons throughout the year as stated in P5, P13, and P14. In addition, they also make remarks on the importance of the teacher autonomy in enhancing their professional development (P14).

For entry-level teachers, it is of great importance to increase their awareness of teacher autonomy and to recognize that they have the space to exercise their autonomy. This is particularly crucial because when entry-level teachers start their profession in schools, not all schools with the leadership team would be supportive and conducive for teacher autonomy to flourish. In many schools in Indonesia, unfortunately, the hierarchy of seniority and ranks may diminish the opportunity afforded to the entry-level teachers some level of autonomy. Moreover, the entry-level teachers are in a vulnerable position as their employment status as contract teachers could put them in a difficult situation when demanding too much autonomy, as can be seen in the presentation regarding their choice of enjoining professional development training toward the end of the analysis.

The data from the reflection journal also immediately reveal that, when reflecting on their teaching experience, the participants felt that in reality, teacher autonomy is more difficult to realize. Most participants attribute this to the top-down policy implementation that requires the school leadership to impose what is supposed to be models or guidelines for teachers. One example of rigid implementation of the regulation in ELT is the format of the lesson plans. Many teachers are concerned with the layout and format of the lesson plans rather than the content itself. Another example would be on the format of the student assessments; teachers would have the same assessment techniques and rubrics because they perceive that formats would be one of the important aspects when the school leadership and supervisors evaluate their teaching performance.

The representation of the participants' responses regarding the realization of teacher autonomy are presented below:

*This course had enlightened me on the idea of teacher autonomy, but it is harder to realize it in real teaching situation. As much as I wish to actualize autonomy as a teacher, we are bound with rules and we must follow them. (P3)*

*A teacher should have the autonomy if it is to be called a profession, but we are far from its realization.(P4)*

*I am not very autonomous when teaching in class when determining lesson plans and learning resources, I am not so autonomous because the government has determined the textbook and curriculum that must be implemented. (P7)*

*We learned about teacher autonomy here and it's a positive thing. I'd love to see teachers being supported to exercise their autonomy. (P12)*

The participants' responses above indicate that most of them thought that there were challenges in asserting greater teacher autonomy. As stated by P3 and P7, the top-down policies either from the government or the school authorities involving the curriculum and learning resources, had created barriers for asserting greater teacher autonomy. Participants P4 and P12 further stated that having greater autonomy should be the goals for professional teachers and that schools should provide support for teachers to be more autonomous. Regarding this, it is apparent that the schools' supportive atmosphere for allowing greater teacher autonomy seems lacking which is signposted in the inclusivity in their remarks (i.e. the use of pronoun *we*), indicating that besides having the experience of limited autonomy themselves, they also observed the similar situations with their teacher colleagues, despite being full time in-service teachers in their respective teaching contexts.

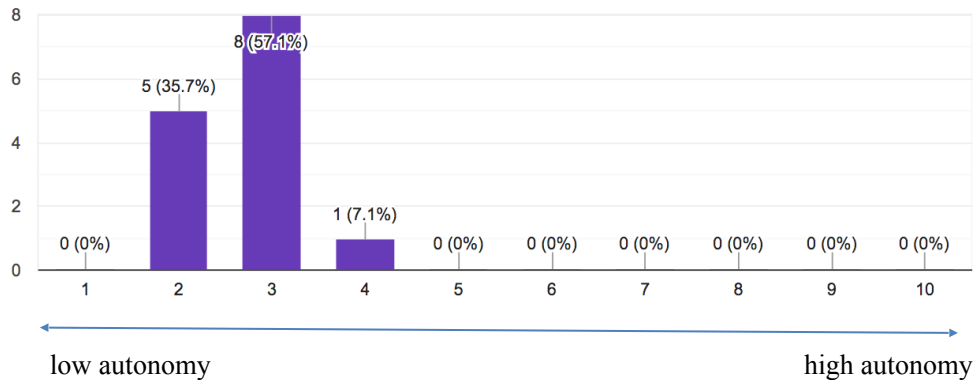
## **2. Perceived Realization of Teacher Autonomy**

In this study, the participants had the opportunity to reflect on how teacher autonomy had manifested in their teaching experience. Given that all of the participants were taking the teacher professionalism training to be certified teachers, at the moment of data collection, the participants were not taking full time teaching positions. During the course, it was emphasized that in developing healthy teacher autonomy, teachers would be required to be reflective, more responsible in their teaching, and responsive to innovations.

The data presented below show the perceived level of teacher autonomy realization as acclaimed by the participants. The teacher autonomy aspects measured and reported here are the perceived level of teacher autonomy are fourfold: (1) designing and determining the content of the lessons, (2) teaching methodology, (3) assessment, and (4) professional development. These aspects are crucial

The level of perceived teacher autonomy in designing and determining the content of the English lessons is reported in figure 1 which shows that the entry-level teacher participants had low autonomy in this aspect, in which the points range from 2 to 4 and the majority rated it at three. During the interview, the common responses provided by the participants was that they were told by the school leadership to use the materials such as textbooks and student exercise books as recommended by the government. Not only did they have to use them, they should also make sure that they covered the teaching materials in the textbook. This is consistent with the reflection journals when they wrote that the schools imposed that they used the curriculum and the textbooks from the government.

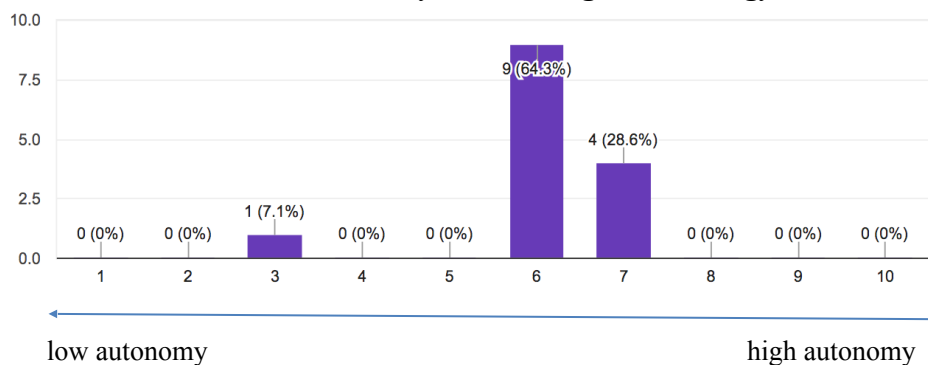
**Figure 1**  
*Perceived autonomy on designing and determining contents of English lessons*



A limited space and opportunity where exercise their teacher autonomy indicated in the numbers 2 – 4 in the figure above was when they substituted a few parts of lessons with online materials. However, this did not occur on a regular basis or in more substantial fashion because they needed to comply with the school policy for materials conformity used in the EFL classes.

Figure 2 below shows the level of perceived autonomy in teaching methodology. From the data, it can be seen that most participants reported to have moderate skewing toward high levels of autonomy in deciding on the teaching techniques they employed in the classroom. Many of the participants claimed that they used games, dialogues, and online quizzes to engage the students in the learning activities.

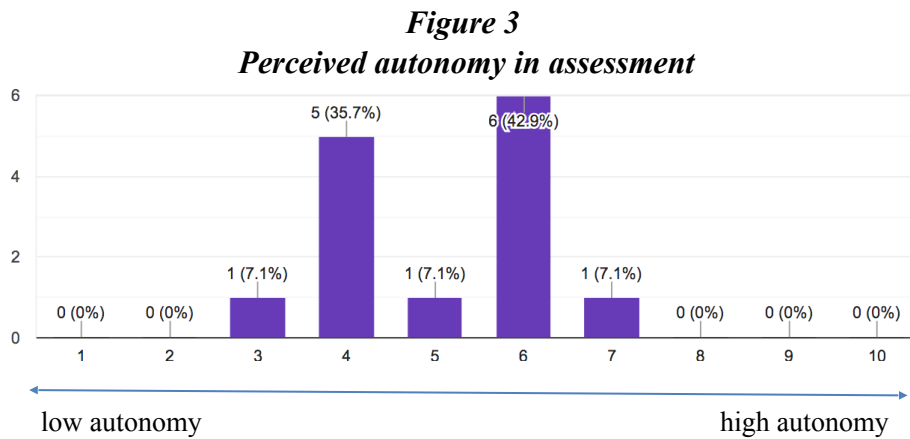
**Figure 2**  
*Perceived autonomy on teaching methodology*



The one participant with low level of perceived autonomy on teaching methodology admitted that being an entry-level teacher, she somehow projected herself as not “skillful and confident enough to try new things”. She would follow the teaching activities as prescribed in the textbook. She hoped that taking the professional development training would equip her with various teaching techniques and tools to try when she got her next teaching assignment.



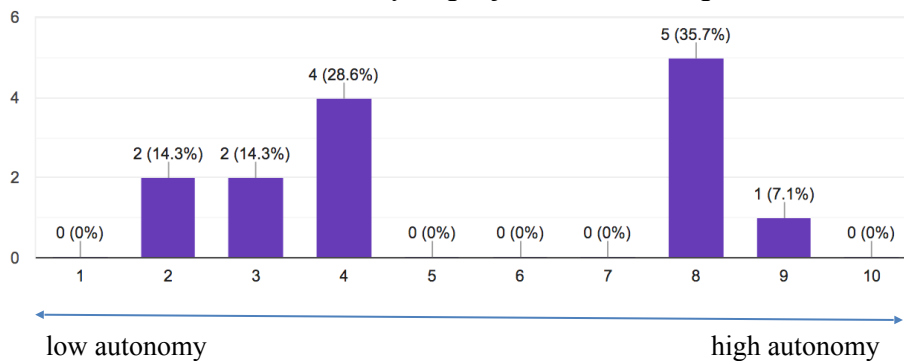
The level of perceived autonomy in assessment can be seen in figure 3. The participants rated their level of autonomy in assessment ranging from 3 – 7, whereby the majority of the participants rated it on 6 (42.9%) and 4 (35.7%).



From the interview, it was revealed that the participants saw assessments as of two types, the low-stake and high-stake assessment. What was reported here is the everyday and school level assessment, rather than the high-stake nation-wide assessment in which teachers have extremely limited authority to design and access them. By the figure, we see that the participants would have low to moderate autonomy in the classroom and school level assessment because the schools and districts would still impose certain criteria for the kinds and format of the assessment. In other words, while they have more autonomy to design their own tests to be used in formative assessment, they have to follow and try to resemble the assessment prepared by the schools and districts for summative tests.

The last aspect on the level of perceived autonomy is the teacher autonomy in professional development. Figure 4 below shows the level of perceived autonomy in professional development in which the participants' responses are almost in two opposite positions: 8 (57%) participants reported to have low level of autonomy in professional development, rated their autonomy from 2 to 4. The rest of 6 participants (43%) rated their autonomy in professional development as high. Data from the reflective journal and interview revealed that the split can be explained in terms of the funding situation for each of the participants. Those who rated their autonomy as low claimed that they had to make a hard decision to leave their teaching positions to get the training to be certified teachers. The schools and districts where they worked as teachers did not provide financial support and relief and forced them to leave their teaching position if they participated in the teacher certification training and were not offered a return to the previous position.

**Figure 4**  
***Perceived autonomy in professional development***



On the other hand, the participants who rated their autonomy as high were those whose schools and districts allowed them to take a sabbatical leave during the teacher certification training and were allowed to return to their previous teaching positions after completing the one-year program.

The funding and other support provided either by the schools and district for the entry-level teachers apparently had an immense impact on their autonomy in the professional development front. As it was for the participants, especially for those who did not have financial and other support, and whose teaching jobs were removed from them, the autonomy in the professionalism, because they chose to join the certification program, may have felt disappointing.

## 5. Discussion

The notion of teacher autonomy as understood by the participants shows that it is a prerequisite for successful teaching practices. It is undeniable that autonomy is a western construct (Merry, 2007). However, as the educational systems in many parts of the world, including Indonesia, have been transformed and democratized, the notion of teacher autonomy should be inculcated in our teachers. They were also aware that the concept of autonomy is not one of free-association; it involves an interdependence (Boud, 1981, in Benson, 2008) as it deals with bureaucratic institutions that influence their teaching (La Ganza, 2008). This study's attempt to describe the participants' teacher autonomy has shown that through the teacher professional development course and the relatively short period of time of teaching experience, the participants were aware of the ecology of teaching; the various aspects of it as well as the decision makers at different levels that affect their day-to-day teaching practice, in this case, the top-down policy implementation which made asserting autonomy somewhat challenging. As reported by Muttaqin et al. (2016) and Leer (2016), the decentralization in the Indonesian educational system has yet to promote larger autonomy to the schools which in turn would grant the teachers greater autonomy. Nonetheless, according to Benson's (2010), which this study supports, entry-level teachers should be given appropriate teacher education in which they develop greater sensitivity to the affordances of the teachers' working conditions and exercise critical reflexivity (Lamb, 2008). Similarly,

Reeve et al. (2004) concur that trained teachers displayed significantly more autonomy than untrained teachers. Therefore, having awareness of teacher autonomy is of high importance as the participants needed to have a sense of teacher efficacy (Bandura, 2006, 2008) as to what extent their autonomy and actions could impact their teaching and students' learning.

Teacher autonomy highly correlates with the notions of choice and involvement (Reinders & Lewis, 2008). As shown in the study, the participants asserted that the autonomy they asserted in the aspects of teaching contents, teaching methodology, assessment, and professional development are directly related to the choices they made. This is confirmed by Khezerlou (2013), who found that decision-making dimensions are the strongest predictor of teacher autonomy. For novice teachers like the participants in the study, Xu (2014) found that aspects of collaboration in teaching could improve teacher autonomy and help in dealing with anxiety. By the same token, Shawn (2008) and Sinclair (2008) both argue that teacher autonomy should be achieved by teachers working together because through the dialogues and collaboration to create opportunities, teachers can develop a sense of confidence to operate in new and different ways to innovate their teaching practices. Moreover, in the long run, the level of autonomy developed by teachers is inversely related to the feeling of burnout in their teaching career (Javadi, 2014).

## 6. Conclusion

There have been tremendous challenges which the entry-level teachers have faced to claim and exercise their autonomy but proper training and education should prepare them for that. No doubt, teacher autonomy will require critical reflexivity, and the course they took provided them with a means for practice. Some implications to be drawn from the study present themselves. From the policy point of view, the government would need to genuinely implement decentralization in education to grant the schools and teachers greater autonomy. For the teachers, they need to create and actively seek more opportunities for collaboration to promote greater autonomy. Finally, all stakeholders in education need to concern themselves with developing independent and autonomous teachers at the forefront of our educational system.

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