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Research Article

Fostering Learner Autonomy in EFL Classroom: The Impact of New Learning Guidelines and Relational Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is a critical outcome in EFL education, yet the mechanisms through which instructional frameworks and educator behavior influence autonomous learning remain underexplored. This study investigates the impact of the New Learning Guidelines, a structured pedagogical framework, on the development of learner autonomy among undergraduate EFL students. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study involved 539 students categorized into positive (n = 78) and negative (n = 462) attitudinal groups. The quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, and qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Quantitative findings revealed that students with positive attitudes demonstrated substantial gains in goal setting, strategic planning, and self-monitoring, whereas those with negative attitudes showed limited improvement from structure alone. Thematic analysis underscored the role of relational scaffolding, emotionally responsive, supportive teacher-student interactions as a critical factor in fostering autonomy among disengaged learners. These findings challenge deficit-based perspective on learner motivation and advance autonomy theory by emphasizing its socio-relational dimension. The study suggests EFL educators may integrate clear instructional guidelines with affective and relational pedagogies to address diverse learner dispositions. Practically, the findings underscore the need for teacher training programs to integrate relational strategies with structural management to promote learner autonomy effectively.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy, Relational pedagogy, Structured learning guidelines*

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INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has become a central focus in educational research, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where independent language practice, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation are crucial for sustained learning success (Benson, 2007; Palfreyman, 2003; Smith, 2007). Globally, EFL learners face challenges such as limited exposure to authentic language environments, curriculum rigidity, and passive learning cultures, making autonomy development urgent and complex (Alrabai, 2021; Tuan, 2021). Autonomous learners are those who can set meaningful goals, monitor their progress, and take responsibility for their learning. However, fostering such autonomy, especially among students with negative learning attitudes, remains a persistent challenge for educators.

"From compliance to autonomy: Can NLG truly empower EFL learners"

At an earlier stage of this study, a formatted New Learning Guidelines (NLG) was implemented to address students' disengagement and passivity in an English as a Foreign Language classroom (Eppendi, 2022). The intervention clearly outlined learning expectations, responsibilities and consequences. Results indicated significant behavioral changes students previously characteristised as reluctant, unmotivated and unaccountable. They began to display greater discipline, responsibility and adherence to academic demands (Mcfarland et al., 2008; Tanol et al., 2010; Thompson & Webber, 2010; Young, 2008). More recently studies affirm that structured, and autonomy-supportive teaching foster learner engagement and behavioral regulation in EFL setting (Alrabai, 2021; Han, 2021; Liu & Li, 2023; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). These findings support (Shindler, 2010) view that effective communicated roles and consistent routine can lay the foundation for developing learner autonomy.

Nevertheless, the extent to which these observed behavioral advances as deeper forms of autonomous learning remains uncertain. While improved discipline and engagement are often celebrated, they may mask underlying passivity without internalized motivation or agency. Although students showed greater compliance and discipline, it is unclear if they also developed the capacity fir initiative, self-regulation, or goal-directed learning. Prior studies have shown that structured behavioral interventions may result in surface-level conformity without fostering autonomous engagement (Marzuki et al., 2023; Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). Recent research thus calls for more attention to socio-cultural and motivational dimensions in autonomy development (Ismail et al., 2023). According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b) autonomy emerges from internalized goals supported by environment that fulfil the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Relational pedagogy reinforces this view, highlighting the role of trust, empathy, and teacher responsiveness in promoting learner agency (Noddings, 2005; Ushioda, 2015).

Despite this growing recognition, there remains limited understanding of how learners with differing attitudinal dispositions internalize structured autonomy-supportive

interventions. Few empirical studies have explored the relational conditions under which structures foster autonomy. Furthermore, much literature frames disengaged learners as deficient rather than relationally underserved. This research addresses these gaps by examining how the NLG framework influences autonomy development among both positively and negatively predisposed EFL students, while also foregrounding relational scaffolding as a novel theoretical lens in autonomy research.

Unlike, the previous studies that focused on behavioral compliance, this study examines whether the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) can foster deeper autonomy across both positively and negatively predisposed EFL learners. This question holds theoretical and practical significance for the EFL community, offering potential contributions to classroom practice, curriculum design, and teacher training. Accordingly, this study was guided by the following questions:

(1) how do positively and negatively disposed EFL students differ in their perceptions and internalization of autonomy-related behaviors under the NLG framework?
(2) how do emotionally supportive teacher-students' interactions within the NLG contribute to fostering learner autonomy, particularly among students with negative dispositions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner Autonomy in EFL Context

Learner autonomy has gained prominence in English as Foreign Language (EFL) research because it promotes lifelong learning, goal-setting, self-monitoring, and intrinsic motivation (Benson, 2007, 2013; Little, 1991; Smith, 2007). Autonomous learners are characterised by their ability to take charge of their learning processes, making decisions and reflecting on their progress independently. In EFL contexts, where linguistic input is limited, autonomy is crucial in ensuring sustained engagement and success. However, promoting autonomy remains pedagogically complex, especially for students with negative attitudes, low motivation, or culturally conditioned deference to authority (Lamb, 2017; Palfreyman, 2003).

Globally, EFL learners encounter structural and cultural barriers such as teacher-centred practices, exam-oriented curricula, and limited authentic exposure (Agustina et al., 2022). These issues hinder the development of autonomy despite educational policy shifts promoting student agency. Recent scholarship has advocated for more situated, socially-mediated models of autonomy that consider learner identity, motivation, and classroom interactions(Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Ushioda, 2015).

New Learning Guidelines and Behavioral Intervention

Eppendi (2022) introduced the New Learning Guidelines (NLG), a redesigned contract-based intervention to create a more structured, transparent, and accountable classroom culture to address persistent behavioral issues among EFL students. The intervention responded to chronic lateness, absenteeism, dishonesty, and a passive attitude toward English learning. The original learning contract, standard in Indonesian universities, often legitimised low engagement due to vague expectations and focus on cognitive outcomes. In contrast, the NLG balances cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions through a revised rubric, behaviour scoring, and consistent rules on attendance and integrity.

In its initial implementation, Eppendi (2022) students resisted the new framework, but gradually appreciated its fairness in recognising effort and integrity alongside academic achievement. Including affective and behavioural dimensions contributed to a more respectful and focused learning environment. The firm consequences for dishonesty, such as failing grades, consistently enforced. Over two semesters, the intervention reduced misconduct and shifted students' attitudes, from avoidance to accountability and reflective engagement. These outcomes provided the empirical foundation for the current study, which moves beyond behavioural change to examine whether the NLG foster deeper, sustainable learner autonomy.

Self-Determination Theory and Relational Pedagogy

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs that must be met to foster intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). When learners perceive their learning environment as supportive of choice and emotional connection, they are more likely to internalise goals and engage meaningfully. In EFL classrooms, however, autonomy is often narrowly defined as self-direction and choice, overlooking the relational contexts in which agency develops (Ushioda, 2015).

Relational pedagogy broadens the understanding of autonomy by emphasising the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of teaching (Noddings, 2005; Cornelius-White, 2007). Trust, empathy, and responsiveness form the bedrock of learner engagement, especially for students who struggle with self-belief or prior disengagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Recent studies have introduced terms such as "relational autonomy" and "affective scaffolding" to describe the role of teacher-student interactions in sustaining motivation (Amerstorfer, 2020; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021).

METHOD

Research design and context

In this study, the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was applied to investigate whether the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) influenced learner autonomy among EFL undergraduates. The quantitative phase identified patterns of behavioural and attitudinal difference, followed by a qualitative phase that explored how students internalized the structure and relational support. This design was appropriate as it provided both a comprehensive measurable analysis of autonomy-related effects and a nuanced understanding of learner's subjective experiences, particularly among those with differing attitudes towards EFL learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 539 undergraduate students enrolled in EFL courses across departments including Law, Management, Education, Economics, Engineering and Agriculture. Prior to data collection, participants were orally informed about the purpose, procedure, and confidentially of the research, and their voluntary consent was obtained and

documented through recorded verbal agreement. The study utilized a total population sampling that is effective in program evaluation when the group is formed (Ary et al., 2019)

The participants were recruited from face-to-face and blended learning format between 2021 and 2024. A psychometric procedure in language educational research, participants were categorized into positive and negative attitudinal groups using their responses to a pre-intervention questionnaire measuring motivational and desired-related constructs (Dörnyei, 2007). Students who scored above the established mean were classified as positive attitude groups (n=78), while those scoring below were placed in the negative attitude group (n= 462). This imbalance was not a result of sampling bias but rather a reflection of the actual distribution of learner attitudes within the total sample. It reveals a predominance of negative dispositions toward English learning in the studied context, which adds further significance to the need for pedagogical interventions such as the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) framework.

Data collection

The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on the constructs of the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) framework. It employed of a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) and included five latent constructs: Motivation, Desire, Structural Freedom, Metacognitive Awareness, and Belief (Nguyen & Habók, 2020), representing cognitive and affective dimensions of learner autonomy (Benson, 2007; Little, 1991). The instrument was piloted to ensure validity and reliability, and revised for clarity and contextual relevance. The final version demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha exceeding accepted thresholds (Ary et al., 2019). Students' academic achievement was also assessed pre- and post-test scores at the beginning and end of the semester. These standardised tests provided objective indicators to support the self-reported autonomy data. The combination of cognitive outcomes and self-perceptions strengthened the analysis of how structured influenced autonomy development.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interview guidelines were used to explore students' perceptions of the NLG. After analysing the questionnaire data, participants were purposively selected from both attitudinal groups. Maximum variation sampling ensured a diversity of perspectives (Mackey & Gass, 2015). Interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed using an inductive approach. Emphasis was placed on identifying recurring patterns that revealed deeper insight into students' responses to the NLG framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007).

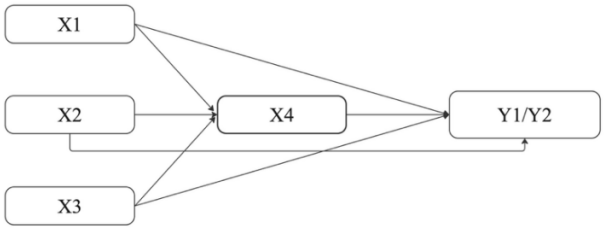
Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using path analysis to examine direct and indirect effects among learner autonomy construct. (Hair et al., 2019). Before modelling, assumptions of normality, multicollinearity, and model fit were tested. Separate structural models were constructed for positive and negative attitudinal groups, following two-lane path analysis and ANCOVA procedures as detailed in the analytic documentation.

Data from semi-structure interviews were analysed using reflexive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying patterns of structured behavioral engagement, emotional support, and participatory ownership. Emergent codes were organised into themes reflecting shared and contrasting learner experience under the NLG framework. Both data strands were integrated with quantitative results to provide a comprehensive account of how structure and relational dynamics shape learner autonomy.

Figure 1

Schema Path Analysis.



Based on the Two-Lane Path Analysis Model illustrated above, the following structural equations can be derived:

$$Y = \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + e_1$$

FINDINGS

RQ1: Differing Perceptions of Autonomy among Positively and Negatively Disposed Students

To address the first research question, we examined how students with positive and negative dispositions differed in their perceptions of autonomy-related constructs under the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) framework. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for five key constructs: Motivation, Desire, Freedom, Metacognitive Awareness, and Belief.

Table 1

Descriptive Data on New Learning Guidelines and Student Perceptions

New Learning Guidelines	Attitude	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard Deviation
Motivation	Positive	14.9	13	16	0.97
	Negative	11.7	8	16	1.46
Desire	Positive	14.3	14	15	0.44
	Negative	9.57	8	14	1.25
Freedom	Positive	14.1	13	15	0.74
	Negative	9.03	8	16	2.16
Metacognitive	Positive	14.1	13	15	0.76
	Negative	9.02	8	15	1.81
Belief	Positive	16.0	16	16	0.00
	Negative	16.0	16	16	0.00

These descriptive data reveal clear distinctions between groups. Students with positive attitudes reported substantially higher mean scores across all constructs, particularly Motivation and Desire, and exhibited lower variability, suggesting a more consistent and favorable perception of autonomy-supportive behaviors. In contrast, students with negative dispositions reported lower means and higher variability, especially in Freedom and Metacognitive Awareness, indicating weaker and more inconsistent engagement with NLG principles.

Of note, the Belief construct showed no variance across both groups (M = 16.0, SD = 0.00), indicating a uniformly high perceived value of English learning—possibly shaped by socio-cultural expectations. Due to this ceiling effect, Belief was excluded from subsequent modeling and explored further through qualitative data.

RQ1: Patterns of Autonomy Internalization: A Comparison by Disposition

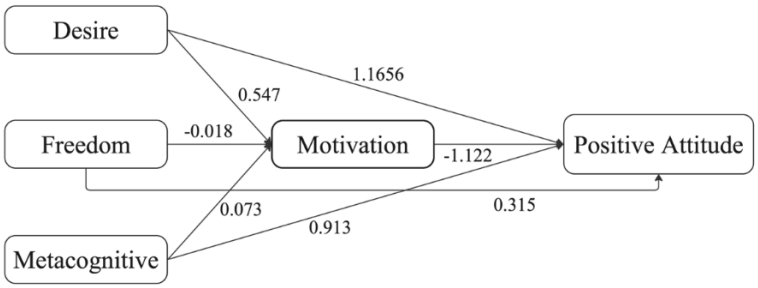
To further examine how students internalized autonomy-related behaviors under the NLG framework, we conducted path analyses for both attitudinal groups. The following subsections present the results of the structural modeling for each group.

Positive Attitude Group

Figure 2 illustrates the two-lane path analysis model for students with positive attitudinal dispositions. It displays the direct and indirect relationships among desire, freedom, metacognitive awareness, motivation, and their influence on learner autonomy under the NLG framework.

Figure 2

Two-Lane Path Analysis for Positive Attitude Group



The model revealed that Desire had a significant positive effect on Motivation (β = 0.547, p = 0.032), indicating that intrinsic desire substantially drove academic engagement. In contrast, Freedom (β = -0.018, p = 0.908) and Metacognitive Awareness (β = 0.073, p = 0.631) had minimal effects on Motivation, suggesting that structural flexibility and self-regulatory strategies alone were not decisive in activating motivation for this group.

Interestingly, Motivation exerted a negative direct effect on students' Positive Attitude (β = -1.122, p = 0.146), possibly indicating emotional costs of high achievement orientation within a structured setting. However, Desire (β = 1.656), Freedom (β = 0.315),

and Metacognitive Awareness (β = 0.913) positively influenced attitudes, reinforcing that affective engagement was bolstered by intrinsic goals and strategic support.

Table 2
Hypothesis Testing Results of the Student's Positive Attitude

Hypothesis	B	Standard Path Coefficient B	Sig
H_1: Desire → Motivation	0.547	0.250	0.032
H_2: Freedom → Motivation	-0.018	-0.013	0.908
H_3: Metacognitive → Motivation	0.73	0.57	0.631
H_4: Desire → Student's Positive	1.656	0.117	0.334
H_5: Freedom → Student's Positive	0.315	0.37	0.754
H_6: Metacognitive → Student's Positive	0.913	0.110	0.363
H_7: Motivation → Student's Positive	-1.122	-0.174	0.146

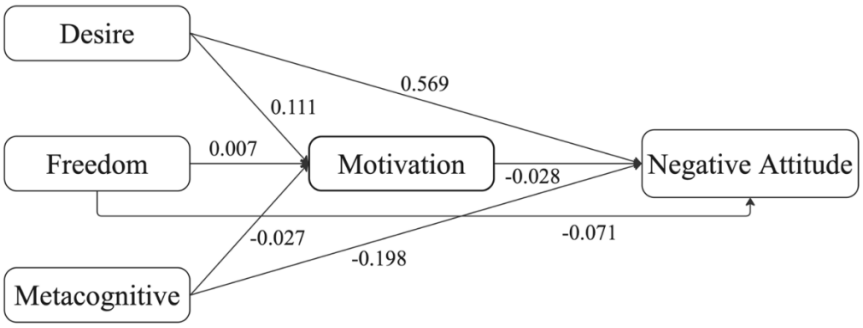
The comparison of results for the hypotheses testing the direct influence of two variables on student outcomes (N = 539) reveals significant findings. The analysis indicates the hypothesis concerning the effect of desire on motivation is supported ($p < 0.005$). Specifically, desire positively influences motivation (β = 0.547, sig = 0.032), suggesting that an increase in a student's desire leads to a corresponding increase in their motivation to learn. This relationship demonstrates a strong positive effect. In contrast, the freedom variable shows a negative effect on motivation (β = -0.018, sig = 0.908). This negative relationship indicates that as students experience greater freedom, their motivation to learn decreases. This result is counterintuitive, suggesting an inverse relationship between freedom and motivation. On the other hand, the metacognitive variable has a positive effect on motivation (β = 0.24, sig = 0.631), which implies that greater metacognitive awareness leads to increased motivation in learning.

Further analysis of variable influencing positive attitude towards learning reveals additional insights. The desire variable positively impacts student positivity (β = 1.656, sig = 0.334), implying that students with higher levels of desire exhibit more positive learning attitude. Similarly, the freedom variable also positively influences student positivity (β = 0.315, sig = 0.754), inferring that greater freedom is associated with a more positive attitude in students. The metacognitive variable continues to show a positive effect on student positivity (β = 0.913, sig = 0.363), suggesting that enhanced metacognitive abilities contribute to a more positive learning disposition. Interestingly, motivation has a negative effect on student positivity (β = -1.122, sig = 0.146), indicating that higher motivation may paradoxically lead to lower student positivity, which is an unexpected result regarding an inverse relationship. For a complete summary of hypothesis testing results (see Table 2).

Negative Attitude Group

Figure 3 presents the two-lane path analysis model for students with negative attitudinal dispositions. It depicts the direct and indirect effects of desire, freedom, metacognitive awareness, and motivation on learner autonomy within the NLG framework.

Figure 3
Two-Lane Path Analysis for Negative Attitude Group.



For the negative attitude group, the path analysis revealed weaker and more inconsistent relationships among the constructs of Desire, Freedom, Metacognitive Awareness, Motivation, and Negative Attitude. Desire exerted a small but statistically significant positive effect on Motivation (β = 0.111), indicating that even among disengaged learners, a degree of internal desire could stimulate motivational responses. However, the effects of Freedom (β = 0.007) and Metacognitive Awareness (β = -0.027) on Motivation were negligible and statistically insignificant, suggesting that structural autonomy and cognitive strategies had little bearing on motivational levels in this group. With respect to student outcomes, Desire again showed a small positive direct effect on Negative Attitude (β = 0.569), which may imply that some students with negative dispositions still recognized the relevance of goal orientation, even if their affective orientation toward English learning remained unfavorable. In contrast, Freedom (β = -0.071), Metacognitive Awareness (β = -0.198), and Motivation (β = -0.028) all showed weak and negative associations with Negative Attitude, yet none reached statistical significance. These results suggest that for disengaged learners, structural or cognitive interventions alone are insufficient in influencing motivational or attitudinal outcomes. The limited explanatory power of these variables reinforces the need for relational and affective scaffolding to support learners who lack intrinsic engagement.

Table 3
Hypothesis Testing Results of Student's Negative Attitude

Hypothesis	B	Standard Path Coefficient B	Sig
H_1: Desire → Motivation	0.111	0.094	0.044
H_2: Freedom → Motivation	0.007	0.010	0.832
H_3: Metacognitive → Motivation	-0.027	-0.34	0.467
H_4: Desire → Student's Negative	0.569	0.263	0.006
H_5: Freedom → Student's Negative	-0.071	-0.348	0.550
H_6: Metacognitive → Student's Negative	-0.198	-0.065	0.165
H_7: Motivation → Student's Negative	-0.028	-0.007	0.874

The hypothesis testing the direct influence of two variables on student outcomes (N = 539) was rejected ($p < 0.005$). The desire variable positively influences motivation (β = 0.111, sig = 0.044), indicating that increased student desire leads to higher motivation. In contrast, freedom has an insignificant positive effect on motivation (β = 0.007, sig = 0.832),

and metacognition has a negative effect (β = -0.027, sig = 0.467). Regarding negative student outcomes, desire positively influences negative students (β = 0.569, sig = 0.006), while freedom (β = -0.071, sig = 0.550), metacognition (β = -0.198, sig = 0.165), and motivation (β = -0.028, sig = 0.874) show negative, but statistically insignificant effects. Positive path coefficients (β) indicate a positive relationship between variables like desire, freedom, and metacognition with motivation and negative student behaviors. Negative coefficients suggest the opposite, with higher desire, freedom, or metacognition linked to lower motivation and negative behaviors.

RQ2: The Role of Emotionally Supportive Interactions in Autonomy Development

Interview data highlighted the central role of emotional support in shaping learner autonomy, particularly for students with negative dispositions. Students described the classroom as emotionally safe, nonjudgmental, and responsive to their concerns.

> Excerpt 1# Student 67
> *"He treated us like real learners… he was on our side, not just grading us."*

> Excerpt 2# Student 134
> *"We felt like we could ask anything… he would listen without judging*

Among students with negative dispositions, emotional support was particularly transformative.

> Excerpt 3# Student 453
> *"He often said, 'No human being is stupid, only lazy'... He did not care about our background; he focused on how much progress we had made."*

> Excerpt 4# Student 276
> *"What really motivated us was how different this lecturer was from what we experienced before."*

These findings illustrate how affective dimensions of instruction—such as empathy, affirmation, and respectful dialogue—were essential to initiating motivation among disengaged learners. These excerpts collectively inform how emotionally supportive interactions served as a catalyst for re-engagement among students who might otherwise remain detached from the learning process. Students consistently emphasized the instructor's humanizing approach—treating them as capable learners rather than passive recipients of instruction. For disengaged learners, such as Student 453, the lecturer's focus on individual progress over background or past performance helped dismantle internalized beliefs of inadequacy. This shift in perception created a sense of possibility, enabling learners to reframe their academic identity. The trust and openness described by Student 134 reveal that emotional availability was not incidental but foundational to fostering risk-taking and self-expression. The affective contrast described by Student 276—between the current instructor and prior learning experiences—highlights the transformational potential of relational pedagogy. These findings support the view that, particularly for students with negative dispositions, autonomy does not emerge solely from cognitive or structural interventions, but from emotionally attuned teaching that affirms student worth and creates a space of psychological safety.

RQ2: Teacher Scaffolding and Emotional Climate in the NLG Classroom

Instructor consistency and participatory classroom culture were key components of the emotional climate. Students appreciated clear behavioral expectations and the instructor's modeling of discipline:

> Excerpt 5# Student 28
> *"The lecturer was never once late… this consistency motivated us."*

Even less motivated students acknowledged the value of this structure:

> Excerpt 6# Student 412
> *"We never saw the lecturer come late… it made us more disciplined, even if we weren't excited about the guidelines themselves."*

Participatory scaffolding further supported autonomy:

> Excerpt 7# Student 48
> *"He constantly asked, 'Do you have some ideas we could use?' Once our ideas were used, we were more excited and participated more."*

> Excerpt 8# Student 215
> *"He would say, 'It is all right. I am here. Just you give it a go.'"*

Such relational scaffolding expanded students' sense of ownership, reduced fear of failure, and promoted self-directed learning. The lecturer's consistent invitation for students to contribute ideas and shape learning activities reflected a deliberate shift in classroom power dynamics—from instructor-centered to learner-inclusive. This participatory culture not only validated students' voices but also fostered a sense of shared responsibility for the learning process. As Student 48 noted, the integration of their suggestions into actual classroom practice increased their enthusiasm and engagement, reinforcing the principle of co-design embedded in the NLG framework.

Moreover, the instructor's affirming stance, as seen in Student 215's reflection— "Just you give it a go"—created a low-risk environment in which students felt psychologically safe to experiment, make mistakes, and grow. This reassurance lowered the affective filter, especially for students who were initially hesitant or had previously experienced punitive or high-pressure learning environments. Over time, this emotional safety translated into increased confidence and initiative, two foundational elements of learner autonomy.

Notably, even students with negative initial dispositions began to re-evaluate their role in the learning process when exposed to this relational scaffolding. Although they may not have immediately demonstrated high motivation or active engagement, their responses revealed an emerging sense of being seen, heard, and supported. These findings suggest that emotional climate—characterized by consistency, openness, and encouragement—is not merely a backdrop to instruction but an active driver of learner transformation. Within the NLG framework, such an affective environment complements structural clarity, forming a dual pathway toward the cultivation of autonomous, resilient learners.

In relation to autonomy trajectories of negatively disposed students, several students with negative dispositions experienced gradual shifts in motivation and classroom engagement due to emotionally supportive interactions. Although quantitative results showed only modest improvements, qualitative accounts revealed emotional and behavioral turning points:

> Excerpt 9# Student 397
> *"He asked what we thought about how to improve the class… it felt like we mattered."*

These small but meaningful shifts suggest that autonomy among negatively disposed students may develop incrementally, beginning with emotional trust and inclusive dialogue, and later extending to more active participation.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The explanatory sequential design helped contextualize the differential impact of the NLG on learner autonomy. Quantitative findings showed consistently higher levels of Motivation, Desire, Freedom, and Metacognitive Awareness among positively disposed students, pointing to strong internalization of autonomy-supportive behaviors. Qualitative data confirmed these students perceived NLG as clear, structured, and empowering.

In contrast, students with negative dispositions showed weaker internalization of autonomy-related behaviors. Quantitative modeling revealed inconsistent or non-significant relationships. However, interview data indicated that emotionally responsive teaching created psychological safety, enabling a gradual emergence of engagement and learner responsibility. These findings suggest that for autonomy to develop equitably across dispositions, pedagogical design must balance structural clarity with emotional responsiveness.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the impact of the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) framework on learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, revealing clear differences between students with positive and negative attitudes towards English learning. Quantitative findings showed that positively inclined students perceived the NLG as supportive in setting clear goals, planning strategically, and monitoring progress core dimensions of autonomy (Benson, 2013; Lengkanawati, 2017; Little, 1991). These findings align with Shindler's (2010) emphasis on structural clarity and behavioural expectations as catalysts for responsible learning, resonating with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) notion of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). This is consistent with the descriptive analysis, which indicated higher mean scores for motivation, desire, and metacognitive awareness among positively inclined students, with lower variability suggesting stable autonomy-supportive attitudes.

Qualitative analysis identified three key motivational themes: *Structured Behavioural Clarity*, *Perceived Emotional Support*, and *Participatory Learning Ownership*. These interacted with students' attitudes toward English learning. For positively inclined learners, the NLG

structure was viewed as empowering, offering control, fairness, and predictability while satisfying SDT's needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy through clear expectations and participatory practices. Students expressed feeling empowered when their ideas were acknowledged and supported, and encouraged to take risks. In contrast, students with negative dispositions were less responsive to structure alone and more influenced by relational dynamics. Emotional support from lecturers, demonstrated through availability, consistent feedback, and respectful treatment, played a critical role in motivating these students. They described feeling more engaged when "seen" and treated with empathy, which cultivated psychological safety. These relational experiences were interpreted as relational scaffolding, a form of interpersonal support that facilitates learner agency. This reinforces relational pedagogy's emphasis on trust and emotional attunement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Noddings, 2005), and highlights the often-overlooked SDT need for relatedness. These themes were coded inductively from recurring narratives during interviews, illustrating that learner autonomy results from the dynamic interplay between pedagogical clarity, emotional connection, and learner disposition.

The current research also reconfirms the significance of rapport between teachers and students, emotional awareness, and relational proficiency in establishing engagement and autonomy in EFL environments (Wang et al., 2022). The dynamic model of motivation developed by (Ushioda, 2015) also points to the role that the emotion-related aspects of the teaching practice can play in defining the agency of learners and their persistence over time. Taken together, these observations and considerations indicate that in the case of disengaged learners, relational, as opposed to structural, scaffolding can be regarded as a missing key to the initiation of autonomous learning. This interpretation is also enhanced by qualitative insights generated by interviewing students. Learners, especially those with harmful biases, always brought up that their teacher needs to apply consistency, accessibility, and motivation to ensure that they learn well. This interpretation is also enhanced by qualitative insights generated by interviewing students. Learners, especially those with harmful biases, always brought up that their teacher needs to apply consistency, accessibility, and motivation to ensure that they learn well. Such conclusions refute the prevalent deficit approach in the EFL research industry that usually defines disengaged learners as lowly motivated or unable to be independent (Alrabai, 2021; Han, 2021; Liu & Li, 2023), and further support Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), in which teacher emotional presence functions as a form of scaffolding that enables students to operate beyond their current independent capacities (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Thematic analysis revealed that although students with differing attitudes shared the same learning environment, they responded differently to identical pedagogical strategies. Path analysis confirmed this divergence: desire significantly predicted motivation among positively inclined students but had only marginal effects on disengaged ones. Students with positive attitudes valued the clarity of learning steps, fairness of expectations, and enhanced self-monitoring fostered by the NLG framework. They also felt empowered when invited to contribute ideas and supported by the lecturer's consistent presence. In contrast, students with negative attitudes were less responsive to structure and more influenced by the

lecturer's emotional attunement. Expressions such as being "seen," "treated equally," and "supported when struggling" highlighted emotional safety as essential for their engagement. This was reflected in the weak and statistically insignificant associations among disengaged students, particularly between freedom, metacognitive awareness, and motivation. These contrasting patterns suggest that autonomy is not solely a product of structure or personality, but is co-constructed through relational dynamics embedded in teacher-student interaction, in line with sociocultural theory and Vygotskyan pedagogy (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Instead, the data suggests that disengaged learners can develop autonomy when they feel emotionally supported and respected within the learning environment. This aligns with research showing that relationally attuned teaching practices, including empathy, trust, and dialogic engagement, can re-engage marginalised learners and foster intrinsic motivation (Janah & Cahyono, 2022; Li, 2023; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2015).

The statistical findings further reinforce these themes. Desire emerged as a significant predictor of motivation, confirming with the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Ryan & Deci, 2000a), emphasizing the importance of internalised goals in fostering autonomous behaviour. This relationship was especially evident in the positive-attitude group, where desire showed a strong positive effect on motivation, unlike in the negative group where effects were minimal. However, the weak or inconsistent effects of structural freedom and metacognitive awareness on motivation raise critical questions about how autonomy functions in complex learning environments. While traditional autonomy frameworks posit that learner control and self-regulation enhance motivation (Benson, 2013; Little, 1991), our results suggest that autonomy cannot be sustained through structural provisions alone. Particularly for disengaged learners, the absence of relational support, such as empathetic teacher-student interactions, can diminish the motivational potential of freedom (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Li, 2023). These findings underscore the need to reconceptualise autonomy not merely as individual agency but as relationally situated and contextually mediated (Ushioda, 2015), requiring both affective attunement and pedagogical scaffolding within learners' ZPD for optimal development.

A significant contribution of this study is the emergence of relational scaffolding, which is the idea that affective and interpersonal support from educators plays a vital role in the development of learner autonomy. While many autonomy frameworks emphasise individual regulation, such as goal-setting, planning, and monitoring (Benson, 2013; Little, 1991), the findings demonstrate that autonomy is also socially co-constructed within emotionally safe classroom environments. This perspective aligns with socio-relational models of language learning (Amerstorfer, 2020; Toohey, 2007) and is increasingly supported by empirical evidence showing that autonomy develops not only from within the learner but also through dynamic interactions with responsive and supportive teachers (Gao, 2021; Pusey & Nanni, 2022). When examined through the lens of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST), autonomy is best understood as a context-sensitive, interactional process shaped by teacher-student relationships and the broader classroom ecology (Thao & Thuy, 2024; Ushioda, 2015), and this view is reinforced when relational scaffolding is

positioned as both a fulfilment of SDT's relatedness need and as a mediational tool in sociocultural theory.

These results carry strong implications that extend beyond the Indonesian EFL context. In the global EFL context, relational scaffolding may constitute a potent pedagogic approach, especially where the learners experience affective and motivational issues. Heightening of emotionally responsive learning environments can prove more universally advantageous than strictly organisational interventions particularly in under-resourced or linguistically heterogeneous settings. Autonomy-building models dependent on such relational interaction have the capacity to develop self-regulation, engagement, and resilience across a range of culture and institutional set-ups.

This study examined how structured learning guidelines, particularly the New Learning Guidelines (NLG) framework, shape learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, with attention to the moderating role of students' attitudinal dispositions. Findings indicate that while structural clarity supported autonomy for positively disposed students, relational scaffolding through emotionally attuned and responsive teacher interactions was critical for engaging learners with negative attitudes. The explanatory mixed-methods design allowed deeper insight into why the structural clarity of NLG worked for some but not others, as the quantitative and qualitative data both revealed this attitudinal divide. These results suggest that autonomy is not solely a product of instructional design but is co-constructed through relational dynamics. This finding underscores the importance of teacher autonomy, as educators who exercised professional discretion to respond to students' emotional needs were more effective in fostering autonomous learning. For institutions and policymakers, the findings advocate for professional development that equips teachers with structural planning and relational competence. In broader EFL contexts, especially those marked by disengagement or diversity, relational scaffolding may be a scalable and culturally responsive strategy to enhance learner motivation, agency, and long-term engagement.

This study calls for a re-evaluation of how learner motivation and autonomy are conceptualised within EFL settings. Rather than treating these as fixed traits or student deficits, the findings underscore the importance of context, relational dynamics, and pedagogy in shaping autonomous learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2015). The New Learning Guidelines (NLG) provided behavioural clarity that effectively enhanced engagement among students with positive attitudes, but this structure alone was insufficient for learners with negative dispositions. Thematic analysis revealed that emotional responsiveness, relational scaffolding, and participatory teaching enabled these learners to internalise goals, take initiative, and assume ownership of their learning. This supports the view that autonomy is co-constructed in interactional and affective spaces (Amerstorfer, 2020; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021), consistent with the relational pedagogy advocated by (Toohey, 2007) and the socio-emotional framing of Self-Determination Theory, in which autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be jointly satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Teachers who engage in autonomy-supportive teaching, combining structure with encouragement and choice, have been shown to enhance learner engagement and internal

motivation (Reeve, 2016), while flipped and dialogic classroom models have similarly promoted learner ownership in EFL settings (Tsai, 2019).

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The uniform responses on the belief construct may suggest a ceiling effect caused by cultural norms or social desirability, rather than actual learner conviction. Additionally, some observed behavioural gains may reflect general academic diligence rather than a direct outcome of the NLG intervention. Methodologically, the study was conducted within a single institutional setting and relied on self-reported data, which, although useful for capturing internal learner perspectives, may not reflect the full behavioural complexity of classroom autonomy. Nevertheless, the sequential mixed-methods design provided interpretive depth by connecting statistical trends with the students. Future research should integrate triangulated data sources such as teacher interviews, classroom observations, or longitudinal analysis to deepen understanding of how pedagogical structure and emotional support interact to foster enduring learner autonomy in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study challenges the dominant view of learner autonomy as an isolated, self-regulated skill, showing by that autonomy is relationally situated and emotionally mediated (Ushioda, 2015). Based on explanatory sequential mixed-methods findings, it introduces relational scaffolding, teacher provided emotional and interpersonal support that enables learners to engage meaningfully with structured frameworks, in line with autonomy as learner responsibility (Holec, 1981). While the NLG supported goal-setting, planning, and self-monitoring for positively inclined students (Benson, 2013; Little, 1991), they were inadequate for students negatively disposed learners without empathetic teacher interactions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Liu & Li, 2023). Thus, relational scaffolding emerges as essential for structural autonomy, reframing it from an individual trait to a socially co-constructed process (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021; Son & Hai, 2023). The findings offer significant implications for EFL pedagogy and teacher education. Educators need both instructional clarity and relational competencies such as emotional atonement, responsiveness, and trust-building to foster inclusive and empowering learning environments (Noddings, 2005; Reeve, 2016). Teacher preparation programmes should embed relational pedagogy , and institutional policies should promote emotionally literate, and autonomy-supportive teaching. This study calls for a paradigm shift : from viewing disengaged learners as deficient to recognising autonomy emerging from supportive, and humanised instructional contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct and publication of this study. Although the research received institutional funding, the funding body had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or decision to publish the results.

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