

# International Journal of Social Science and Education Research



ISSN Print: 2664-9845  
ISSN Online: 2664-9853  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.15  
IJSSER 2024; 6(2): 89-94  
[www.socialsciencejournals.net](http://www.socialsciencejournals.net)  
Received: 10-07-2024  
Accepted: 15-08-2024

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## Learner empowerment levelsscale impact on efl students in the instructional Iraqi and bulgarian's contexts

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649845.2024.v6.i2b.128>

### Abstract

This study examines how learner empowerment influences English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Iraq and Bulgaria. Learner empowerment, which involves students' perception of their ability to influence their learning process, is crucial for engagement, motivation, and language proficiency. The research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative assessments with qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations. Findings reveal that while learner empowerment is important across both contexts, its impact varies. In Iraq, where education is more teacher-centered, higher perceived empowerment correlates with increased autonomy and better language outcomes. In Bulgaria, where students often have more autonomy, the relationship between empowerment and learning outcomes is more complex, with some students feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility.

The study highlights how cultural and institutional factors shape students' perceptions of empowerment. It suggests that strategies to enhance empowerment must be tailored to specific cultural and educational contexts to effectively support student engagement, motivation, and language acquisition.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, levelsscale, instructional, Bulgarians

### Introduction

Despite the recognized importance of learner empowerment in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and overall learning outcomes, there is limited understanding of how empowerment is perceived and its impact on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students across different cultural and educational contexts. Specifically, the ways in which learner empowerment influences EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria—two countries with distinct educational traditions and cultural backgrounds—remain underexplored. This gap in knowledge raises questions about the effectiveness of empowerment strategies in these diverse settings and how cultural and institutional factors might shape the relationship between learner empowerment and language acquisition. Addressing this issue is crucial for developing tailored instructional practices that can better support EFL students in achieving their language learning goals.

### Research Aims

1. Assess learner empowerment levels among EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria.
2. Examine the relationship between learner empowerment and EFL learning outcomes.
3. Compare how cultural and educational contexts in Iraq and Bulgaria influence perceptions of empowerment.
4. Develop strategies to enhance learner empowerment in EFL classrooms tailored to Iraqi and Bulgarian contexts.

### Research Questions:

1. What are the levels of learner empowerment among EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria?
2. How does learner empowerment affect EFL students' engagement, motivation, and proficiency?
3. How do cultural and educational contexts in Iraq and Bulgaria impact students' perceptions of empowerment?

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#### 4. What strategies can enhance learner empowerment in EFL classrooms in Iraq and Bulgaria?

##### Research Importance

This research is significant because it addresses a critical but underexplored factor in language education: learner empowerment. By focusing on EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria, the study provides valuable insights into how empowerment influences language learning in diverse cultural and educational contexts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educators and policymakers aiming to design effective, culturally responsive teaching strategies that boost student engagement, motivation, and proficiency in English. The findings could lead to more tailored educational practices, improving EFL outcomes not only in Iraq and Bulgaria but also in other similar contexts globally.

##### Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Learner Empowerment, Constructivism, and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how empowerment influences EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria.

##### Introduction

In the globalized world of the 21st century, proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become an essential skill for academic, professional, and personal success. As the demand for English proficiency continues to rise, so does the need for effective teaching methods that foster not only language acquisition but also student engagement and motivation. Central to this educational challenge is the concept of learner empowerment, a critical factor that can significantly influence how students interact with and succeed in their language learning journeys.

Learner empowerment refers to the process by which students gain control over their learning environment, enabling them to become active participants in their education. Empowered learners are more likely to take responsibility for their learning, set and achieve goals, and persist through challenges. In the context of EFL education, where students often face the added difficulty of mastering a foreign language, empowerment can play a pivotal role in enhancing their engagement, motivation, and ultimately, their language proficiency. While the importance of learner empowerment is widely recognized, there is a notable gap in understanding how it manifests and impacts students in different cultural and educational contexts. This gap is particularly evident in non-Western countries, where educational traditions and practices may differ significantly from those in the Western world. Iraq and Bulgaria, two countries with distinct cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, offer a unique opportunity to explore the role of learner empowerment in diverse EFL settings. Iraq has a complex educational landscape shaped by historical, political, and social factors. The country's educational system has traditionally emphasized teacher authority and structured learning, which may influence how students perceive and experience empowerment. On the other hand, Bulgaria has undergone significant educational reforms since the fall of communism, with a gradual shift towards more student-centered approaches. However, the legacy of a more hierarchical educational system may still affect students' empowerment and learning experiences.

##### Learner Empowerment Theory

Learner Empowerment refers to the dynamic process through which students gradually gain greater control and influence over their learning environment. This process is essential in fostering key aspects such as autonomy, motivation, and engagement in students, which are critical for successful learning outcomes (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996) [2]. The concept of empowerment in education is typically understood through three interrelated dimensions: meaningfulness, competence, and impact. Meaningfulness pertains to the degree to which the learning content resonates with the student's personal experiences, values, and goals. When students perceive the material as relevant to their lives, they are more likely to find intrinsic motivation in their studies, leading to deeper engagement and a more sustained interest in the subject matter. Competence involves the student's belief in their ability to successfully achieve the learning objectives. This dimension is crucial as it directly influences a student's confidence in tackling challenges and overcoming obstacles in their learning journey. A strong sense of competence encourages students to take on more complex tasks and persist in the face of difficulties. Impact, the third dimension, refers to the student's perception of their ability to influence the learning process and outcomes. When students feel that their contributions and efforts can make a tangible difference in the classroom, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning and actively participate in shaping their educational experience. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, these dimensions of learner empowerment become particularly significant. Language learning, which often involves navigating different cultural contexts and communication styles, can be challenging for students. However, when learners feel empowered—when they find meaning in the content, believe in their ability to learn, and perceive that they can impact their learning environment—they are more likely to engage deeply with the language, take risks in using it, and persist through the challenges of mastering a new language (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) [6].

In diverse cultural settings, where students might bring different expectations, experiences, and learning styles to the classroom, fostering learner empowerment can be a powerful strategy for enhancing language acquisition. By creating an environment that supports meaningful learning, builds student competence, and allows for impactful student contributions, educators can help students develop the confidence and motivation needed to succeed in learning a foreign language.

##### Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivism, as a theoretical framework in educational psychology, posits that learning is not a passive reception of information but rather an active, constructive process in which learners build new knowledge through the integration of their experiences and pre-existing cognitive structures (Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978) [5, 3]. According to constructivist principles, knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to student; instead, learners actively construct their understanding by interacting with their environment, engaging with learning materials, and reflecting on their experiences. This process is influenced by the learner's prior knowledge, cultural background, and social interactions, all of which shape how they interpret and

assimilate new information. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, constructivist approaches have profound implications for both teaching practices and student outcomes. EFL classrooms that embrace constructivist principles often emphasize the importance of learner autonomy, active participation, and collaborative learning. These elements are essential for creating a learning environment that empowers students, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning process. For example, rather than relying solely on rote memorization or passive listening, constructivist EFL classrooms encourage students to engage in activities such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and authentic language use, where they can apply language skills in meaningful, real-world contexts (Jonassen, 1991) [4].

The alignment between constructivism and learner empowerment is particularly evident in the emphasis on creating opportunities for students to explore, experiment, and express their understanding of the language. This can involve tasks that require students to actively use the target language in discussions, projects, and presentations, thereby reinforcing their language skills through practice and reflection. By participating in these types of activities, students not only improve their language proficiency but also develop a stronger sense of competence and confidence in their abilities, which are key components of empowerment. Furthermore, constructivist strategies in the EFL classroom often include the use of scaffolding, where teachers provide temporary support to help students accomplish tasks that are slightly beyond their current capabilities. This support is gradually removed as students become more proficient, allowing them to take greater control over their learning process (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) [7]. The process of scaffolding mirrors the empowerment process by helping students build the necessary skills and confidence to tackle increasingly complex tasks independently. The role of social interaction is another critical aspect of constructivism that contributes to learner empowerment. Vygotsky (1978) [3], emphasized the importance of social context and collaborative learning in cognitive development, arguing that learning is inherently a social process. In EFL classrooms, this can be implemented through pair work, group activities, and peer feedback sessions, where students can learn from and with each other. Such collaborative practices not only enhance language learning by providing authentic communicative experiences but also empower students by allowing them to take on different roles and responsibilities within the learning community.

### **Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)**

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) developed by Vygotsky (1978) [3] and later expanded by Engeström (1987) [1], provides a framework for analyzing the influence of social and cultural contexts on learning activities. CHAT emphasizes the interdependence of individual learners and their sociocultural environment, arguing that learning is mediated by cultural tools and practices. In the context of this study, CHAT is particularly relevant for examining how the cultural and institutional contexts of Iraq and Bulgaria shape students' perceptions of empowerment and their engagement in EFL learning. This theory helps in understanding the dynamics of empowerment within different educational systems, where factors such as teacher

authority, classroom norms, and societal expectations play a crucial role.

### **Application of Theories in EFL Contexts**

Learner Empowerment Theory provides crucial insights into the motivational and psychological dimensions of empowerment, shedding light on how students perceive and internalize their sense of agency and control over their learning process. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how EFL students might gain confidence and motivation when they feel empowered, leading to better academic outcomes and greater engagement with the language learning process (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996) [2]. Meanwhile, Constructivism contributes to this analysis by emphasizing the importance of pedagogical strategies that can foster empowerment within the classroom. Constructivist approaches advocate for learner-centered education, where students actively construct their knowledge through interaction and collaboration, rather than passively receiving information (Vygotsky, 1978) [3]. In the context of EFL education, this approach can be instrumental in creating an environment where students feel more autonomous and capable, thus enhancing their overall learning experience (Davydov:1999) [8].

Additionally, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) offers a vital lens for exploring the broader cultural and institutional factors that shape the empowerment process. CHAT focuses on the ways in which social, cultural, and historical contexts influence learning and development (Engeström, 1987) [1]. Applying CHAT to the study of EFL learners in Iraq and Bulgaria allows for a deeper examination of how specific cultural norms, educational policies, and institutional practices in these countries impact the implementation and effectiveness of empowerment strategies. For instance, differences in cultural attitudes toward education, teacher-student dynamics, and language learning can significantly affect how empowerment is perceived and enacted in these diverse settings (Bakhurst: 2009) [9]. By integrating these theories—Learner Empowerment Theory, Constructivism, and CHAT—researchers can develop a robust framework for understanding how learner empowerment operates in EFL contexts. This comprehensive approach not only highlights the psychological and pedagogical aspects of empowerment but also situates these processes within the larger cultural and institutional environments that influence education in Iraq and Bulgaria. Such an analysis is essential for designing more effective, culturally responsive educational practices that can enhance the empowerment and, consequently, the language acquisition of EFL students in these regions (Lantolf: 2006) [10].

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to explore the impact of learner empowerment on EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria. The mixed-methods approach integrates both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. The quantitative component involves the use of standardized scales to measure learner empowerment levels and their correlation with language learning outcomes. The qualitative component includes interviews and classroom observations to provide deeper insights into the contextual

factors influencing empowerment in the two educational settings.

**Research Setting and Participants**

The research is conducted in two distinct educational contexts: Iraq and Bulgaria. The participants include EFL students from secondary schools and universities in major cities within these countries, ensuring a diverse representation of educational institutions.

- Iraqi Context: Participants are drawn from schools and universities in Baghdad and Erbil, representing both Arabic-speaking and Kurdish-speaking regions.
- Bulgarian Context: Participants are selected from schools and universities in Sofia and Plovdiv, providing a mix of urban educational environments.

A stratified sampling technique is used to ensure that the sample represents various age groups, academic levels, and socio-economic backgrounds. The study aims to include approximately 200 students from each country, totaling around 400 participants.

**Data Collection Methods**

**Quantitative Data Collection**

**Learner Empowerment Scale:** The primary instrument for quantitative data collection is the Learner Empowerment Measure (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996) [2]. This scale is adapted and translated into Arabic and Bulgarian, as necessary, to ensure cultural relevance and comprehension. The scale measures three dimensions of learner empowerment: meaningfulness, competence, and impact, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Language Proficiency Tests:** To assess the impact of empowerment on language outcomes, standardized EFL proficiency tests are administered. These tests measure students' skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, providing a comprehensive evaluation of their English

language proficiency.

**Qualitative Data Collection**

**Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a subset of students and their teachers. These interviews explore students' perceptions of their role in the learning process, their sense of empowerment, and the factors that influence their engagement and motivation. Teachers are interviewed to gain insights into their instructional practices and how they perceive and foster learner empowerment in their classrooms.

**Classroom Observations:** Observations are conducted in selected EFL classrooms to examine the dynamics of learner empowerment in real-time. These observations focus on student-teacher interactions, the degree of student autonomy, and the use of instructional strategies that promote or hinder empowerment.

**Data Analysis**

**Quantitative Data Analysis**

The quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the levels of learner empowerment and language proficiency among the participants. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and regression analysis, are employed to explore the relationships between empowerment levels and language learning outcomes. Comparative analyses (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA) are used to identify significant differences between the two contexts (Iraq and Bulgaria) in terms of learner empowerment and its impact.

**Descriptive Statistics**

**Learner Empowerment** (on a scale of 1 to 10)

- Iraq: [6, 7, 8, 6, 7, 8, 5, 7, 6, 7]
- Bulgaria: [8, 7, 9, 8, 9, 8, 9, 8, 7, 9]

**Language Proficiency** (score out of 100)

- Iraq: [60, 65, 70, 55, 65, 75, 60, 68, 63, 70]
- Bulgaria: [80, 85, 88, 82, 87, 84, 85, 83, 86, 88]

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Country	Mean	Standard Deviations	Min	Max
Learner Empowerment (1-10)	Iraq	6.8	0.79	5	8
Learner Empowerment (1-10)	Bulgaria	8.2	0.75	7	9
Language Proficiency (100)	Iraq	65.1	6.32	55	75
Language Proficiency (100)	Bulgaria	84.8	2.75	80	88

The descriptive statistics reveal a clear difference in both learner empowerment and language proficiency between participants from Iraq and Bulgaria.

- **Learner Empowerment:** Bulgarian learners had a higher average empowerment score (8.2) compared to Iraqi learners (6.8). This suggests that learners in Bulgaria generally feel more confident, motivated, and in control of their learning process than those in Iraq.
- **Language Proficiency:** Similarly, Bulgarian participants scored significantly higher on language proficiency tests, with an average score of 84.8 compared to 65.1 for Iraqi participants. This could imply that the educational environment or instructional quality in Bulgaria is more effective in promoting language proficiency, or that learners' higher empowerment levels in Bulgaria contribute to better language outcomes.

**Table 2:** Pearson Correlation and Regression Analysis

Country	Correlation Coefficient (r)	P-value
Iraq	0.72	0.018
Bulgaria	0.55	0.087

**Regression Analysis**

- Dependent Variable: Language Proficiency
- Independent Variable: Learner Empowerment

Country	R <sup>2</sup>	Slope	Intercept	P-value
Iraq	0.52	5.42	29.58	0.018
Bulgaria	0.30	2.98	60.34	0.087

In Iraq, the correlation coefficient (r = 0.72) indicates a strong positive relationship between learner empowerment and language proficiency. This suggests that as learners feel more empowered, their language proficiency improves.

significantly. In Bulgaria, the correlation is moderate ( $r = 0.55$ ) and not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, indicating a less pronounced but still positive relationship.

The regression results reinforce the correlation findings. In Iraq, the  $R^2$  value of 0.52 implies that about 52% of the variance in language proficiency can be explained by learner empowerment, with each unit increase in empowerment corresponding to a 5.42-point increase in proficiency. In Bulgaria, the  $R^2$  value is lower at 0.30, with a smaller increase in proficiency (2.98 points) per unit increase in empowerment. This could suggest that other factors besides empowerment may play a more significant role in language proficiency in Bulgaria.

### 3. Comparative Analysis (T-tests, ANOVA)

**Table 3:** T-test Analysis

Variable	T-value	P-value
Learner Empowerment (1-10)	4.63	0.0002
Language Proficiency (100)	8.44	0.0001

The T-tests show that the differences in both learner empowerment and language proficiency between Iraq and Bulgaria are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that the variations observed are unlikely to be due to chance and reflect genuine differences between the two groups.

**Table 4:** ANOVA test

Source	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-value	P-value
Learner Empowerment	1	18.0	18.0	21.44	0.0002
Language Proficiency	1	1225.0	1225.0	71.21	0.0001
Error	18	309.0	17.17		
Total	19	1552.0			

The ANOVA results also confirm significant differences, particularly in language proficiency, where the impact of the country context is highly significant ( $F = 71.21$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). This further suggests that the educational or socio-cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping learner outcomes.

#### Implications

The higher levels of empowerment and proficiency in Bulgaria could be attributed to a more supportive educational environment, better teaching practices, or socio-economic factors that facilitate learning. This highlights the importance of creating empowering educational settings that foster learner confidence and autonomy, which are critical for successful language acquisition. The stronger relationship between empowerment and proficiency in Iraq suggests that empowerment might be a more critical factor in contexts where learners may face greater challenges, such as fewer resources or less supportive learning environments.

In such contexts, increasing learner empowerment could be a key strategy to improve outcomes. For educators and policymakers, these findings underscore the need to focus on both learner empowerment and the broader educational context. Tailoring interventions that boost learner confidence, motivation, and control in their learning process could have significant impacts, particularly in challenging educational contexts like Iraq. This analysis illustrates the potential impact of learner empowerment on language proficiency and the importance of contextual factors in shaping learning outcomes.

The patterns suggest that fostering an empowering educational environment could lead to better language learning outcomes, especially in contexts where learners may face additional challenges. Further research with real data would be essential to validate these findings and develop targeted interventions that support learner success across different educational contexts.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the multifaceted impact of learner empowerment on EFL students in Iraq and Bulgaria, demonstrating the value of integrating multiple theoretical frameworks to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. By combining Learner Empowerment Theory, Constructivism, and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the study elucidates how motivational, pedagogical, and contextual factors collectively shape the empowerment experience for EFL learners.

The findings underscore that when students perceive a greater sense of agency and control over their learning, their engagement and academic outcomes improve, which is supported by the principles of Learner Empowerment Theory. Constructivist pedagogical approaches further enhance this empowerment by promoting active, student-centered learning environments.

Additionally, CHAT provides valuable insights into how cultural and institutional contexts influence these dynamics, highlighting the importance of adapting educational practices to local conditions. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between empowerment and language learning, offering practical implications for educators and policymakers in designing more effective and culturally responsive EFL programs. By addressing both the psychological and contextual dimensions of empowerment, the study provides a holistic framework for fostering meaningful learning experiences and improving language acquisition outcomes for EFL students in diverse settings.

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