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From Hierarchy to Harmony: Exploring EFL Teachers' Leadership Empowerment in Kurdish Tertiary Education

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Abstract

Teacher leadership, a concept gaining prominence in educational discourse, denotes the active involvement of educators in influencing practices and policies within and beyond their individual classrooms. This study explores the multi-faceted nature of teacher leadership, specifically focusing on eliciting teachers' perceptions, practices, and institutional conditions shaping Kurdish EFL teachers' leadership in Kurdistan Region (KR) universities. To this end, the research adopts a mixed method research design using a questionnaire and a set of open-ended questions. The results of the questionnaire highlight a critical division in Kurdish EFL teachers' practice of academic leadership. While Kurdish tertiary EFL teachers report a high degree of pedagogical freedom and self-efficacy at the individual level, they view their leadership power more negatively when it comes to participation in broader institutional governance. Furthermore, the open-ended questions revealed similar results. Teachers remain individually autonomous in their own teaching/research, but collectively marginalised in administration and governance. The findings provide actionable recommendations for policy makers and administrators to nurture a more inclusive, participatory, and a sustainable model of faculty empowerment and teacher leadership in the Kurdish context.

Key words: Teacher Leadership, Teacher Autonomy, Professional Development, Educational Policy

لە پلەبەندىيە وە بۇ ھاۋئاھەنگى: لىكۆلینە وە لە بەھىزىرىدىن ۋابەرىي مامۆستايىانى زمانى ئىنگلىزى وە كى زمانىيى بىيانى لە پەروھەدى بالاى كوردىدا

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پوخته

ۋابەرىي مامۆستا، چەمكىتىك كە لە گفتۇرگۇي پەروھەدىدا گىنگىيە كى زىيادى بەدەست ھىنواھ، ئامازە بە بەشدارىي چالاكانەي پەروھەدە كاران دەكەت لە كارىگەرەي لەسەر پراكتىك و سىاسەتە كان لە ناو و دەرەوەي پۇلە كانيان. ئەم لىكۆلینە وە يە سروشى فەرە رۇھى ۋابەرىي مامۆستا دەخولىتە وە، بە تايىبەتى سەرنج دەخاتە سەر دەرھىيانى يېروراكان، پراكتىكە كان، و مەرچە دامەزراوهەيى كەن مامۆستايىانى زمانى ئىنگلىزى وە كى زمانىيى بىيانى كە ۋابەرىي مامۆستايىانى كورد لە زانکۆكەن ھەریمى كوردىستان شىۋەي پىيەدەن. بۇ ئەم مەبەستە، لىكۆلینە وە كە دىزايىنى لىك-رىنە وە تىكەل بە كاردەھىننەت بە بەكارھەتىانى راپرسى و كۆمەلېك پرسىارى كراوه.

ئەنجامە كەن ۋابەشىپەن ئەكادىمەي ۋابەرىي ئەكادىمەي مامۆستايىانى زمانى ئىنگلىزى وە كى زمانىيى بىيانى كورد رۇن دەكەتە وە. لە كاتىكدا راھەي بەرزى ئازادىي پەروھەدىي و كارىگەرەي خۇيان لە ئاستى تاكە كە سىدا راھەگەيەن، بەلام بىننەيان لە ھىزى ۋابەرىي خۇيان نەرىننەتە كاتىك دىتە بەشدارىي لە فەرمانەوايى دامەزراوهەي فراوانتر. ھەرۇھا، پرسىارە كراوهە كان ئەنجامى ھاوشىپەيان ئاشكرا كرد. مامۆستايىان بەشىۋەيە كى تاكە كە سى لە وانھوتتە وە/لىكۆلینە وە خۇياندا سەرىخۇن، بەلام بە كۆمەلەيەتى لە فەرمانەوايى و پىشىكەوتىدا پەراوىز كراون.

دۆزىنە وە كان پىشىنەتى كەن بۇ پەيەرە وە كوردىنى مۆدىلىكى زىاتر گشتىگىر، بەشدارى، و بەرەۋامى بەھىزىرىدىن فاكەلتى و ۋابەرىي مامۆستا لە كۆننەتكىستى كوردىدا.

وشه سەرەكىيە كان: ۋابەرىي مامۆستا، سەرىبەخقىي مامۆستا، گەشەپىدانى پىشەيى، سىاسەتى پەروھەدىي

1. Introduction

In recent years, university teacher leadership has received recognition globally. There is an increasing concern in empowering them not only as classroom instructors but also as catalysts for educational change. In addition to their roles as instructional designers and curriculum innovators, they should be provided vital roles in the educational hierarchy.

Different countries are pressingly seeking effective pathways for innovating and transforming their higher education systems. This is due to the pivotal role played by higher education institutions in bringing about skill cultivation and societal development. This development assumes the enormous significance of the discourse of many agencies across the educational system. Undoubtedly, EFL teachers are part and parcel of this change and development since they spearhead any educational reform effort.

Turning to the teaching profession, it is a complex and a demanding task. Given the heterogeneity in today's classes doubled with the recent transformation in higher education in Kurdistan Region, this job has become more burdensome. Kurdish university teachers are caught between depending on their intuition and experience to do what best serves their students' needs and meeting higher education expectations in KR. Teachers can make sound decisions to meet their students' needs, but they still have fear of not meeting specific outcomes and implementing the mandates. At the core of empowering teacher leadership generally is the distinction between what teachers can decide and to what extent they allowed to decide.

Hence, it can be said that teacher leadership empowerment has grown as a critical issue raising concerns about teacher decision-making and accountability. As Thornburg and Mungai (2011) contend, teachers should be provided with a supportive environment in which they feel they are cared for to become empowered to participate in decision-making. Consequently, this would increase their self-efficacy, commitment, and dedication. It is worth mentioning that within the Kurdish context, developing teacher leadership is particularly important because of the Region's distinct cultural and linguistic dynamics.

2. Research Aims

The current study is guided by the following aims:

- Exploring Kurdish EFL teachers' perceptions toward their current leadership power,
- Identifying the difference in Kurdish EFL teachers' perceptions toward the different dimensions of their leadership power,
- Determining the challenges Kurdish EFL teachers encounter in practicing/assuming their leadership power in higher education context.

3. Research Questions

This study is intended to answer the following research question:

- What are Kurdish EFL teachers' perceptions toward their current leadership power?
- Is there any significant difference in Kurdish EFL teachers' perceptions toward the different dimensions of their leadership power?
- What challenges do Kurdish EFL teachers encounter in practicing/assuming their leadership power in higher education context?

4. The Significance of the Study

The significance of this study derives from the momentousness of its subject, which is crucial in addressing the dynamic nature of the educational organizations in Higher education sector. Gaining a nuanced understanding of the various manifestation of teacher leadership at university level provides valuable insights for administrators and policy makers to develop effective strategies for supporting EFL teachers' leadership, which ultimately enhances language education and institutional effectiveness.

The relevance of the current study is further highlighted by the scarcity of research focused on teacher leadership within ministry of higher education in Kurdistan Region. There is an urgent need to conduct a context-sensitive analysis since the existing literature lacks a detailed, context aware understanding of how teacher leadership works on the ground in Kurdish universities. For example, the degree to which tribal, political, and religious affiliations influence leadership, or how global educational trends interact with local realities, remain unexplored. Hence, this gap calls for conducting researches to capture teachers' perspectives to inform leadership reforms that are genuinely participatory and effective. It is hoped that this study will enrich the literature on teacher leadership in Kurdish educational and academic institutions.

While this research aims at eliciting 'perceptions', teachers' perceptions often informs their practices. There might be instances where teachers express perceptions that are reinforced or challenged by their actual exercise of leadership rights.

5. The Context of the Study

5.1 The Hierarchical Landscape of Kurdish Education

In spite of the persistent demand for professional qualified teachers and the unrelenting pressure on them to deliver superior language teaching in various EFL contexts in the Middle East, the concept of good leadership is recklessly disregarded (Shah, 2014). This oversight is particularly evident in higher education context. On this wise, Handy (1993, 190) asserts that the structure of higher education institution is likely to be either rigidly hierarchical or conversely marked by a collection of highly autonomous individuals portrayed as 'a galaxy of individual stars'. The Kurdish context is not excepted from this dichotomy; the same applies to our context. In Kurdistan Region, a predominantly hierarchical leadership is adopted where the structure and ethos of educational institutions follow a top-down leadership model that

falls short in addressing the requirements of the international complexity and change in EFL teaching. This hierachal structure pervades all levels of education.

5.2 Primary and Secondary Education

In primary and secondary education, as Vernez et al. (2014) assert, Kurdish teachers and principals are largely confined to administrative roles, with limited scope for instructional leadership. They are only responsible for managing schools. Teachers are in charge of teaching separately and they work in small subject-based groups, lacking formal platforms for negotiating and resolving broader educational issues. Therefore, innovation is unexpected outcome in this context. Similarly, Sofi-Karim (2015, p.29) maintains that “Teacher and principal autonomy is limited. They are not authorized to make essential decisions”. To him, a school headmaster almost has an administrative role limited to assigning teachers to classes, arranging class schedules, interacting with student and parents, and caring for school supplies and needs.

5.3 Higher Education

The same assertion of limited leadership and teacher autonomy extends to the university level. Noriey (2016) believes that a significant factor contributing to the unsuccessful performance of many higher education institutions in Kurdistan Region and Iraq is the defective process of selecting leaders who may have insufficient experience and skills necessary for institutional management. He connects this ineffective recruitment practice to a perceived “lack of transparency and the political party connection of this selection process of the right candidate” (p.56).

In a study conducted by Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) tackling the quality of higher education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, they concluded that the majority of teachers were critical of the system in the region and they held negative perspectives towards it. Even the leadership of the universities seemed not to be well connected to departmental realities and were dissatisfied with both the higher education system and their own role in running the institutions.

Deeply probing into the higher education policy and legal documents reveals that in the past 25 years, educational policy initiatives and projects are established in a hierachal manner.

This model largely relies on top-down processing which expresses “the extent of the political power of political officials and interest groups over the institutional integrity” (Ala’Aldeen, as cited in Wahab, 2017, p.112).

5.4 The Imperative for Change: Dialogue and Teacher Leadership

To overcome traditionalism and inflexible centralization processes, a fundamental step involves initiating mutual dialogue among all stakeholders. This collaborative approach is essential for members of higher education institutions to organize their thoughts and actions through reaching a consensus and integrating diverse ideas (Atrushi and Woodfield, 2018).

The 21st century skill needs and language competency requirements have placed heavy loads on higher education. This complexity has given rise to the necessities of carrying out empirical studies about EFL teachers’ empowerment and leadership in tertiary education. In the Kurdish context, Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) argue that “There is a huge gap in research on leadership in Higher Education” (p.26). To date, there is no study in the Kurdish context that explores university teacher leadership and autonomy.

Launching Bologna process, introducing technology to teaching and blended learning, incorporating entrepreneurship education, and the widespread adoption of AI use in education have necessitated revolutionary demands from university teachers. Hence, teaching should no longer be viewed as a profession in which knowledge is transmitted to a passive audience via the authoritarian dictates of teachers’ values and beliefs (Zahawi, 2019). Marginalizing university teachers and treating them as peripheral in decision making processes have brought about the problem of not being able to develop the adequate competence to assume the responsibility of their own professional growth and meet the expectation of higher education mandates. Thus, teacher leadership capacity is central to the success of any innovative attempts of educational reform in the Kurdish higher education sector.

Wahab (2017) maintains when educational conferences are held in Kurdistan Region for the sake of making a reform, people from various levels (teachers, professors, administrator, and foreign experts) are invited to take part. He adds “Although many people participate, in reality, those who make decisions are key administrators at the Ministry level” (p.168). This statement discloses the hierachal central nature of decision making in Higher education institutions.

Moving forward and fostering genuine teacher leadership are deemed crucial for the Kurdish education system to update itself to global demands and stimulate innovation. This requires changing the purely top-down model to one that embraces collaborative decision-making and empowers educators at all levels.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Teacher Leadership

Traditionally, universities have been marked by mutual interplay of power between faculty members, administrators, and decision-making authorities in higher education institutions, each holding distinct but interrelated roles in shaping institutional policies and resource distribution. Advocating leadership empowerment, inclusivity, and mutual respect would result in better staff commitment and institutional effectiveness. Although many efforts have been made to precisely define teacher leadership, yet a generally accepted definition is still lacking (Shen et al., 2020; Pawar, 2023).

Throughout the development of the concept and practice of teacher leadership, different terminologies were used to denote the era of accountability. Wenner and Campbell (2017) mention terms like teacher leadership, teacher empowerment, distributed leadership, and shared governance. Shen et al. (2020) contend that even though these terms conceive teacher leadership in rather distinctive ways, they all express one notion that leadership embraces empowerment and collective influence.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) state teacher leadership refers to the way teachers, individually or collectively, impact their fellow teachers, school managers, and broad school communities to enhance instructional practices and ultimately boost student learning.

To Maeroff (1988), teacher empowerment refers to individual improved position, maximized knowledge, and access to decision-making. Lin (2014) proceeds that teacher empowerment is often brought into focus when negotiating issues that pertain the degree to which teachers' voices are taken into account in making decisions relevant to the teaching and learning processes.

Distributed leadership, instead of concentrating solely on either one formal individual leader or specified teacher leaders, indicates that leadership is "a group-level phenomenon" that necessitates the collective agency of multiple members. Hence, distributed leadership seems

to be a broader concept that embraces both teacher leadership and teacher empowerment (Shen et al., 2020).

Lightfoot (1986) asserts that a school is said to assist and develop teacher empowerment when it affords opportunities for autonomy, responsibility, and authority. As for Maeroff (1988), he contends that autonomy, recognition, opportunities for increasing knowledge, and decision making are pre-requisites for teacher empowerment. In Zembylas and Papanastasiou's (2005) view, teacher empowerment can be best studied in proportion to enhancing collegiality, providing adequate professional training, and appreciating teachers' role in their student achievement.

To Barth (2004) creating a school culture that will sustain teacher leadership requires administrators to clearly define goals and allow time for the staff to find coherence of what is going on in schools. The provision of culture of a school to change is indispensable in increasing teacher leadership. As such, control is no more found in the headmaster, but rather the headmaster assists teachers and initiates opportunities for them to develop and grow professionally.

To Maeroff (1988), within current trends associated with educational best practices, teacher empowerment has increasingly gained recognition. In the same token, Joshua et al. (2022) are of the belief that empowering teachers serves as a decisive factor in the success of the schools or other organizations in which teachers work toward achieving a common goal. They add, teachers' sense of empowerment constitutes a significant variable in the collective school improvement efforts in today's ever-evolving world.

Basically, the structure of society determines the origins of power and control in educational systems. To Watkins (2005), it is essential to consider to what extent the class structure, reflected in society's power distribution, is imposed on hierarchies of control.

Leithwood et al. (2008) maintain that the importance of teacher leadership becomes plainly visible when teachers encounter multifaceted challenges like improving student achievement, promoting objectivity and inclusion, and handling quickly evolving technological landscape. According to Pawar (2023), leadership in higher education entails inspiring, guiding, and empowering teachers and institutions to excel in teaching, researching, and service provision. If adequately provided, academic leadership would yield better institutional success, educational quality, and societal impact.

Bennis and Nanus (1997) maintain that rapid and unsteady change characterizes this era. To him, enormous ironies, dualities, contradictions, and contraries afflict educational organizations. Consequently, educational leadership plays a key role in alleviating the situation and creating a supportive and promising environment through building educational humanistic rapport among the different sectors so as to achieve the ultimate goal of the educational organization (Harris, 2003).

Additionally, Kouzes and Posner (1995) believe that the fruition of educational goals is contingent on having a good leadership. Effective leadership constitutes the cornerstone of changing and transforming the traditional leadership practices into a more inspiring, stance initiating, and change pioneering actions. Having this courage of launching change in teacher leaders, as Cole and Southworth (2005) remark, would hamper replacing such effective leadership by conventional educational administration, which often legitimize the existing power dynamics in education and strengthen the patterns of inequality in the education system.

In the field of EFL teaching, Stephenson (2008) asserts that the concept of teacher leadership is an optimal solution to keep power balance and supersede the top-down hierarchical leadership model, which minimizes EFL teacher autonomy at university level. This assertion is based on the conviction that individuals who have a common goal and work collectively can cooperate and bring about a change in their favour. In line with Stephenson's view, Harris (2003) defines leadership as "a common and collective endeavour that involves all members of the organisation" (p. 75). Hence, we find that the traditional doctrine of the single, individualistic leader is formally questioned and objected by this mode of new leadership.

Bento (2011) draws the distinction between two types of leadership approaches. The former perceives the teacher as a directive figure whose personal properties or actions distinguish him/her from the rest of the peers. The latter, which is more common in recent researches, accentuates the significance of teachers' collegial collaboration and interdependency of roles. It gives prominence to the concept of transformational leadership, where a leader has a crucial role in planning and enacting transformation.

6.2 Theories of Leadership

Leadership theories generally fall into three main categories: universalist, behavioral, and situational. Each of these has its own principles and period of dominance. The universal theory addresses leadership through personality traits and conducts that lead the charisma. This

theory underscored the significance of personal leadership characteristics as crucial in distinguishing leaders from followers, and it was dominant until 1940s (Stephenson, 2008).

In contrast, the behavioral theory shifted the emphasis from a leader's personal traits to their actions, which required the development of a set of necessary leadership traits (Azevedo, 2002).

As a response to the limited effectiveness of the behavioral theory and specifically since the 1980s, leadership research moved beyond personality traits and took into account the environmental variables contributing to the success of leaders. It accentuated the importance of collegiality and the interdependent roles of leaders and followers. The concept of a solo leader changed to a team leader and the image of heroic manager started to vanish eventually. Consequently, this shift in focus raised questions about the institutional culture of an organisation that support leaders in consolidating their traits and values. The concept of transformational leadership emerged to clarify the institutional reality showing its real vision and mission (Bento, 2011).

Jenkins (2021) maintains that the rapid evolutions occurring in the 21st century are influencing the educational landscape. Hence, it is required from institutions to adapt to and respond to such developments. An essential component of this adaptation necessitates alignment among institutional leaders and today's dynamic and complex environments. It has been confirmed that traditional linear approaches to manage higher education institutions are no longer effective. Thus, a novel concept of shared leadership emerged as a reaction to traditional leadership, which promotes adaptability, collaboration, and collective decision-making.

6.3 Dimensions of Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership is a multi-faceted concept that tackles the crucial role teachers play in shaping effective learning environments. It extends simply granting autonomy and delves into various dimensions that collectively foster a sense of professionalism and ownership among teachers. Understanding these dimensions is essential for developing effective strategies that genuinely empower teachers. Short and Rinehart (1992) propose six dimensions for empowering teacher leadership:

Decision-making means involving teachers in decisions that are directly related to their teaching processes and job-related duties.

Professional Growth includes teachers' awareness that the school will aid them to grow and develop as professionals and supports them to expand the required knowledge and skills.

Status refers to the teachers' attention to professional respect and esteem from peers due to their expertise in their field.

Self-Efficacy embraces teachers' perceptions of their own skills to facilitate students' learning and their potentials to affect changes in the progress of their students.

Autonomy touches upon the sense of freedom among teachers. In specific, it pertains managing the teaching processes in the classroom and utilising the effective strategies as planned for the lesson.

Impact refers to teachers' impression that they have an effective influence on school life. They need to perceive their worthiness in their job and feel recognition for their achievements.

It is worth-mentioning that this dimension's classification is used for designing the questionnaire items in the current study.

7. Methodology

A mixed method approach is employed in this study combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. Integrating both types of method within this study has been very enriching since each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses; thus the limitations of both are minimised.

7.1 Population and Sample

This study focuses on EFL teachers in Kurdistan Region Universities. Fortunately, there is a Viber group that collectively gathers most of them. This Viber group is composed of 247 members. The questionnaire was shared with this group via a Google Form which made the process of data collection effortless, accessible, and systematic. Out of this number, only 95 teachers completed the questionnaire online through the form. As for the qualitative data, 14 teachers from different universities in the Region were chosen to answer the open-ended questions.

7.2 Data Collection Tools

7.2.1 The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to investigate teacher leadership based on Short and Rinehart's (1992) six-dimension classification for empowering teachers. It included demographic questions and items related to these dimensions (decision-making, professional growth, status, self-Efficacy, autonomy, and impact). The questionnaire sought to elicit teachers' perceptions toward their current leadership power and its different dimensions, and the challenges they encounter in practicing their leadership power in higher education context in Kurdistan Region. It consisted of 36 items, rated on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 'strongly agree' to 5 'strongly disagree'. The 36 items were divided into six sections, each representing a specific dimension.

7.2.2 The Open-Ended Questions

The qualitative data was obtained through a set of open-ended questions revolving around the six dimensions of teacher leadership (Appendix 1). These questions were originally designed for face-to-face interviews with 14 teachers from the same department, selected through convenience sampling. However, the researchers acknowledged the limitation that such sampling method would restrict the generalizability of the findings. Consequently, to enhance the diversity of the sample and address the logistical challenges related to transportation, 14 teachers from different universities across KR were randomly selected and invited to participate. The open-ended questions were distributed via email instead of being administered through in-person interviews.

The open-ended questions elicited unpredictably rich data from the participants and the responses provided a deeper and more detailed understanding of the subject. The qualitative data supported the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, as the answers helped the researchers understand the reason why the participants selected certain responses in the questionnaire items.

7.3 Validity and Reliability

The validity of the questionnaire was checked so as to ensure the questionnaire measures the information it was supposed to measure. Seven university professors comprised the panel experts designated for this purpose. Their comments and recommendations were carefully considered, and the questionnaire items were revised accordingly to make them more relevant and aligned with the study objectives.

Later, a pilot study was carried out with 10 EFL teachers to test the survey's reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed and its value was calculated as .79, indicating a high level of reliability of the questionnaire.

7.4 Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in accordance with the established ethical research principles to ensure the rights, dignity, and well-being of the participants. Prior to data collection, the participants were informed about the aims of the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. The respondents were assured that the responses will be kept confidentially and used solely for research purposes. Further assurance was provided that individual responses will not be shared, and data will only be reported in aggregate form. Care was taken to present participants' views fairly and respectfully, without misinterpretation or manipulation.

7.5 Data Analysis

7.5.1 The Questionnaire Analysis and Discussion

The questionnaire items were classified into 6 main dimensions based on Sort and Rinehart's (1992) scale. The finding from this questionnaire depicts a complex and interesting details of university teachers' experiences with academic leadership. The agreement ratio from the teachers show a moderate level of satisfaction of their own leadership. Nonetheless, looking closely at the data discloses a stark dichotomy: the teachers feel thoroughly empowered in their immediate teaching roles but perceive a notable lack of influence in broader institutional leadership.

The highest mean scores and agreement ratios were found in the self-efficacy and autonomy sections. This suggests that the teachers feel empowered and have confidence in their day-to-day pedagogical responsibilities as shown in the two tables below:

Table 1 Self-Efficacy items

Section 4: Self-Efficacy Percentage		Mean	SD	
19	I am highly confident in my ability to design and deliver engaging and effective learning experiences for my students.	4.15	0.714	83.00%

20	I believe I possess the necessary skills to effectively manage diverse classroom dynamics and student needs.	4.11	0.515	82.20%
21	I am capable of adapting my teaching strategies and materials to ensure all students, regardless of their background, can achieve learning outcomes.	4.12	0.543	82.40%
22	I feel competent in assessing student learning and providing constructive feedback that promotes their academic progress.	4.14	0.594	82.80%
23	I am confident in my ability to integrate new technologies and pedagogical approaches into my teaching practice.	4.04	0.728	80.80%
24	I believe my teaching positively influences students' motivation and their overall learning journey.	4.08	0.630	81.60%

With the mean score of 4.15, teachers are highly confident in their ability to design and deliver effective learning experiences. A remarkable 83% of the respondents agreed with this statement. This high level of self-efficacy extends to other core teaching competencies, e.g. managing classroom dynamics (mean 4.11) and adapting teaching strategies (mean 4.12). These findings indicate that teachers have a strong sense of personal professional competence that enables them to successfully meet the demands on their instructional roles.

Table 2 Autonomy items

Percentage	Section 5: Autonomy			SD
		Mean	SD	
25	I have considerable freedom in choosing the instructional materials and resources for my courses.	3.93	0.970	78.60%
26	I am able to determine the pace and sequence of my lessons without undue external interference.	3.98	0.772	79.60%
27	I feel I have the liberty to experiment with innovative teaching methods and assessment techniques in my classroom.	3.92	0.953	78.40%
28	My curriculum design and pedagogical choices are respected by the administration and my colleagues.	3.79	0.966	75.80%
29	I have control over how I structure my class time to best meet the	4.04	0.922	80.80%

	learning objectives.			
30	I am not excessively constrained by rigid guidelines that limit my professional judgment in the classroom.	3.22	1.093	64.40%

Teachers' feeling of competence is complemented by a high degree of perceived autonomy (Table 2). The teachers declared that they have considerable freedom in choosing instructional materials (Mean 3.93) and determining the pace and sequence of their lessons (Mean 3.98). Furthermore, over 78% of the respondents feel they have the liberty to experiment with innovative teaching methods. This implies that the academic environment values and respects individual pedagogical choices. The only item in this section with lower score is related to being constrained with rigid guidelines (Mean 3.22) indicating that some teachers feel somehow constrained.

In sharp contrast to their classroom autonomy, the data discloses a huge deficit in teachers' perceived impact on broader departmental and institutional decisions. The lowest-scoring items in the entire questionnaire are clustered in the Decision-making section, as is shown below in table 3:

Table 3 Decision-Making items

Items	Section 1: Decision-Making	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage
1	I am regularly consulted on decisions that directly impact my teaching methodologies and classroom management.	2.60	1.180	52.00%
2	My opinions are actively sought and valued when the department or faculty makes decisions concerning job-related duties.	2.49	1.040	49.80%
3	I have a significant influence on the development and revision of academic policies that affect my instructional practices.	2.56	1.099	51.20%
4	I feel empowered to make autonomous decisions regarding the content and delivery of my courses, within curriculum guidelines.	3.49	1.237	69.80%
5	There are clear channels for me to provide input on institutional decisions that affect the teaching and learning environment.	2.93	1.151	58.60%

6	My involvement in decision-making processes extends beyond my immediate classroom to broader departmental or institutional matters.	1.85	0.934	37.00%
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The data demonstrates that the teachers feel mostly disengaged with institutional decision-making processes. For instance, the lowest scoring item in the entire questionnaire was related to teachers' involvement in decision-making processes beyond their immediate classroom, with (Mean 1.85). this is a critical finding since it suggests a top-down governance model where faculty voice is either not sought or not valued.

The findings in the Impact section support this feeling of lack of influence. While teachers believe that their work significantly contributes to the success of their department (Mean 3.97), their perception of directly influencing positive changes in college policies or practices is markedly low (Mean 2.72), as is shown below:

Table 4 Impact items

Percentage	Section 6: Impact			
		Mean	SD	
31	I believe my work significantly contributes to the overall success and reputation of my department/faculty.	3.97	0.736	79.40%
32	I feel that my efforts directly influence positive changes in school policies or practices.	2.72	1.048	54.40%
33	My contributions are recognized and celebrated by the university administration and the wider academic community.	2.94	0.943	58.80%
34	I see tangible evidence that my teaching and research have a meaningful impact on students' lives and careers.	3.53	0.873	70.60%
35	I feel that my voice is heard and considered when important decisions are made that affect the entire institution.	2.20	0.929	44.00%
36	I am confident that my work makes a difference in achieving the educational goals of the university.	3.62	0.901	72.40%

The data from the remaining two sections presents a generally positive outlook. As for professional growth, the teachers are of the belief that their institution prioritizes their professional growth (Mean 3.18); however, the practical support for it is lacking. The lowest-scoring item in this section was related to the regular assessment of their

professional development needs by their institutions (Mean 1.83), with an agreement ratio of just 36.6%. This indicates a mismatch between institutional intent and actual implementation, with professional development opportunities often seen as insufficient in resource or time (2.49) as is shown below:

Table 5 Professional growth items

Section 2: Professional Growth		Mean	SD	
Percentage				
7	My institution actively supports my continuous professional development through various opportunities (e.g., workshops, conferences, further studies).	2.96	1.368	59.20%
8	I am provided with sufficient resources and time to expand my knowledge and skills relevant to my academic discipline and teaching profession.	2.49	1.040	49.80%
9	I feel encouraged to pursue advanced degrees or certifications that enhance my professional capabilities.	3.14	1.277	62.80%
10	There are mentorship programs or peer learning initiatives available that contribute to my professional growth.	2.17	0.964	43.40%
11	My professional development needs are regularly assessed and addressed by the university administration.	1.83	0.883	36.60%
12	I believe that investing in my professional growth is a priority for my institution.	3.18	1.271	63.60%

Finally, and in status section, the teachers report a strong sense of professional respect and status from their colleagues and superiors. They continuously receive professional respect (Mean 3.34) and feel that their contribution to academic discussions and research are valued (Mean 3.21). This implies that while formal influence may be limited, informal peer-to-peer relationships and a culture of mutual respect are healthy within the academic community as table shows:

Table 6 Status items

Section 3: Status	Mean	SD
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Percentage				
13	I consistently receive professional respect and esteem from my colleagues and superiors due to my expertise in my academic field.	3.34	1.088	66.80%
14	My contributions to academic discussions and research are frequently acknowledged and valued by my peers.	3.21	1.119	64.20%
15	I feel that my professional standing within the university community is recognized and appreciated.	3.05	1.124	61.00%
16	My opinions are sought by other faculty members when they encounter challenges or seek advice in areas where I have expertise.	3.05	1.152	61.00%
17	I am given opportunities to represent my department or institution in academic forums or committees, which enhances my professional status.	2.97	1.115	59.40%
18	I believe my expertise is adequately utilized and recognized in collaborative projects and initiatives.	3.03	1.115	60.60%

One-way ANOVA was used to compare the mean score of the six dimensions and identify the differences among them. The statistical error value for the significance of the variance is accepted up to 0.01, as follows:

Table 7 ANOVA test for difference among leadership dimensions

The statistical error value for the significance of the variance is accepted up to 0.01, as follows:

ANOVA Test						
Study variables	Source of Variation	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
University teachers regarding various dimensions of their empowerment within their educational institutions	Between Groups	6	172.599	34.520	71.458	<0.001
	Within Groups	563	272.456	0.483		
	Total	569	445.055			

** Highly significant when the probability value is (Sig ≤ 0.01)

The ANOVA results reveal statistically significant differences in Kurdish university teachers' perceptions of leadership across the six studied dimensions. The extremely high F-statistics (71.458) and low p-value (<0.001) indicate that the variance observed among the dimensions is not due to random chance but reflects real difference in how teachers experience leadership.

From practical perspective, this finding suggests that certain aspects of leadership (such as decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact) may be perceived more positively or negatively than others. Such difference justifies further investigation through post-hoc tests e.g. Least Significant Difference (L.S.D. α) to precisely identify which dimensions differ significantly as is illustrated below:

Table 8 Least Significant Difference (L.S.D. α) analysis of the six dimensions

Study Variables		Multiple Comparisons					
		Decision - Making	Professional Growth	Status	Self-Efficacy	Autonomy	Impact
	Mean	2.65	2.63	3.11	4.11	3.81	3.16
Decision-Making	2.65		0.794	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
Professional Growth	2.63			0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
Status	3.11				0.00**	0.00**	0.602
Self-Efficacy	4.11					0.004**	0.00**
Autonomy	3.81						0.00**
Impact	3.16						

** Highly significant when the probability value is (Sig ≤ 0.01)

Based on the results presented in table 8, the mean scores show that self-efficacy (Mean 4.11) and autonomy (Mean 3.81) are rated highest, indicating that the teachers feel confident and independent in their roles; while decision-making (Mean 2.65) and

professional growth (Mean 2.63) are rated lowest. Highlighting areas needing improvement.

Most pairwise comparisons are significant ($Sig \leq 0.01$), confirming significant differences between dimensions. The only non-significant differences are between decision-making and professional growth ($Sig = 0.794$), and between status and impact ($Sig = 0.602$), suggesting these are thought of similarly. To a large extent, the findings indicate that teacher leadership is not equal across the six dimensions, emphasizing strength in self-efficacy and autonomy but weakness in decision-making participation and growth opportunities.

Table 9 One-sample t-test for the six dimensions of leadership

Study Variables	Cases	Mean	Calculate t	Sig	Decision	Trend
Decision-Making	95	2.65	-4.546	0.00	Significant	Negative
Professional Growth	95	2.63	-4.414	0.00	Significant	Negative
Status	95	3.11	1.246	0.216	Non-Significant	Neutral
Self-Efficacy	95	4.11	23.386	0.00	Significant	Positive
Autonomy	95	3.81	11.385	0.00	Significant	Positive
Impact	95	3.16	3.119	0.002	Significant	Positive
Overall	95	3.25	5.153	0.00	Significant	Positive

Table 9 shows results of a one-sample t-test of the six dimensions of teacher leadership. The t-test compared mean of each dimension (based on a 5 point Likert scale) against a test value (often neutral point of 3) to determine whether the responses are significantly higher or lower than neutral.

The one-sample t-test reveals that the teachers report high self-efficacy, autonomy, and perceived impact that reflect strong confidence in their work. However, decision-making power and professional growth opportunities are significantly lacking, which indicate structural or policy constraints. Status perceptions remain neutral, showing no clear lean toward positivity or negativity. Overall, the results demonstrate a general positive

leadership empowerment, with notable weaknesses in active participation and career advancement opportunities.

7.5.2 The Open-ended Questions Analysis and Discussion

The open-ended questions were analysed thematically emphasizing interpretive depth and researchers' reflexivity. Initially, the following key codes were extracted:

Restricted decision-making power, professional development opportunities, limited and informal collaboration and administrative support, lack of substantial funding, absence of systematic mentorship, and limited access to resources.

Restricted decision-making power

The respondents' answers demonstrate the fact that faculty members have autonomy only at micro level, e.g. designing their own courses and determining research scope. Teacher1 said "As a faculty member, my autonomy is primarily confined to the pedagogical domain: deciding how to teach, organising lessons, and evaluating student performance". Another teacher maintained "While broader institutional policy and curricula are centrally determined, we have discretion at the micro level in structuring and delivering lessons".

On the other hand, decision-making is centralized on the macro level. Faculty input is minimal at appointing department heads, deans, or shaping university policy. Teacher3 suggested "undertaking democratic reform e.g. electing department heads and deans biannually by faculty members to enhance inclusivity". Teacher4 reported "I feel excluded from higher-level policy decisions and faculty members encounter hieratical barriers in partaking in faculty input".

Professional development opportunities

As for the second theme, the respondents' attitudes are quite different. While eight teachers reported uneven professional development opportunities, general satisfaction at departmental level are claimed by other six teachers emphasizing mainly on personal initiatives. Teacher5 stated "professional growth opportunities e.g. seminars, workshops, and external training exist, but their quality and support vary". Another teacher reported

“Opportunities for professional training tend to favour certain individuals (favouritism), leaving others with limited or no access”. A similar response was “Not all faculty members are equally supported in their professional growth; access to courses and workshops is highly concealed and nontransparent (especially academic missions abroad)”.

Limited and informal collaboration and administrative support

The absence of formal and structured collaboration platforms was recognized by the majority of the respondents. A respondent said “Mostly, the respondents contended that peer learning occurs informally, mainly through daily observations and friendly feedback”. Another respondent maintained “This limited professional networking would hinder collective knowledge building among EFL teachers”. Doubtless to say, collaboration mechanisms at universities facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation. There are various formal and informal methods to achieve this, e.g. joint research projects, internships, and technology transfer offices. Hence, it is necessary for university administrations to create platforms and stimuli for networking and establish clear goals and roles for all parties in order to enhance academic collaboration. This would, as one of the respondents asserted, “foster a culture of trust and communication through shared vision and transparent feedback mechanisms”. Concerning the teachers’ readiness for participation in such activities, a respondent remarked “I would like to be involved in interdisciplinary programs that bring together teachers from different disciplines to work on real world problems that promote practical skill development”.

Lack of substantial funding

The respondents reported lack of state funding which has left a pile of university infrastructure needs. It restricts access to basic necessities, technology, and databases. The administrations’ failure in timely addressing college facility needs would negatively affect the teachers to teach and conduct research effectively. A respondent said “There is a chronic lack of financial resources, making it difficult to upgrade facilities or support academic initiatives”. A more elaborated response was made by another teacher “The narrow implication of lack of academic financial support lies in the fact that basic necessities such as laboratory equipment and teaching materials are in short supply. The wider implication is represented in the fact that financial restrictions have prevented the university from expanding programs or investing in modern infrastructure”.

The interview data discloses a paradox of teacher autonomy in the Kurdish higher education. While teachers enjoy significant individual autonomy in teaching and research design, yet, they encounter systemic exclusion from collective leadership and governance. This reflects what Bolden (2011) calls “formally empowered but structurally disempowered”. This academic leadership disempowerment resonates with regional studies that pronounce that the system does not foster teachers’ sense of choice, agency or autonomous decision-making, which in turn would “create an atmosphere of micromanagement and external pressure” (Salmani, 2025, 1). Similarly, Jubouri (2024) highlighted political instability, resource constrains, and hieratical culture as the main barriers to promoting teacher leadership in Iraqi universities.

The participants’ emphasis on the lack of faculty influence in leadership appointments accords with the findings from Deem et al. (2007) who contend that universities in centralized systems often restrict academic staff to narrow domains of influence. The increasing international call for democratizing academic governance may be at odds with hieratical traditions of Kurdish higher education. Among the obstacles that hinder improving the higher education sector in Kurdistan Region, Atrushi and Woodfield (2018) mentioned “political interference and heavy bureaucracy in the system” (p.27). Therefore, teachers should challenge the dogma and express critical views about the vital issues pertaining their academic environment.

In spite of having this traditional system in KR universities, there should be serious reform attempts so as to establish a well-deserved academic reputation and make universities at par with global standards. Deem et al. (2017) emphasise the significance of academic reputation as a primary indicator of institutional validity and legitimacy in the global higher education landscape.

As for teachers’ collaboration and collegiality, the respondents maintained that they regularly collaborate with their colleagues on research projects, curriculum development, or shared pedagogical initiatives, i.e., they individually collaborate on their teaching issues. They asserted that while workshops and seminars exist, their effectiveness is weakened by insufficient structural support. This assertion agrees with Ismail (2020), who mentioned lack of funds and experts for education and shortage of teacher training opportunities as big challenges in Kurdish Higher Education sector.

The limited access to research funding, databases, and grants reflect the wider systemic underfunding in Kurdish higher education. This concern of the respondents aligns with

Tahir et al. (2025) who are of the belief that the educational institutions' infrastructure should receive a substantial support since the most critical problem faced is the chronic under budgeting of the higher education system.

Tahir et al. (2025) contend that the unadaptable one-size-fits-all approach for developing professionals disregards the experience and credentials of individual academics, reflecting a broader institutional resistance to innovation in teacher professionalism. They describe the training as "still structurally disjointed, procedurally ineffective".

8. Conclusions

The results of the questionnaire highlight a critical divide in Kurdish EFL teachers' practice of academic leadership. They showed a high degree of pedagogical freedom and self-efficacy at the individual level. However, they lean towards rating their leadership power more negatively when it came to participation and influence in broader institutional governance.

Teachers responses to the open-ended questions revealed similar results. Teachers remain individually autonomous (in their own teaching/research), but collectively marginalised in governance and advancement. Therefore, they should have a significant voice in departmental and university-level decision-making processes.

The current hierarchical structure of the Kurdish higher education system limits teacher leadership. This is doubled with insufficient professional development tailored for developing leadership skills, which in turn, hinder EFL instructors from taking on such roles.

9. Implications and Recommendations

This research has the implication of empowering Kurdish EFL teachers and making them part of the mainstream leadership so as to reduce contradictions in leadership practices that hinder teacher empowerment. This can be achieved by reconciling the tensions through passing new educational legislation.

The Kurdish universities should take steady steps toward internationalization, global networking, and professional development integration by hosting international centers and initiating capacity building projects with other universities.

Establish a syndicate specified for university teachers to organize joint committees, consultative counsels, and formal mechanisms that ensure faculty voices influence

institutional policies. Forming this syndicate should not be viewed as a procedural management, rather, it should reflect deeper values of collaboration and accountability to empower faculty as key contributors in strategic decisions in higher education settings.

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Appendix 1 The open-ended questions

Section A: Decision-Making

How do you currently contribute to decisions that directly impact your courses, curriculum, or research projects?

In what ways are your opinions considered when departmental or faculty-wide policies affecting academic staff are developed (e.g. appointing deans and department heads), and what improvements could be made to this process?

Can you describe the processes for faculty members to contribute to decision-making at various levels (e.g., departmental, faculty, university committees)?

In what specific instances have you felt your voice influenced changes in academic policies and practices within your department or faculty? What factors contributed to or hindered that influence?

Section B: Professional Growth

How does the university/department actively promote and support your continuous professional learning and academic development (e.g., workshops, seminars, new teaching methodologies)? Are equal opportunities provided to all teachers?

In what ways does the university/department facilitate learning from and collaboration with your academic colleagues? Can you provide examples of successful collaborations or areas for improvement?

How does the university/departmental administration support your professional growth and career advancement goals (e.g., promotion, tenure)? What more could be done to foster these goals?

Can you describe the resources (e.g., access to databases, software, research grants) the university/department invests in to help you expand your knowledge and skills as an academic? How effectively do these resources meet your needs?

Section C: Status

What makes you feel that faculty members are generally recognized as respected professionals within this university/department? Are there any areas where this recognition could be strengthened?

How are your scholarly achievements, teaching excellence, and service efforts appropriately acknowledged by the university/departmental administration? What forms of acknowledgment are most meaningful to you?

What contributes to your sense of professional esteem from the broader academic community and institution?

Section D: Self-Efficacy

What aspects of designing and delivering engaging and rigorous university-level courses make you feel most confident? What, if anything, challenges your confidence in this area?

What approaches do you find most effective in motivating and engaging your students in critical thinking and advanced academic inquiry?

How do you ensure you assess student learning accurately and provide meaningful feedback in higher education contexts? What challenges do you encounter in this process?

Can you describe a time when you successfully handled an unexpected challenge in your teaching, research, or service responsibilities? What did you learn from that experience?

Section E: Autonomy

To what extent do you feel you have the freedom to choose the most effective teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches for your courses? What factors influence this freedom?

How are you trusted to design and implement course syllabi and content within established program guidelines? What level of flexibility do you experience?

How much control do you feel you have over organizing and managing your academic workload, including teaching, research, and service? What are the main influences on your workload management?

How do you typically adjust your course content and assessment methods based on student feedback and academic developments in your field?

Section F: Impact

In what specific ways do you believe your efforts have a tangible positive impact on the overall university environment and academic culture?

How are your contributions to departmental or university-wide initiatives and projects recognized and appreciated?

What opportunities have you had to contribute to university-wide improvements beyond your primary teaching and research responsibilities?

How do you feel your voice matters when it comes to shaping the academic direction and strategic goals of the university/department?