

Autonomous Language Learning at Tertiary Education Level in Saudi Arabia: Students' and Instructors' Perceptions and Practices

<https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.21.1.4>

Mohammad N. Khreisat and Ahmad Ibrahim Mugableh
Jouf University, KSA

Abstract: *The ultimate goal of educational institutions is to create self-independent, lifelong learners and discourage regurgitation of information in exams and evaluation. Thus, this study investigated (a) autonomous learning perceptions and practices among Saudi EFL students (n=312) and (b) instructors' perceptions of their students' autonomous language learning at a rural college at Jouf University in Saudi Arabia. This study utilizes a mixed method explanatory sequential research design using both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) research. The results of this study reveal that the students perceive their teachers as being largely responsible for most (50%) of the learning practices. The rest of the practices were viewed as either their own responsibility or mutually shared responsibility with their teachers with 25% for each. The quantitative analysis also indicates a medium frequency level (mean=3.2) of learning activities among students indicating that students have little exposure and experience in autonomous learning at their current institution. As for the gender differences, there are minor differences seen in the results, but they are not statistically significant. Semi-structured interviews provided in-depth insights on students' (n=14) and teachers' (n=6) perceptions of autonomous learning. Based on the findings, the instructors have positive attitude towards autonomous learning and are cognizant about its importance, but it is not effectuated in the educational process. Students and instructors agree that weakness in English attenuate utilising autonomous learning practices. The study proposes training programs, re-evaluate curriculum and implement self-access learning time to promote autonomous learning at the tertiary level in Saudi Arabia.*

Keywords: autonomous learning, autonomous language readiness, EFL autonomy, Saudi EFL, student centred learning

1. Introduction

The current educational process adopts a learning model where students take control over their learning, being active agents and are at the centre of the learning process (Kaur Sidhu & Kaur 2014). In this age, students ought to possess the necessary skills to seek, skim and sift through a flood of information from multiple sources. The change in the roles of both students and teachers has led to the emergence of autonomous learning as a key component in acquiring knowledge. The concept of autonomous learning is not new; however, it has gained momentum over the last decade in ELT (Ertürk 2016). Holec's (1981) definition, "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3), remains the most widely cited definition. However, the educational culture of Saudi students in the pre-tertiary levels

suggests that students perceive knowledge solely as a process of transmission from the teacher as the sole source of information, rather than a process of discovery and seeking information by themselves (Chan 2001). The researchers' experiences and preliminary interviews suggest that Saudi students are accustomed to rote learning where they rely on the teacher as the source and the moderator of the teaching process. This practice has resulted in weak and dependent individuals. This problem primarily begins at schools and is conveyed to the tertiary institutions where high-school graduates get into the university with little knowledge or even complete ignorance of the basics of the English language. This phenomenon also extends to a large percentage of Saudi tertiary graduates who are awarded scholarships to study in an English-speaking country. They are often given at least one year of English language courses before they commence their postgraduate studies there. Their inactive learning approach is largely a process of memorization and regurgitation of knowledge, especially in examinations. These students usually "sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught" as Knowles depicted (as cited in Teng 2019). For EFL students, it seems that reliance on the teacher as the sole source of language learning is apparent, which gives total control to the teacher and educationally enslaves students. With the dawn of technology and abundance of information, it became indispensable that students take responsibility for their own learning, especially outside classrooms (Gholami 2016). Thus, a proper understanding of students' beliefs and practices related to autonomous learning is crucial in order to take proper measures. Proper training can be suggested since many researchers (e.g., Chen & Pan 2015; Sidhu, Chan, & Sidhu 2011) attested that autonomous learning is not innate or inborn and should be acquired and guided.

There is a common consensus among all educators and policy makers on the importance of creating autonomous learners and learning systems, whether at school or tertiary levels. One of the central goals of educational institutions is to create lifelong autonomous learners (Gholami 2016; Sedighi & Tamjid 2016) who possess skills and capacity to obtain and learn information from multiple sources. The benefits of autonomous learning are innumerable and beyond dispute. Many researchers have attested that having autonomous learning capacity will increase motivation (Dickinson 1995; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan 2002; Szócs 2016, 2017; Ushioda 1996) and lead to more independent and critical learning (Szócs 2017). Thus, from the outset of starting the university, students are expected to use autonomous learning skills. Such skills are being encouraged and considered as main goals of education (Sedighi & Tamjid 2016; Üstünlüoğlu 2009). For these reasons, investigating students' perception about autonomous learning is necessary (Jafari, Ketabi, & Tavakoli 2017). Determining students' readiness towards autonomous language learning will provide invaluable information on how to promote and nurture autonomy in various educational levels. In the context of Saudi Arabian educational system, hitherto, there is a paucity of research which tackled the issue of language learning autonomy. This study adds to the scarce research in the Middle Eastern context in general and contributes to the limited research conducted in Saudi Arabia on the topic in particular.

The main purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the students' perceptions of autonomous language learning, as well as their actual autonomous behaviours. It also investigates the instructors' views about their students' autonomous learning. In order to accomplish this, the study utilises a mixed method research design to investigate the following questions and possible explanations. Thus, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of their roles in English Language autonomous learning in Saudi Arabia at tertiary level?
2. What are the differences between male and female students' autonomous learning perceptions and habits?
3. How often do Saudi learners engage in autonomous learning activities to learn English language?
4. What are the instructors' perceptions of their students' beliefs and practices about English language autonomous learning?

2. Literature review

Chan, Spratt, and Humphreys (2002) assert that autonomous learning stems from the learners' acceptance of their responsibility to learn. This means that students will have to assume responsibility and have control over both their learning method and content. The term has been coined since the 1960's. Throughout the history, various terms have been used to describe, sometimes interchangeably, Learning Autonomy (LA, henceforth) such as 'self-instruction'(BOWN 2009), 'self-regulation'(Zimmerman 2002), 'independent learning', 'self-access learning', and 'self-directed learning'(Holec 1996). Hitherto, Henri Holec remains the most prominent figure within the field of autonomy. He defined autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, Co-operation, & Europe 1981, p. 3). Other researchers have also tried to provide a definition for LA. White (2008, p. 5), for example, provides an illustrative definition of independent learning. She defines it as:

...Students' understanding of their own needs and interests and is fostered by creating the opportunities and experiences which encourages student choice and self-reliance and which promote the development of learning strategies and metacognitive knowledge.

Benson (2013) defined Autonomy as "capacity to take control of one's own learning". He has updated Holec's definition by replacing 'ability' with 'capacity' and 'take control of' instead of 'take charge of.'

Autonomy is multifaceted, complex and much-debated concept (Benson 2013). Little (1991) asserts that autonomy is multidimensional and has many forms. One view is Benson's (1997) which adopts classification of autonomy into technical, psychological and political perspectives. The technical perspective involves having the skills and strategies necessary to practice or use autonomy outside educational institutions and definitely without the involvement of the teacher (Schmenk 2005). In the psychological, as the name suggests, it involves the internal capacity of the learner such as attitudes that enable the learner to engage or practice autonomous learning. The political aspect focusses on the empowerment

given to learners to practice their own control over the learning process. An ideal situation for autonomous language learning to happen is when the learners have: an autonomous learning training (technical), positive attitudes and dispositions about learning autonomously (psychological) and a suitable environment or context that empowers them to take full control over the learning process (political) (Ivanovska 2015).

2.1 Autonomy and teachers

There is a strong interrelationship between learners' autonomy and teachers (Szöcs 2016) since teachers are supposed to facilitate autonomous learning in students (Mustafa 2018). Little (1995) clearly asserts that "the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers" (p. 175). Teachers need to have a conscious understanding of the limits of their control in the learning environment as overusing it could undermine student's autonomy. Unfortunately, many language teachers have positive attitude towards autonomous language learning and how important it is for learning and learners; however, they fail to put it into practice (Abdel Razeq 2014; Benson 2013).

2.2 Middle Eastern region and autonomous learning

Many scholars (e.g., Pennycook 1997; Schmenk 2005) claim that autonomous learning is a western educational concept that is conceived and perceived only in the West. This has, thus, created a large debate whether autonomous language learning can be implemented by learners outside western contexts. There are also arguments on the effects of culture and whether it can stymie the implementation of autonomous learning. Pennycook (1997), for example, states that autonomous learning which is derived from a specific context will have different nature in other cultures. However, nowadays, in the course of its evolution, the concept of autonomy has become part of the mainstream research and practice within the field of language education in different parts of the world.

The normal view of the learning process in the Middle East is for the students to passively receive the information from the teacher at school. Then parents are asked to follow up on what assignments the teachers have given them at home. Now, in critically analysing this process, the students are sent from one authority to another leaving them no choice to practice control over their learning. Since, as mentioned previously, autonomous learning is not innate and has to be learned (Kaur Sidhu & Kaur 2014), it leaves the students with no choice but to buttress their beliefs and perceptions of reticent learning.

From a cultural standpoint, in the educational contexts of the Middle Eastern regions, respect for the authority of the teacher in educational institutions is the norm, and students rarely question the information given out by the teacher. Asiri and Shukri (2020) attests to this notion in Middle East about teachers. Also, formal interaction between the teacher and the students is expected. This practice stems from a culture that respects hierarchy and fears embarrassment thereby strongly affecting learners' perceptions about autonomous learning. Thus, leaving us with educational settings that are best described as having a traditional and didactic

method in teaching and learning. It is undeniable that the concept of autonomous learning differs according to different cultures in which socio-cultural factors play an important role affecting education and learning of students in that cultural setting (Aliponga, Johnston, Koshiyama, Ries, & Rush 2013). Althaqafi (2017) states that autonomy of individuals and their decisions are also affected by the subjective and social norms of the surrounding environment. Learners in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, are often considered passive and reticent which affects their learning. The majority of them exhibit little or no knowledge of autonomous learning which further indicates their dependency on the teacher in the learning process. Abdel Razeq (2014) asserts that the majority of learners in the Middle East favour educators who take responsibility for all classroom activities. He postulates that such phenomenon is contingent on students' cultural upbringings and educational systems which are accustomed to spoon-feeding knowledge to learners. This is similar to a number of studies (Chan et al. 2002; Kaur Sidhu & Kaur 2014) with common cultural features which were conducted in Asian educational settings. In this regard, Hofstede's (2011) Cultural Dimensions theory illustrates how values in the society clearly affect its members' behaviour. In applying Hofstede's theory, it is clear that there is a large 'Power Distance' in the Middle Eastern culture and educational contexts. In this kind of society: parents teach children obedience; older people are both respected and feared; education is teacher-cantered; and subordinates are expected to be told what to do (see Hofstede 2011, for more details).

2.3 Autonomous language learning studies in the Arabian context

Previous studies on autonomous language learning in Saudi Arabia in particular and the Middle East in general are relatively scant and recent. Among the relevant research in Saudi Arabia, the following are identified: El-Gilany and Abusaad (2013) explored the readiness for self-directed learning of 275 students in Nursing department at faculty of Applied Medical Sciences, Jouf University. The study concluded that the majority of nursing students have high levels of readiness for self-directed learning. They also reported no significant relationship between self-directed learning readiness and students' demographics or learning style. However, results are only limited to Nursing students and female students outnumbered male ones. Alzubi, Singh, and Pandian (2017) explored the autonomous learning practices of 208 Saudi male students in the preparatory year program at Najran University. The study found that the respondents demonstrated a low level of learning autonomy due to weaknesses in linguistics confidence and locus of control. Alrabai (2017) study explored the level of autonomy and its relationship to academic achievement of 630 Saudi students enrolled at King Khalid University. The findings showed that students had low levels of autonomy in learning English and low language achievement. The results also found a significant positive relationship between autonomous language learning level and achievement. Almusharraf (2018) studied foreign language learner autonomy in vocabulary development of six students and 4 teachers which employed qualitative design, namely, classroom observations and semi structured interviews. The study was

conducted in an all-female public university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study attempted to explore students' autonomous levels in vocabulary development and teachers' efforts to encourage and implement autonomous vocabulary development. The researcher found that teachers are aware of autonomous vocabulary learning and their students' autonomy levels are influenced by their teachers' practices in this regard. Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) have explored 359 teachers' perceptions teaching in an English Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) at a university in Saudi Arabia. The study reported awareness among teachers about autonomous learning and its positive effects; however, they were less positive on the applicability of promoting and applying the concept in Saudi Arabia. In a recent study, Asiri and Shukri (2020) investigated the perceptions of 150 Preparatory year female students on learner autonomy at the English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University. The results revealed a very low level of autonomous learning and heavy reliance on the teacher in the learning process.

In the Middle Eastern context, Abdel Razeq (2014) explored autonomous learning readiness of 140 Palestinian tertiary students in the English language at Birzeit University using mixed research methods, namely, questionnaires and interviews. The study reported that students were affected by their past educational experience being accustomed to a teacher-centred approach in their language learning process. Nevertheless, the participants seemed amenable to change and act autonomously if given the chance, the author asserted. The findings did not show any influence of gender or achievement on the students' engagement in autonomous learning activities. Al Masroori (2015) conducted a study investigating the perceptions of 59 students and 8 teachers towards learner autonomy in a college of technology in Oman. The results confirm the similar findings of other studies in the region in which majority of students assume the teacher as the sole responsible for most of the learning process being the most knowledgeable. On the other hand, teachers perceive themselves as facilitators in the learning process. Boggu and Sundarsingh (2019) conducted experiential study on 60 business undergraduate students. They administered pre-test and post-test learner autonomy questionnaire to see the effect of the experiment. The findings of the study revealed that experiential learning cycle activities implicitly fostered learner autonomy and enabled learning necessary skills.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This paper utilizes a mixed method explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011, 2018; Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick 2006). Explanatory sequential design is divided into two stages in which dominance is given to the quantitative phase followed by qualitative phase (Qan→qual). The data from the quantitative strand is initially analysed to give a general picture of the study problem; on the other hand, the qualitative phase further explores and explains statistical results in depth (Ivankova & Stick 2007). Thus, this study utilises both quantitative and qualitative methods (i.e., questionnaires and interviews) to collect data about the students' perceptions and habits of autonomous language learning. Quantitative

statistical analyses were utilised to analyse data from the questionnaire using IBM SPSS v.23. In addition, qualitative method analysis using QSR Nvivo v. 10 was employed to provide explanation and further elaboration on the data from the quantitative strand.

3.2 Participants

The total population of the students in the faculty of Arts and Science in Tabarjal is 4445 male and female students; a branch affiliated to a state-owned university called Jouf University. The recommended sample size is 354 with 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. This study utilised a non-probability convenience sampling method to distribute the questionnaire to all the students enrolled in English language related courses (e.g., ENGL 103, ENGL 104, and English major courses). The returned and usable questionnaires were 312 and the ratio of male to females is to some degree close: 170 (54.5%) and 142 (45.5%), respectively. Table 1 illustrates demographic information of the sample. The students' majors categorized under the main study streams are as follows: (1) Humanities and Arts (e.g., English Language, Arabic Language, and Educational Studies) (2) Applied Sciences (e.g., Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry) (3) Business Management (e.g., Human Resources, Accounting, and Marketing...etc.). The level of students ranges from first-year students to fourth-year students.

Table 1. Demographic information of the sample

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	170	54.5
	Female	142	45.5
Majors	Humanities and Arts	186	59.6
	Applied Sciences	82	26.3
	Business Management	15	4.8
	Computer sciences	11	3.5
	Others	18	5.8

3.3 Data collection instruments and methods

For the quantitative phase, a self-reported questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was adapted from Chan et al. (2002). It comprised three sections that investigated (1) demographic information of the students. In this section, the students were asked to fill in their gender, major, level of study and their university ID number. The second section investigated students' perceptions of learning responsibilities. In this section, the students were asked to identify their views on a number of items according to the following categories: their responsibility, teacher's responsibility or both. The third section includes autonomous learning habits. This section asked the students to indicate their level of frequency of doing autonomous learning activities. Before the implementation of the main study

questionnaire, a number of procedures were taken. First, the questionnaire was translated into the Arabic language in order to facilitate understanding and accuracy of data. The researchers, being bilinguals, translated the adapted questionnaire into the Arabic language. Then it was sent to a panel of two bilingual experts with a PhD in applied linguistics to check for linguistic and cultural validity of the questionnaire. The experts subsequently back-translated the questionnaire in order to test for equivalence. In result, the Arabic version of the questionnaire was deemed valid. Later, the questionnaire was pilot-tested on a sample of students (n=10) who share the same characteristics of the main sample to check for ambiguities or any mistakes before it was implemented in the main study. No issues were present and the questionnaire was deemed valid.

Following the explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011, 2018), interviews succeeded the administration and analysis of the questionnaire. Two semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted; one on each campus, comprising 7 students. In the female campus, however, a fellow female instructor conducted the interview due to reasons pertinent to cultural and gender-segregated higher educational system in Saudi Arabia. This also helped eliminate and reduce bias influence from the researchers' side. The focus groups interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the discussion section, names of the students were changed to pseudonym symbols to remain anonymous. The symbols used indicated the gender of the students and a random number. For example, a female student is given FS and a male student is given MS symbol. The students were allowed to speak in the language they preferred, whether Arabic or English, to eliminate any communication barrier and allow them to express their opinions as freely as possible. Semi-structured interviews were also used to investigate the teachers' (n=6) perceptions about their students' autonomous language learning practices. The names of teachers were changed to pseudonym symbols to remain anonymous. They were given MT for male teachers and FT for female ones. The researchers developed a semi structured interview protocol with questions that further explain results from the quantitative strand. The following paragraphs illustrate the results of quantitative and qualitative strands to provide triangulation, synergy and support to the results.

4. Results and discussion

This study opted to use explanatory sequential design that triangulates the data from quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interviews) sources to create synergy and validate the results (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011, 2018). The results of the questionnaire were analysed using comparison of means, frequencies, and t-test. To interpret means, this study utilised Oxford's (1990) Likert frequency classification. According to Oxford's classification, mean scores between 1.0 and 2.4 are deemed as 'low' frequency use, mean scores between 2.5 and 3.4 are considered as 'medium' frequency use, and mean scores that ranged between 3.5 and 5.0 are considered as 'high' frequency use. The t-test was utilised to examine any significant gender differences in students' perceptions about their roles in autonomous language learning. Qualitative data was analysed using content

analysis procedures to identify common themes in the interviews (see, Bryman 2012).

4.1 Students' perceptions of their language learning responsibilities

In order to answer research question one which investigates Saudi students' perceptions of their responsibilities in English Language autonomous learning, the students were asked to indicate who is responsible for doing certain actions related to English language learning. Table 2 below lists the actions and illustrates the results of students' perceptions about language learning responsibility. Generally, the results of the data reveal that students perceive their teachers as being largely responsible for most of the learning activities.

Table 2. Students' perceptions of language learning responsibilities

Autonomous Learning Action	Teacher's Responsibility		My Responsibility		Our Responsibility	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1. Make sure I make progress during lessons	66	21.2	65	20.8	181	58.0
2. Stimulate my interest in learning English	104	33.3	77	24.7	131	42.0
3. Make sure I make progress outside class	56	17.9	189	60.6	67	21.5
4. Choose what activities to use to learn English in my lessons	199	63.8	44	14.1	69	22.1
5. Identify my weaknesses in English	73	23.4	132	42.3	107	34.3
6. Decide how long to spend on each activity	201	64.4	44	14.1	67	21.5
7. Evaluate my learning	163	52.2	58	18.6	91	29.2
8. Decide what I learn outside class	68	21.8	173	55.4	71	22.8
9. Translate new words in classroom	91	29.2	98	31.4	123	39.4
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in my lessons	173	55.4	64	20.5	75	24.0
11. Evaluate my performance in learning English	213	68.3	35	11.2	64	20.5
12. Decide the objectives of my English course	158	50.6	56	17.9	98	31.4

As the results in Table 2 indicate, out of the 12 learning activities, six activities are believed to be the responsibility of the teacher. The students perceived that their teachers are responsible for choosing the activities to be used in their English lessons (64%), deciding the time spent on each activity (64%), evaluate their learning (52%), choosing the materials in learning English (55%), evaluating their performance in learning English (58%), and deciding the objectives of the English course (50%). This clearly indicates a high tendency to depend on the teacher in deciding and doing these activities. It signifies their dependence on the teacher and their perception of teacher as the only source of information. This has been reported in previous studies and considered a main cause of low levels of autonomous learning in Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region (e.g., Al Masroori 2015; Asiri & Shukri 2020). This was apparent in the interviews when students were asked the following questions: “Who is responsible in the classroom? You or the teacher? Why?”. The reply from many students was the teacher, of course. FS1 further commented that they are used to listening and writing what the teacher says in the classrooms. MS1 added a reason why he believes the teacher is responsible. He said that the teacher knows the book better than the students so he should be responsible. Another female student (FS2) asserted that they were used to the teacher telling them what is important and what is not since the time they were at school. These reasons are consistent with the findings in Abdel Razeq (2014) study on autonomous learning. He has found that students preferred teachers who take the responsibility of all activities in the classroom.

Students assume responsibility for only three activities, two of which are outside the classroom. Accordingly, students believe they are responsible for making sure they make progress outside class (60%), identify their weakness in English (42%), and decide what they learn outside class (55%). Based on this, students feel they can be autonomous outside the class but not in the classrooms. The researchers further investigated this point in the interview and asked the following question: “Do you think you are capable of learning English by yourself? Please explain your answer?”. Students seem to acknowledge their weakness in the English language and report it as the cause of not learning. MS5 said that he is weak in English and that he does not know if he is learning correctly. This is common for Saudi students as other studies also reported students justifying their weak ability as a proper cause of not being excellent in English (e.g., Alsuhaibani 2019). Students’ autonomous learning capacity appear to be affected by having the teacher inside the classroom, compared to outside. FS7 implied this when she said that sometimes she acts alone outside the classroom when she cannot ask the teacher. The presence of the teacher being omniscient is causing them to rely on him/her which in turn affecting their views about their perceptions of autonomous language learning. This could be due to, as some instructors illustrated, past experiences and cultural background habituated on passive learning and teacher-centred educational system. Affective reasons might be another factor affecting these perceptions of their abilities, as one FS4 felt embarrassed when she gave a wrong answer in front of the whole class.

The remaining three activities were perceived by students as shared with the teacher. They are making sure they progress during lessons (58 %), stimulating their interest in learning English (42%), and translate new words in classroom (39.4%). These activities do not involve using their abilities but actions that can be done.

4.2 Autonomous learning responsibility and gender

According to the results illustrated in Table 3, there seems to be a general agreement between males and females on their perceptions of autonomous learning responsibilities. However, there are two cases where students disagreed (Item 2 and 9). In item 2, '*stimulating interest in learning English*', a high number of female students seems to believe that it is the teacher's responsibility compared to a high percentage of male students who believe it is a shared responsibility. In the results, female students attribute '*stimulating their interest in learning*' as the responsibility of the teacher. One of the interviewed female instructors, on the other hand, clearly stated that their students "*lack interest in learning and aren't motivated enough.*" It appears that female students are expecting stimulus from their teachers who also believe their students should be intrinsically motivated. FS2 stated that she is an Arabic language major and she does not need English in her life.

In item 9, female students perceived that it is the teacher's responsibility to translate new words in classroom, while male students perceived it as a shared responsibility. Since female and male students differ in their perceptions to this question, the researchers further explored this significant point in the interviews to reveal additional information. The students were asked to comment on the following question: "Do you use the dictionary or E-dictionary to translate words? Who mostly translates words in the classroom? Why?" All the students agreed they use e-dictionaries whether on their mobiles or online. MS7 clearly stated that it is easy, nowadays, to look up words on our mobiles or use Google translate. FS4 added that not all instructors allow them to use mobiles in classrooms. This could be the reason why female students differ from male students on whose responsibility it is to translate words. FS1 answered the second question and said that the instructor asks them the meaning of a new word and nobody answers, so she eventually gives it to them. She added that sometimes a word has many meanings, so it is better for the teacher to give them the right one.

Results clearly indicate that female students are more reliant on their instructors in stimulating interest in learning English and translating new words in classroom. Interviews with the teachers corroborated this fact, most female instructors concurred that their students are weak, they lack motivation, and they want the teacher to do the work. As one instructor described it "*They still want a teacher-centred method*" which is a common characteristic of low achievers as asserted by Abdel Razeq (2014). The results, however, contradicts with the findings of Alrabai (2017) who found that female Saudi students demonstrated more interest and positive autonomous behaviours when compared to their male counterparts.

Table 3. Students' perceptions of language learning responsibilities

Autonomous Learning Action	Gender	Teacher's Responsibility	My Responsibility	Our Responsibility
1. Make sure I make progress during lessons	M	16.5%	22.9%	60.6%
	F	26.8%	18.3%	54.9%
2. Stimulate my interest in learning English	M	24.1%	25.9%	50.0%
	F	44.4%	23.2%	32.4%
3. Make sure I make progress outside class	M	14.7%	70.6%	14.7%
	F	21.8%	48.6%	29.6%
4. Choose what activities to use to learn English in my English lessons	M	61.8%	15.3%	22.9%
	F	66.2%	12.7%	21.1%
5. Identify my weaknesses in English	M	18.2%	42.9%	38.8%
	F	29.6%	41.5%	28.9%
6. Decide how long to spend on each activity	M	54.7%	21.2%	24.1%
	F	76.1%	5.6%	18.3%
7. Evaluate my learning	M	50.6%	23.5%	25.9%
	F	54.2%	12.7%	33.1%
8. Decide what I learn outside class	M	16.5%	58.8%	24.7%
	F	28.2%	51.4%	20.4%
9. Translate new words in classroom	M	22.4%	34.7%	42.9%
	F	37.3%	27.5%	35.2%
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in my English lessons	M	48.2%	26.5%	25.3%
	F	64.1%	13.4%	22.5%
11. Evaluate my performance in learning English	M	61.2%	16.5%	22.4%
	F	76.8%	4.9%	18.3%
12. Decide the objectives of my English course	M	42.4%	23.5%	34.1%
	F	60.6%	11.3%	28.2%

4.3 English language autonomous learning habits and practices

The second question of this study investigated the students' autonomous learning habits and how often they practice these habits. The means and std. deviations are illustrated in Table 4. In order to interpret the means, the study utilised Oxford's (1990) classification of five-point Likert scale of frequency ranging from Never (1) to always (5). The means for the autonomous learning habits (Table 4) ranged between 2.83-4.15. The overall mean of the students' habits is 3.2 indicating that students engaged in autonomous learning activities at a medium level. This is normal since the respondents have been newly introduced to this concept and never been exposed to autonomous learning before in their past learning experiences especially in schools. They may have used it upon the request of the teacher only. This has been clear since a number of students and teachers have clearly stated this in the interviews. It is also important to indicate that autonomous learning is linked to the level of motivation (Spratt et al. 2002) which they lack according to the interviews with their instructors. Autonomous learning is not an innate skill (Kaur Sidhu & Kaur 2014), and students are not expected to use what they have not been taught.

The analysis also reveals that the most frequently used activity is 'taking notes during the lectures.' According to the interviews with instructors, this is due to frequent requests by the instructor to write important things and highlight it on the book. One of the male instructors clearly stated that majority of students need to be told what to highlight in the book to indicate its importance. The students are usually accustomed to the teacher telling them to note down important information.

Table 4. Autonomous learning habits practices

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Do assignments which are not compulsory	2.93	0.172
2. Note down new words and their meanings	3.27	0.302
3. Watch English TV programs	3.35	0.372
4. Read newspapers in English	2.86	0.433
5. Read books or magazines in English	2.86	0.372
6. Go to see the teacher about the Course materials.	3.31	0.240
7. Talk to foreigners in English	2.85	0.357
8. Practice using English with friends	2.97	0.310
9. Study English in a group with my friends	2.83	0.365
10. Prepare for the lesson before hand	3.25	0.244
11. Taking notes during the lectures	4.15	0.104
12. Use the internet to study English	3.95	0.157
13. Collaborate with my friends to study English	3.15	0.307

In an attempt to elaborate on their habits and learning practices, the researchers tried to investigate the main source of learning using the following questions: “Where do you learn mostly from? What are the sources of your learning?”. A student answered, “From the book” [Many students agreed with what was said]. He further asserted that the questions in the exams are always from the textbooks, it is difficult to answer if anything is not from the textbooks. MS5 further explained that they always memorise and practice on the exercises in the book. A female student commented that none of the teachers gave them anything that is not in the books because this is what they are used to, that is, all the questions are from the book.

4.4 Language learning practices and gender

This study also examined the relationship between autonomous learning habits and gender. Table 5 presents the results of independent sample t-test to examine if any significant differences exist between male and female students with regard to autonomous learning activities. The overall mean of female students seems to be slightly higher than males with 3.29 and 3.21, respectively. This is consistent with previous research (e.g., Tok 2011; Varol & Yilmaz 2010) which have found that female students engaged more frequently in autonomous learning activities than male students. However, only two activities were found significantly different, item 7 ($P < 0.005$) and item 10 ($P < 0.05$). In item 7 (i.e., Talk to foreigners in English), male students were found to do it significantly more frequently than female students with mean scores of 3.06 and 2.58, respectively. Furthermore, in item 10 (i.e., Prepare for the lesson before hand) female students were found to do it more frequently than male students: mean 3.42 and 3.09, respectively.

Table 5. Learning practices and gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Sig.
1. Do assignments which are not compulsory.	Male	170	2.85	0.142	.496
	Female	142	2.96	0.209	
2. Note down new words and their meanings	Male	170	3.37	0.325	0.367
	Female	142	3.17	0.273	
3. Watch English TV programs	Male	170	3.42	0.366	.319
	Female	142	3.27	0.378	
4. Read newspapers in English	Male	170	2.81	0.449	0.448
	Female	142	2.93	0.417	
5. Read books or magazines in English	Male	170	2.74	0.348	0.075
	Female	142	3.01	0.389	
6. Go to see the teacher about the Course materials.	Male	170	3.24	0.251	0.259
	Female	142	3.39	0.226	
7. Talk to foreigners in English	Male	170	3.06	0.364	0.002

	Female	142	2.58	0.306	
8. Practice using English with friends	Male	170	2.88	0.237	0.153
	Female	142	3.09	0.388	
9. Study English in a group with my friends	Male	170	2.84	0.344	0.978
	Female	142	2.83	0.394	
10. Prepare for the lesson before hand	Male	170	3.09	0.327	0.049
	Female	142	3.42	0.124	
11. Taking notes during the lectures	Male	170	4.05	0.130	0.077
	Female	142	4.27	0.065	
12. Use the internet to study English	Male	170	3.98	0.096	0.616
	Female	142	3.92	0.229	
13. Collaborate with my friends to study English*	Male	170	3.10	0.268	0.844
	Female	142	3.21	0.356	

The researchers asked about other activities which could attenuate the time allocated to engage in English language learning activities outside classroom. MS2 stated that he does not have much time to learn outside classroom. The researcher asked, “Why, what do you do? The student replied that after he finishes class, he goes out with his friends, watch movies or spend time on mobile checking messages, watching videos, or chatting with friends [Many students agreed with this statement]. Female students also agreed that they were occupied with these things and stated other things like doing choirs at home and shopping. However, cultural restrictions on Saudi female students require them to spend more time at home compared to male students who are given more liberty and freedom to spend time outside their home. As a result, female students tend to spend more time doing autonomous learning activities as the results indicate. Other leisure activities undertaken by both male and female students outweighed other activities related to learning or improving English language. MS6, for example, stated that he already spends enough time at the university studying and attending lectures. He then firmly stated “it is my time outside college.” When asked about the activities pertinent to learning students engage in outside college, students mentioned the following: watching movies and T.V. series which is a by-product in learning English and not a conscious and academic practice that targets learning another language. It can be inferred that the students’ only exposure to learning English in Saudi Arabia is restricted to education received in college or classroom.

4.5 Interviews with the teachers

In order to answer the fourth question of the current research (i.e., To investigate university instructors’ perceptions of their students’ level of learning autonomy to learn English), an interview with a number of instructors who currently teach the students was conducted. The researchers asked the instructors to comment on the

following topics. When asked about their opinion about autonomous learning, the instructors showed a clear understanding of what autonomous learning is and what it encompasses. FT3 defined it as: “having the power to act and regulate one’s own learning activities.” All the instructors have positive attitude towards autonomous learning and acknowledge the importance of autonomy in the learning process. MT2 said, “autonomous learning is very important to foster healthy learning.” They also highlighted that students should be autonomous in learning the English language and rely on themselves rather than being dependant on the teachers. FT1 said that “It gives the students the right and responsibility to choose and control their own learning process ... students become more independent in making decisions.” FT2 emphasised the importance of autonomous learning in the teaching process, she said: “I strongly believe that students should learn how to become autonomous.”

The researchers have also asked the following two questions: “What do you think about your current students with reference to autonomous language learning?” and “What are the challenges you face in promoting/implementing autonomous learning?” as they seemed connected and would elicit similar answers. Most of the interviewed instructors have explicitly stated that their students are weak in language; therefore, unable to practice autonomous learning on their own. FT3 said that “They lack the basics of English.” There is a consensus among lecturers on this fact. Instructors described their students to be completely reliant on the teacher in the classroom. For instance, some instructors used the term ‘spoon feeding’ to describe the teaching process in their classes. MT3 elaborated and said that “They need someone to do everything for them”. Another instructor supported this claim and commented, “they want the teacher to be the authority in the class, and they don’t want to make their own decisions.” The teachers on both campuses agree that the majority of students show a lack of awareness of what autonomous learning is or they just simply do not want to learn. Instructors added that their students are not doing what they are asked to do such as homework or assignments. In the male campus, MT1 stated that “Even though I show them how to answer or where to look for the answers, I always find myself obliged to solve homework for them to make sure they have the right answers to the questions”.

The researchers asked another question: To what extent do you think you are able to implement autonomous learning practices in your classes to tackle the previously mentioned challenges? There is a general consensus among all the instructors that applying or implementing autonomous learning is hard and has a limited application in their classrooms. They relate this to a number of reasons including students’ weakness in the English language, lack of interest or motivation, cultural reasons, and past learning experiences. Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) in their study reported similar findings. They related difficulty of promoting learner autonomy to factors such as curricula, societal but most importantly were learners related factors such as lack of motivation and low English proficiency. FT1 reiterated the findings from Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) and asserted that one major reason is “poor curriculum and pedagogical approaches in schools.” She further commented that passive learning is a dominant form of learning in Saudi

Arabian culture and educational system. Perceived challenges of autonomous learning in Saudi Arabia, for many teachers, originate from both lack of the abilities and readiness of students along with social and pedagogical difficulties in changing an established teaching and learning beliefs and practices (Benson 2013).

5. Conclusion

There is a general consensus among all educators and policy makers on the importance and the need for creating autonomous learners and learning systems whether at school or tertiary levels. The benefits of autonomous learning are innumerable and beyond dispute. Thus, investigating students' perception of autonomous learning is necessary (Jafari et al. 2017). This study reveals that students engage in autonomous learning activities with an overall mean of 3.2 indicating that students have little exposure and experience in autonomous learning at their current institution. In investigating students' perceptions of their learning responsibilities, students perceive their teachers as being largely responsible for most (50%) of the learning activities. The remaining activities were viewed as either their own responsibility or mutually shared with their teachers. In attempting to clearly interpret the results, it can be said that there is presence of intention to learn autonomously but it is not effectuated (White 2008). On the one hand, the students want to be autonomous but lack the ability to do so. The teachers, on the other hand, have positive perceptions about autonomous learning; however, it was not implemented due to their students' weakness in English, lack of experience and awareness about autonomous language learning. In addition, other leisure activities undertaken by both male and female students might have outweighed other activities related to learning or improving English language. All this attenuated the implementation of autonomy practices in their classes. In the light of the current results, and development of learning autonomy in Saudi Arabia is clearly constrained by the cultural context and educational environment which Saudi students have been exposed to from schools through university and into.

Based on the findings of the study, a number of implications and recommendations are suggested for policy makers, educational institutions and future researchers and educators. While this study was conducted in the Saudi Arabian higher education context, its implications may apply to other broader EFL learning contexts/environments where limited autonomous language learning practices and awareness are increasingly common. The researchers suggest implementing training programs, for both in service teachers as well as students, to introduce autonomous learning from the early stages at schools and pre-service teachers' programs. Designers and instructors should evaluate current curriculum to incorporate more task-based activities that empower students to be autonomous learners. Policy makers should implement self-access learning time in schools and higher education facilities in Saudi Arabia to give students more control over their learning.

Since the scope of this study is limited to Saudi students' perceptions and habits of autonomous language learning, there is a need to further investigate the following aspects: the relationship between autonomous language learning level

and academic achievement; the effects of motivation on autonomous language learning practices; the attitudes of school teachers and their students towards autonomous language learning; the efforts, if any, made at the school level to foster autonomous learning practices; how much attention do students, teachers and curriculum assign to autonomous learning in Saudi Arabian school system. This study has laid the foundation for studying the aforementioned topics and hopefully shed the light on the current status quo of autonomous language learning in Saudi Arabian higher educational system.

Funding Acknowledgement

This research was supported by Jouf University (Grant No:39/278).

Mohammad N. Khreisat
Department of English
Faculty of Arts and Science
Tabarjal, Jouf University, Saudi Arabia
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-8611-0328
Email: mnkhreisat@ju.edu.sa

Ahmad Ibrahim Mugableh
Department of English
Faculty of Arts and Science
Tabarjal, Jouf University, Saudi Arabia
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-5511-553X
Email: ahmugableh@ju.edu.sa

References

- Abdel Razeq, Anwar.** (2014). 'University efl learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning responsibilities and abilities'. *RELC Journal*, 45 (3), 321-336. doi:10.1177/0033688214547035
- Al Masroori, Badriya.** (2015). 'A mixed-method study of teachers' and students' perceptions towards learner autonomy in a college of technology in oman'. *Oman Journal of ELT*, 2, 30-52.

- Aliponga, Onathan, Johnston, Christopher, Koshiyama, Yasuko, Ries, Tina and Rush, Thomas.** (2013). 'Learner autonomy in east asian university contexts'. *Journal of Educational and Social Research; Vol 3, No 7 (2013): Special Issue* - October 2013.
- Almusharraf, Norah.** (2018). 'English as a foreign language learner autonomy in vocabulary development'. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*.
- Alrabai, Fakieh.** (2017). 'Exploring the unknown: The autonomy of saudi efl learners'. *English Language Teaching*, 10 (5), 222-233.
- Alsuhailani, Zainab.** (2019). 'The relationship between female efl students' use of reading strategies and their reading self-efficacy'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 19 (2), 373-393.
- Althaqafi, Abeer Sultan.** (2017). 'Culture and learner autonomy: An overview from a saudi perspective'. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, 4 (2).
- Alzubi, Ali Abbas Falah, Singh, Manjet Kaur Mehar and Pandian, Ambigapathy.** (2017). 'The use of learner autonomy in english as a foreign language context among saudi undergraduates enrolled in preparatory year deanship at najran university'. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 8 (2), 152-160.
- Asiri, Jameelah and Shukri, Nadia.** (2020). 'Preparatory learners' perspectives of learner autonomy in the saudi context'. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 11 (2June).
- Benson, Phillip.** (2013). *Teaching and researching : Autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Boggu, Anita Teresa and Sundarsingh, J.** (2019). 'An experiential learning approach to fostering learner autonomy among omani students'. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 10 (1), 204-214. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1001.23>
- Borg, Simon and Alshumaimeri, Yousif.** (2019). 'Language learner autonomy in a tertiary context: Teachers' beliefs and practices'. *Language Teaching Research*, 23 (1), 9-38. doi:10.1177/1362168817725759
- BOWN, JENNIFER.** (2009). 'Self-regulatory strategies and agency in self-instructed language learning: A situated view'. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93 (4), 570-583. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00965.x
- Bryman, Alan.** (2012). *Social research methods*: OUP Oxford.
- Chan, Victoria.** (2001). 'Readiness for learner autonomy: What do our learners tell us?'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6 (4), 505-518. doi:10.1080/13562510120078045
- Chan, Victoria, Spratt, Mary and Humphreys, Gillian.** (2002). 'Autonomous language learning: Hong kong tertiary students' attitudes and behaviours'. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, 16 (1), 1-18. doi:10.1080/09500790208667003

- Chen, Hsiang-I and Pan, Hung-Hsi.** (2015). 'Learner autonomy and the use of language learning strategies in a taiwanese junior high school'. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 5 (1), 52-64.
- Creswell, John. and Plano Clark, Vicki.** (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, John. and Plano Clark, Vicki.** (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3 ed.). Los Angeles SAGE Publications.
- Dickinson, Leslie.** (1995). 'Autonomy and motivation a literature review'. *System*, 23 (2), 165-174. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(95\)00005-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00005-5)
- El-Gilany, Abdel-Hady and Abusaad, Fawzia El Sayed.** (2013). 'Self-directed learning readiness and learning styles among saudi undergraduate nursing students'. *Nurse education today*, 33 (9), 1040-1044.
- Ertürk, Nesrin Oruç.** (2016). 'Language learner autonomy: Is it really possible?'. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 650-654. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.089>
- Gholami, Hamid.** (2016). 'Self assessment and learner autonomy'. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6 (1), 46-51.
- Hofstede, Geert.** (2011). 'Dimensionalizing cultures: The hofstede model in context'. *Online readings in psychology and culture*, 2 (1), 8.
- Holec, Henri.** (1996). 'Self-directed learning: An alternative form of training'. *Language Teaching*, 29(2), 89-93. doi:10.1017/S0261444800008387
- Holec, Henri., Co-operation, Council of Europe. Council for Cultural and Europe, Council of.** (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*: Council of Europe.
- Ivankova, Nataliya V., Creswell, John W. and Stick, Sheldon L.** (2006). 'Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: From theory to practice'. *Field Methods*, 18 (1), 3-20. doi:10.1177/1525822x05282260
- Ivankova, Nataliya V. and Stick, Sheldon L.** (2007). 'Students' persistence in a distributed doctoral program in educational leadership in higher education: A mixed methods study'. *Research in Higher Education*, 48 (1), 93-135.
- Ivanovska, Biljana.** (2015). 'Learner autonomy in foreign language education and in cultural context'. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 180, 352-356. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.02.128>
- Jafari, Sakineh, Ketabi, Saeed and Tavakoli, Mansoor.** (2017). 'Advanced and intermediate efl learners' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning'. *ITL - International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 168 (1), 70-90. doi:doi:10.1075/itl.168.1.03jaf
- Kaur Sidhu, Gurnam. and Kaur, S.** (2014). 'Promoting learner autonomy in esl/efl classroom'. In S. Kaur & S.A. Manan (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives in english language studies: Linguistics and literature (penerbit usm)*: Trajectory, Incorporated.
- Lin, Lilan and Reinders, Hayo.** (2017). 'Assessing learner autonomy: Development and validation of a localized scale'. In Hayo Reinders, David Nunan, & Bin Zou (Eds.), *Innovation in language learning and teaching: The case of china* (pp. 307-328). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

- Little, David.** (1991). 'Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems'. In *Dublin: Authentik autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Little, David.** (1995). 'Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy'. *System*, 23 (2), 175-181. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(95\)00006-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00006-6)
- Mustafa, Faisal.** (2018). 'How much do high schools contribute to improving students' english proficiency? Seeking alumni's perception in indonesia'. *Asian EFL Journal*, 20 (2), 49-61.
- Oxford, Rebecca.** (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*: Newbury House Publisher.
- Pennycook, Alastair.** (1997). 'Cultural alternatives and autonomy'. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. (pp. 35–53). Harlow: Longman.
- Schmenk, Barbara.** (2005). 'Globalizing learner autonomy'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39 (1), 107-118. doi:10.2307/3588454
- Sedighi, Elham and Tamjid, Nasrin Hadidi** (2016). 'The relationship between iranian efl learners' autonomy and their vocabulary learning strategies with a focus on gender'. *Journal of English Language Pedagogy and Practice*, 9 (18), 183-196.
- Sidhu, Gurnam Kaur, Chan, YF and Sidhu, Sarjit Kaur.** (2011). 'Students' reactions to school-based oral assessment: Bridging the gap in malaysia'. *Asian EFL Journal*, 13 (4), 300-327.
- Spratt, Mary., Humphreys, Gillian. and Chan, Victoria.** (2002). 'Autonomy and motivation: Which comes first?'. *Language Teaching Research*, 6. doi:10.1191/1362168802lr106oa
- Szócs, Krisztina.** (2016). 'Secondary. School. Teachers'. Beliefs. About. Teacher. Autonomy: A. Qualitative. Study'. In M. Lehmann, R. Lugossy, & J. Horváth (Eds.), *Uprt 2015: Empirical studies in english applied linguistics* (pp. 91): Lingua Franca Csoport.
- Szócs, Krisztina.** (2017). 'Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning autonomy and its implications in the classroom: A mixed method study'. *Apples : Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 11 (2), 125-145.
- Teng, Feng.** (2019). *Autonomy, agency, and identity in teaching and learning english as a foreign language*. Singapore: Springer
- Tok, Hidayet.** (2011). 'Autonomous language learning: Turkish tertiary students' behaviours'. In David Gardner (Ed.), *Fostering autonomy in language learning*. Gaziantep: Zirve University.
- Ushioda, Ema.** (1996). *The role of motivation: Authentik Language Learning Resources*.
- Üstünlüoğlu, Evrim.** (2009). 'Autonomy in language learning: Do student take responsibility for their learning'. *Journal of Theory and practice in Education*, 5 (2), 148-169.
- Varol, Burcu and Yilmaz, Sinem.** (2010). 'Similarities and differences between female and male learners: Inside and outside class autonomous language

learning activities'. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 3, 237-244.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.038>

White, Cynthia. (2008). 'Language learning strategies in independent language learning: An overview'. In S. Hurd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Language learning strategies in independent settings* (pp. 3-24). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Zimmerman, Barry J. (2002). 'Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview'. *Theory Into Practice*, 41 (2), 64-70. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2