Examining Saudi EFL University Students' Readiness for Online Learning at the Onset of Covid-19 Pandemic

Elham Abdullah Ghobain

English Language Institute, Jazan University
Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: ghobain@jazanu.edu.sa

Abdullah Ahmed Zughaibi

English Department, Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

Received: 5/26/2021

Accepted: 6/22/2021

Published: 7/26/2021

Abstract

Nowadays, especially after the COVID-19 crisis lockdown, the heavy reliance on technology and online platforms led to a greater expectation of more learning autonomy among English learners in EFL contexts such as Saudi Arabia. The sudden shift to online learning requires an investigation into students' readiness and willingness for such a mode of learning. This can provide educators with many prospects about learning outcomes achievement and assessment, test performance, and interaction during classes. Therefore, the current study seeks to contribute to the well-known area of learner autonomy research, which is still lacking in the context of the study, by exploring the readiness of Saudi first-year undergraduate English learners towards online education. Participants' level of readiness is identified according to their autonomous behaviors and activities. The study will also assess the investigated concept considering the influence of gender and field of study of the participants on their autonomy levels. A total of 802 students participated in this study. It was found that Saudi first-year university students are moderately autonomous, that both males and females have similar levels of aptitude and readiness for taking responsibility for their learning, and that English-major and non-English-major groups showed comparatively similar levels across different learning autonomy dimensions. Yet interestingly, English-major participants displayed a relatively lower autonomy level than students of other majors.

Keywords: English learners, online learning, Saudi learners, learner autonomy, university students, learning during covid19 lockdown

Cite as: Ghobain, E. A. , & Zughaibi, A.A. (2021). Examining Saudi EFL University Students' Readiness for Online Learning at the Onset of Covid-19 Pandemic *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL (7)*. 3-21. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call7.1>

Introduction

Learner Autonomy (LA) and online learning have become inseparable areas in the area of education research; hence they are always investigated together. It is believed that the boom in technological educational tools and platforms has promoted independence in learning (Reinders & White, 2011), which is the essence of LA. At the same time, the indisputable sovereignty held by technology over education has spurred a repertoire of skills learners should be equipped with, which all stand on the ground of autonomy and self-learning.

Online channels, resources, and learning platforms have been employed in educational settings to varying extents (i.e., in different modes, either as a primary means of instruction or supportive integrated practice). That said, with the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, online education has stood as the only available alternative for learning. Accordingly, the whole world has suddenly shifted to the internet and the virtual space to cope with this situation and fulfill the already set educational goals. Although the study context is fully equipped with online and virtual educational tools, those tools have not been well or fully exploited until the beginning of this recent crisis. The institution utilizes Blackboard as its Learning Management System (LMS) for distance learning programs, except for some common courses that are shared by specific disciplines. The sudden complete shift to Blackboard has necessitated investigating students' readiness to taking charge, responsibility, and control of their learning, what represents a simplified definition for LA. Acknowledging that LA is a concept rooted in western cultures, it is generally assumed that LA does not apply to non-western students. However, some studies, such as those that appear in the literature review below, have shown non-western EFL students as able to acquire autonomy and practice autonomous activities and behaviors. It can be argued that, due to the nature of the 21st century with its large expansion in digital tools and social media, which has endowed users with freedom and individualism, individuals' independence and responsibility have developed across most countries and cultures. Thus, research in these contexts should be vibrant and constant.

In a similar vein, learners in non-western countries have been stereotyped for their teacher dependency. In the context targeted by the upcoming study, although teachers are meant to be available to students online, through emails, discussion boards, or during live sessions, online learning represents a new situation to students. Students should work and learn entirely through a mode in which their teachers are kept at a distance, a situation they most likely have never experienced. This new experience means that they have to hold themselves responsible, develop independence, and realize the 'new' roles that should be played by both themselves and their teachers. Embarking on the journey of online learning and teaching without adequate understanding about the learner's position, role in, or preparedness for this process may yield false assessment and interpretation about the whole journey. At the same time, investigating learners can help drawing a better learning situation if educators pay attention and provide solutions for all potential challenges. Therefore, the study will shed light on participants' perceptions about their roles alongside perceptions about their teachers. It will also investigate how these LA components might be interpreted in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. In details, the upcoming study aims to achieve the following objectives through answering the research questions presented hereafter.

- To identify how well-equipped Saudi EFL university students are in terms of learning English autonomously.
 - To examine if gender is an influencing factor on learners' autonomous practices and behaviors of learning English.
 - To investigate if there are differences in the autonomy levels displayed by English-major and non-English-major students.
- 1) On the ground of learning autonomy, to what extent can Saudi undergraduate students be considered ready for learning English online?
 - 2) What autonomous perceptions, behaviors, and practices of learning English do Saudi undergraduates prefer and display based on gender variable?
 - 3) Is there any difference in the level of autonomy between Saudi English-major and non-English-major students?

Literature Review

The digital age we are witnessing has evoked research into learners' behaviors and skills, as they have been pushed to the center of the learning-teaching process. Technology has imposed a relatively new nature or style on individuals with its abundant user-friendly digital means. Thus, it has created learners who may refute the stereotypes associated with particular contexts and cultures in terms of learning styles. Nowadays, individuals worldwide are taking control of their activities and actions, (Candy, 1991). And this is considered an unprecedented change in life that has shed changes in the nature of learning. The individuality and independence rendered to learners in virtual spaces fit well into the discussion of learner autonomy.

LA has long been treated as a western value imposed on non-western educational contexts (e.g., Pokhrel, 2016; Wang & Wang, 2016; Stroupe, Rundle & Tomita, 2016). It is indeed a term coined by western scholars such as Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987), and Little (1991). It has been investigated in English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL contexts, which embraced the term and its application in those contexts. Due to the great interest and emphasis paid to the term, scholars have provided several definitions and classifications that may comprehensively describe it. The basic concept that underlies all of those definitions is the learner's independence and responsibility for learning. For example, Mistar (2001) has defined LA as the learner's active and creative involvement in language learning activities; in planning, conducting, and evaluating the learning process, which was driven by their positive attitude. According to its pioneering scholars, LA represents learning outside the classroom, a situation in which learners direct their learning independently (Dickinson, 1987). Besides, the learner simply can control his/her learning (Benson, 2011). With that stated, it has indeed been common to adopt the traditional definition and concept of LA in research examining learners' autonomous activities in online environments (Mısıır, Koban & Koç, 2018).

LA has been a preferred option in teaching and learning. It has indeed become a mandatory and *de facto* element in education due to the hegemony of globalizing technology. According to Solomon and Schrum (2007), learners nowadays are expected to take charge of their learning due to their familiarity with the internet. That is, the link between LA and online learning has indeed been established in the literature, and the two elements can be looked at as always in a mutual relationship. That is, the use of technology renders LA and it requires it at the same time. As

Reinders and White (2016:143) put it, "the use of technology for learning often requires a degree of autonomy". Furthermore, Boulton, Chateau, Pereiro, and Azzam-Hannachi (2008) assert that learners in the digital age must have the ability to take responsibility for all the elements of their learning, from setting the goals and objectives to the assessment. At the same time, Chapelle (2001) has indicated that the supportive online tools available for learners help to develop their learning independence and management.

With the changes taking place in teaching and learning practices, the roles of both teachers and learners have changed accordingly. Reinders and White (2016) stated that the roles of learners and teachers have changed in the online learning milieu, following the influence of technology on the understanding of LA. Thus, most of the studies across various fields attempt to identify those roles and interpret them according to LA perspectives. For example, in his investigation into teacher and learner's perceptions about LA, Joshi (2011) attempted to define the teachers and learner's roles through a scale that depicts various autonomous practices and activities. Nepali students in his study viewed their role as an important factor in their learning, revealing positive attitudes towards LA through their identified autonomous activities. Regarding their views about their teachers' roles, most of the participants, although agreeing that most of their learning can be achieved without teachers, still attach the responsibility of learning to them. This overlapping situation is indeed found in most of the studies conducted in EFL contexts, as will be indicated through the following review. Joshi's study, although it does not specifically approach online learning, will be replicated in the context of the upcoming study.

Joshi's (2011) tool has been used by several following researchers in EFL or ESL online-learning contexts. For example, Mısır et al. (2018) adopted the tool to investigate Turkish learners' perceptions of LA while learning online. They found that their participants were highly autonomous and well-prepared to take responsibility for their learning of English. Similarly, Hayta and Yaprak (2013) examined the concept of LA concerning computer technology. They found that students exercised autonomous activities to a satisfactory level. Those students could also make positive use of technology in learning the language to a certain extent. This latter study, however, adapted Joshi's tool by excluding the items created to assess participant's perceptions of learner and teacher's roles. In general, participants in that study showed a moderate level of autonomy. Unlike participants in Mısır et al. (2018) and Hayta and Yaprak (2013), Indonesian students of English in Nabila (2019) were not aware of the LA concept in language learning; hence they were not ready to work individually or independently.

There seems to be a consensus, drawn from several studies in EFL contexts, that EFL learners, even when they reveal high positive perceptions about LA, still have moderate autonomy levels. For example, as in Nabila's (2019) study, Thai learners in Orawiatnakul and Wichadee (2016) showed positive attitudes towards autonomy, yet their out-of-class autonomous behaviors were within the average. Turkish learners in Bekleyen and Selimoğlu (2016) displayed similar levels of autonomy through asserting a high level of dependence on teachers. They believed that teachers were the source of most of the learning components. A similar situation was found in Ghobain (2020), wherein Saudi learners showed awareness about the concept, and an overall moderate level of LA. Yet, they indicated a heavy reliance on teachers. Besides, Asiri and Shukri's (2020) study investigated 150 female Saudi students' perspectives about learner autonomy and

found that participating students held negative perspectives about the concept. In other words, those students displayed dependence on the teacher in most of the activities that should be achieved autonomously. Overall, the study contributed to the fact of Saudi learners' low autonomy level. Saudi students' dissatisfaction with online learning, apparently due to similar factors relevant to teacher's dependence, is further indicated by Al-Jarf's (2020) study. Al-Jarf investigated the agency of translation undergraduate students through a survey administered to 174 students and 53 instructors. Her study found that 55% of her sample were facing challenges while learning online. They were dissatisfied with online communication. The findings showed those participants' low engagement and motivation, low self-efficacy, and absence of goals. Similarly, Saudi students in Albadry's (2018) study showed a need for teachers' instruction, and simultaneously indicated willingness and tendency to do some autonomous behaviors in their future.

Also, another study by Abdelrazeq (2018), which included Arab Palestinian learners, asserted the same undefined or overlapped situation. Participants in the study indicated a dire need for training in areas of autonomous learning while exhibiting high autonomy in other areas, the most important of which was motivation. They also, as in the other reviewed studies, revealed a dependency on their instructors. In addition, Denekamp's (2016) action-research study, which included Arab learners, displayed a high level of multidimensionality in participants' autonomy. Both male and female students in that study equally showed aptitude and readiness for autonomous learning through the training and actions conducted by the researcher. Thus, Denekamp concluded that the inherited perceptions about Arabs' LA are gradually changing.

Motivated by similar incentive to that of the current study, with shifting to online learning platforms as an impact of the pandemic in Indonesia, Mulyah et al. (2020) realized the necessity for examining the students' readiness and perception about autonomous learning. Their study employed an online questionnaire and interview as methods. It found that the 25 participants did not have the autonomy level that might support their learning of the language online. Those participants preferred face-to-face classes and direct teacher support. Thang and Alias (2007) have discussed the mixed findings about the dependence on or the need for teachers while exhibiting other autonomous learning behaviors. In their viewpoint, dependence on teachers should not be treated as a significant aspect overlapping with learners' autonomy in EFL contexts. They elaborated that the need and reliance on teachers might be associated with sociocultural views and values that empower teachers with respect and trust. However, they found that all the participants they included in their study showed a preference for teacher-centered learning while exhibiting autonomous learning features. They explained that not all of those learners were necessarily autonomous. This study further highlights the complexity of LA as a concept, which needs to be approached in light of several factors, such as cultural, psychological, social, and political factors. LA can also be approached with affective linguistic factors, such as proficiency levels, academic achievement, age, motivations. The current study will attempt to incorporate that understanding by focusing on two factors: gender and academic major. The factor of gender might be more valid for investigation in a context known to usually segregate sexes due to inherited cultural norms. As with the academic-major factor, the study assumes that learning the language as an academic major should provoke higher autonomy levels than in other scientific fields.

Indeed, gender has always been considered an influencing factor in learning and using languages concerning LA. In Lu and Fan (2013), for example, gender was strongly correlated with LA as both males and females showed different autonomous activities. Mardjuki (2018) investigated differences between genders in perception, readiness, and competencies regarding LA. No difference was found in experiences and challenges, as both genders preferred individual tasks. Yet, the problem-solving strategies followed by each group were different. In fact, the traditional assumption of gender differences has been refuted by several studies (Varol & Yilmaz 2010). Hence, such outlined dissimilarities between the two genders might be related to the nature of the activities themselves, which is the multidimensionality and complexity of LA. Varol and Yilmaz's (2010) study, however, displayed more similarities between the two genders in terms of autonomous behaviors and activities.

Regarding the academic-major factor, as indicated earlier, we are assuming that students who are supposedly involved in English literature, teaching methods, and linguistics would show higher LA levels than those who study the language as a course for specific purposes. Unfortunately, very few studies with relevant concerns have been found. Also, Chen and Li's (2014) study included English-major postgraduates to examine internal and external factors that might affect their autonomous learning. It found the participants' professional knowledge, language ability, and research ability are the main influencing factors in their autonomy. In another study by Jianfeng, Raj, and Ai (2018), English-major participants' LA was investigated in correlation with language proficiency. The study found that participants' LA significantly correlated with their language proficiency. That said, the current study will examine if English-major students show different autonomous behaviors and activities than those displayed by students of other academic majors.

Methods

Participants

This quantitative study aimed to explore the Saudi learners' readiness for online education, and examine the influence of gender and field of research on their autonomy when learning English. A total of 802 Saudi English learners participated in the survey; of these learners, 501 were female participants, and 301 were male participants. Among them, 636 students were studying English as an intensive course to be qualified to study their majors, which adopts English as the medium of instruction, whereas 166 students were studying English as a major.

Research instrument and procedures

For the study, Joshi's (2011) Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) was used after validating its translation into Arabic by two bilingual experts in both languages (i.e., English and Arabic). The questionnaire includes 30 items that assess the following dimensions: learners' awareness in language learning, their efforts in learning English on their own, self-motivation, broader autonomous activities, self-esteem, use of reference materials, self-motivation in learning, use of technology in learning, perceptions of the roles of learners, and their perceptions of teachers' roles (see Appendices). The questionnaire elicits responses on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. For the reliability of the questionnaire, a reliability analysis was carried out on all of the 30 items and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 84.

For the data analysis, preliminary assumption testing showed no serious violations. Besides the descriptive data analysis, we used independent-samples t-tests to examine the differences between participants in their autonomy, based on their genders and academic majors. Also, an adjustment was made to the p values using Bonferroni's alpha level of .006.

Results

In terms of learning autonomy, to what extent can Saudi undergraduate students be considered ready for online education?

We assessed students' online learning readiness by analyzing their awareness in terms of learner autonomy concept, their autonomous behaviors and practices, and their perceptions about learners and teachers' roles in learning the language (see appendices).

In terms of awareness in language learning (Appendix A), the majority of participants responded in agreement, particularly to the first two items concerning the ability to learn English well and making decisions, and setting goals of their learning (76%, 74.5%, respectively). Participants, however, showed a lesser degree of agreement regarding using their free time in learning English. Nearly half of them (54.6%) agreed or agreed strongly with this statement. That said, the grand mean of the three items combined indicated a high awareness level of LA, $m=3.70$. They also showed a high level of self-esteem in learning English and improving strengths and weaknesses, as shown through their agreement levels (73%) with statement 14, with a mean score of 3.79 (Appendix D). Over half of the participants (60%) displayed a good level of self-motivation in learning by agreeing with the statement of item 17 (see Appendix F), scoring a mean of $m=3.47$.

Under the category of self-efforts in learning English, the participants showed high levels of agreement with making efforts in learning English. Yet, the higher levels were mainly class-based, shown by items five and seven, as 73% and 61% of the respondents respectively indicated using opportunities to participate in class activities and also making notes and summaries of their lessons. The participants' responses to other out-of-classroom activities such as previewing before class and speaking in front of people and friends, as in items four, six, and eight, are lower than in the previous two items (Appendix B).

Similarly, the results of broader autonomous activities beyond the class also showed either moderate or low levels of agreement, as in items nine, ten, twelve, and thirteen, with 54%, 40%, 40%, and 62% agreement levels, respectively. The participants' highest level of out-class activities was in item 11, with 75% agreement regarding using audio-visual materials to improve speaking skills. They also showed similar high levels regarding using reference materials in Appendix E, with 62% and 45% agreement levels to revising lessons and seeking reference books, and reading extra materials in advance, scoring means of $m=3.50$ and $m=3.16$ for items 15 and 16, respectively. A very relevant activity to the question and the overall aim of the study is the participants' use of computers and technology, which is reflected through item 18 (see Appendix G). The participants showed a high level of agreement to resorting to technology, computer, and internet for learning English, with a positive response of 76%, scoring $m=3.90$.

Participants' perceptions about the roles of teachers and learners in learning language reflect their autonomy level as levels are interpreted in the light of responsibility and independence in learning. A high number of participants showed good to high levels of responsibility through

agreeing with all the statements about their perception of their roles (see Appendix H) with relatively high percentages, ranging from 65% to 77%. The grand mean calculated from all the items is $m=3.76$ and it is considered near 'high' on a 5-point scale.

Interpreting perceptions about teachers according to the items in Appendix I somehow differs from doing so with the other items, since high scores for these items indicate negative results in terms of participants' autonomy. High results can be considered positive in this category only with the first item that states learning can be achieved without teachers. Participants indeed scored high agreement levels with this particular statement, with 60% and $m=3.47$. Results, however, did not show a static trend in this category, since high agreement scores to the first item overlap with high scores of the rest of the items that indicate negative perceptions in light of the concept of LA. That is, participants showed a high level of dependence on teachers agreeing with all the other statements, particularly items 25, 26, 27, and 28, with percentages of 75%, 79%, 78%, and 78%, respectively. However, the last two items in this category, which are similar in interpretation to the other items, showed low levels of participants' agreement. That, again, in terms of autonomy, is considered positive. Regardless of different mixed results on the scale, participants did not link learners' failure to teachers as only 43% agreed with item 29. At the same time, most of the participants did not agree with item 30 as only 38% agreed with it, indicating good independence levels. To calculate the grand mean for this category, and to avoid possible misinterpretation related to the nature of these items as shown above, all items, except item 24, were reversed so that high negative results would not be calculated with other high positive results. The grand mean was $m=2.16$ $sd=1.03$, indicating negative perceptions about teachers' roles in terms of learners' autonomy, as it correlates to high levels of dependency on teachers in learning.

Combining all the items of the scale items to generate an overall level of participants' autonomy, the data generally showed participants' level of LA as good to moderate, based on the mean score of $m=3.59$ $sd=.76$ and a median of 4. The classification of the LA levels is based on Orawiatnakul & Wichadee's (2017) 5-point Likert scale analysis, in which they identify the levels as follows: 1.00-1.50 = very low, 1.51-2.50 = low, 2.51-3.50 = moderate, 3.51- 4.50 = high, 4.51-5.00 = very high.

Do males and females differ in their learning autonomy?

To examine gender differences in students' learning autonomy, independent-samples t-test was used. The following table presents the results from the independent t-tests comparing the students' mean scores on different dimensions of their autonomy contributed by their gender.

Table 1. *Male and female participants' levels of autonomous behaviors*

Variable	Male		Female		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Learner awareness in language learning	3.73	0.95	3.77	0.90	.571	800	.568
Learner self-efforts in learning English	3.48	1.07	3.44	1.03	-.463	800	.643
Broader autonomous activities	3.32	1.13	3.47	1.04	1.824	800	.069

Learner self-esteem	3.75	1.10	3.88	0.99	1.706	580.364	.088
Use of reference materials	3.30	1.05	3.44	0.98	1.884	800	.060
Learner self-motivation in learning	3.20	1.30	3.72	1.15	5.724	573.156	.000
Use of technology in learning	3.84	1.13	3.98	1.00	1.784	576.111	.075
Learner perception of their roles	3.78	1.03	3.83	0.96	.672	800	.502
Learner perception of teachers' roles	2.11	1.01	2.17	0.98	.860	800	.390

Nine dependent variables were used to determine gender differences: learner awareness in language learning, learner self-efforts in learning English, broader autonomous activities, learner self-esteem, use of reference materials, learner self-motivation in learning, use of technology in learning, learner perception of their roles, and learner perception of teachers roles. The independent variable was gender. There was no significant difference in scores for males and females in all the dependent variables except in learners' self-motivation in learning. A significant difference was found in scores for males ($M=3.20$, $SD=1.30$) and females ($M=3.72$, $SD=1.15$), $t(573.16)=5.72$, $p=.000$. The magnitude of the differences in the means was almost moderate (eta squared=.04).

Are there any differences in the level of autonomy between Saudi English-major and non-English-major students?

To investigate the students' field of study differences in their autonomous learning, independent-samples t-test was performed. Again, nine dependent variables were used to determine the field of study differences: learner awareness in language learning, learner self-efforts in learning English, broader autonomous activities, learner self-esteem, use of reference materials, learner self-motivation in learning, use of technology in learning, learner perception of their roles, and learner perception of teachers' roles. The independent variable was students' field of study; English or non-English major. Similar to the results found earlier, there was no significant difference in scores for English and non-English major students in all the dependent variables except in learners' self-motivation in learning. A significant difference was found in scores for students majoring in English ($M=3.27$, $SD=1.31$) compared to student majoring in other fields ($M=3.59$, $SD=1.21$), $t(242.688)=2.87$, $p=.004$. The magnitude of the differences in the means was small (eta squared=.01).

Table 2. *English-major and non-English-major participants' levels of autonomous behaviors*

Variable	English (n=166)		Non-English (n=636)		t	df	P
	M	SD	M	SD			
Learner awareness in language learning	3.67	0.99	3.78	0.90	1.328	239.854	.185
Learner self-efforts in learning English	3.46	1.10	3.45	1.03	-.104	800	.917
Broader autonomous activities	3.37	1.17	3.42	1.05	.480	239.381	.632

Learner self-esteem	3.74	1.15	3.86	1.00	1.266	233.489	.207
Use of reference materials	3.27	1.05	3.41	0.99	1.707	800	.088
Learner self-motivation in learning	3.27	1.31	3.59	1.21	2.870	242.688	.004
Use of technology in learning	3.89	1.14	3.94	1.03	.544	800	.587
Learner perception of their roles	3.74	1.10	3.83	0.95	.989	233.529	.324
Learner perception of teachers' roles	2.21	1.08	2.13	0.96	-.914	800	.361

Discussion

The results of our study confirm that Saudi students, like many other learners in EFL contexts, are autonomous and equipped with the necessary characteristics for online education. However, the participants in this study varied in their responses of LAQ across its dimensions and the sub-categorical items of those dimensions, indicating not only that the construct of LA is complex and multifaceted, but also that LA is context-dependent due to the diversity of the individuals' perspectives, perceptions, behaviors, and practices.

Following Orawiwanakul and Wichadee's (2017) ranking, Saudi English learners generally display high levels of learning autonomy. Similar to the findings to Joshi (2011), Mısırlı et al. (2018), Hayta and Yaprak (2013), and Orawiwanakul and Wichadee (2017), a high level of LA is evident and awareness about the concept concerning learning the language and students' perceptions of their roles in learning the language. While both dimensions indicate significant autonomy level, the latter shows the responsibility those learners hold towards their learning. Similar to the participants in Orawiwanakul and Wichadee (2017), Hayta and Yaprak (2013), and Abdelrazeq (2018), Saudi students in this study also displayed moderate levels in the remaining dimensions, namely learning self-efforts, broader autonomous activities, and using materials for learning the language. However, in terms of perceptions about teachers, based on the traditional interpretation of these results, Saudi learners indicate a low LA level; like their Saudi counterparts in Al-Jarf (2020), Asiri and Shukri (2020). Therefore, especially by revealing dependence on teachers and clinging attitudes towards them, participants in this study are similar to their EFL, middle-eastern, and Asian counterparts in Bekleyen and Selimoğlu (2016), Albadry (2018), Abdelrazeq (2018), Al-Jarf (2020), Asiri and Shukri (2020), Muliya et al. (2020), and Ghobain (2020). Findings generally confirm previous studies in Saudi, Arab, and EFL contexts, in terms of relatively similar degrees at specific autonomy dimensions, namely high levels of awareness, moderate level of activities, and heavy reliance on teachers. Findings also assert the multidimensionality of the concept, especially in the Arab context, as discussed by Denekamp (2016).

Both males and females in this study have similar levels of aptitude and readiness for taking responsibility for their learning, as found in Denekamp's (2016) study. Gender differences were only found statistically significant in their motivation. Similar findings were also reported in Mardjuki's (2018) study, wherein participants of both genders displayed similar levels in most of LA dimensions, except in problem-solving.

Similarities between males and females in LA are also evident in other research studies. Varol and Yilmaz (2010) concluded that the traditional assumption of differences between genders, especially in the scope of the study, is being chipped away at and being refuted, as indicated by several studies. Similarities or homogeneity among these study participants are not limited to gender, but they are also inclusive of the other factor investigated, which is the academic major. This factor in itself appears not to influence the participants' level of LA, as it is only associated with the motivation dimension, based on statistical testing between English-major and non-English-major participants. Both groups showed comparatively similar levels across different LA dimensions. Yet interestingly, participants studying English showed a relatively lower level in autonomy than participants in other majors. It seems that very few studies focused on English-major students' LA performance in comparison to students of different majors. For example, Chen and Li (2014) and Jianfeng, Raj and Ai (2018) investigated the LA of English-major students in light of other factors, which are beyond the scope of the study. Although the current study found a slightly significant difference between the two groups, this difference was more toward the non-English-major students.

Thus, majoring in English was not an influencing factor for more autonomy in itself unless incorporated with other affective linguistic factors as in the two latter studies. The English-major participants contradicted the assumption of being more autonomous due to other factors, which are probably higher in their non-English major peers. This can be attributable to the fact that students of different majors, especially medical students, for example, are generally encouraged to be self-dependent and may outperform other students in several different areas. Language learning is expectedly one of them.

Conclusion

The sudden shift to online learning after COVID-19 pandemic has motivated this research to investigate, in an underrepresented context, the Saudi English learners' level of readiness and autonomy considering the influence of their gender and field of study. The study asserts previous research on EFL learners', Arabs particularly, moderate towards high learner autonomy levels. It contributes to the case of learners in a situation where they have excellent or high aptitude and awareness levels of autonomous learning, behaviors, and learner responsibility. Yet, they lack a good level of actual activities. Thus, it supports Denekamp's (2016) conclusion that the situation is now changing in those contexts, as learners now exhibit satisfying qualities of the learner-centered approach. Hence, they are expected, if not trained or scaffolded, to improve their autonomous behaviors. The study also contributes to the discussion that those learners are dependent on teachers besides exhibiting learner-centered attributes. Thus, it supports the argument concluded by Ming and Alias (2007) that showing features of dependence on teachers cannot be interpreted as an element that hinders learner autonomy in the EFL context. It might have become plausible by now to conclude that learners in EFL contexts can be autonomous regardless of their perceptions about teachers. Their preference for the teacher's guidance or support can be related to sociocultural underpinnings in such contexts, which highly value teachers and grant them great power, respect, and trust.

To sum up, EFL learners in Asian or Arab contexts are better described as lacking training on autonomous behaviors and activities rather than lacking autonomy. Their need for teachers is logical as far as they are not guided yet to take responsibility for their learning. Thus, we should not consider them as non-autonomous based on their behaviors or perceptions. We can argue that their awareness of the importance of their roles in learning can guarantee their success in being independent if well-utilized by educators.

In addition, bearing in mind the limited number of factors employed in this study, findings emphasize that autonomy is a construct that needs to be investigated alongside other multidimensional factors if it is to be adequately understood. Accordingly, the situation of English-major students in this study would be more interpretable if other factors were investigated, the most important of which may be their language proficiency and types of motivations.

About the Authors:

Dr. Elham Ghobain is an assistant professor of Applied Linguistics and ELT, at the English Language Institute, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. She obtained her PhD in Applied Linguistics and ELT from Warwick University, UK. She also did her MA in ELT (ESP) at Warwick University, UK. Currently, she is the vice dean of the English Language Institute at Jazan University. Her research focuses on sociolinguistics, ESP, and learner autonomy. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8240-5698>

Dr. Abdullah Zughaibi is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the English Department of Jazan University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Dr. Zughaibi graduated with MA and PhD from La Trobe University, Australia. Formerly, he was the dean of the English Language institute, Jazan University. His research interest focuses on pragmatics, language learning, and sociolinguistics. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5077-5128>

References

- Abdelrazeq, A. (2018). Autonomous Learning Levels of Students Majoring in EFL and the Role of their Teachers in Developing Autonomous Learning. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Studies - Sultan Qaboos University*, 12(4), 724-738.
DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.24200/jeps.vol12iss3pp724-738>
- Albadry, H. (2018) Using mobile technology to foster autonomy among language learners. (Unpublished PhD Thesis). Newcastle University, The United Kingdom. Available at <https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/bitstream/10443/4112/1/Albadry%20H.%202018.pdf>.
- Al-Jarf, R. (2020). Distance Learning and Undergraduate Saudi Students' Agency During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies*, 13(62), 2, 37-54 <https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2020.62.13.2.4>
- Asiri, J., & Shukri, N. (2020). Preparatory Learners' Perspectives of Learner Autonomy in the Saudi Context. *Arab World English Journal*, 11(2), 94-113.
DOI:<https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no2.8>
- Bekleyen, N. & Selimoğlu, F. (2016). Learner Behaviors and Perceptions of Autonomous Language Learning. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, 20(3), 1-20.
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy* (2nd ed.). London, England: Pearson Education.
- Boulton, A. R., Azzam-Hannachi, M. P., & Chateau, A. (2008). Learning to Learn Languages with ICT - but How? *CALL-EJ Online*, 9(2), 1-19. Retrieved from <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00273307/document>.

- Candy, P.C. 1991. *Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning*. California: Jossey-Bass.
- Chapelle, C. 2001. *Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition: Foundations for Teaching, Testing, and Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, H., & Li, N. (2014). The analysis of factors affecting autonomy of English-major postgraduates. In S. Narayanasamy (Ed.), *14th International Conference on Social Science and Management (ICSSM 2014)* (pp. 250-253). Lancaster, PA: DEStech Publications.
- Denekamp, C. (2016). The development of L2 Arab writers proficiency: Autonomy, online self-access centers, and advisement. (Unpublished PhD Thesis). Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand. Retrieved from https://mro.massey.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10179/11217/02_whole.pdf.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Ghobain, E. (2020). Indirect Specialized Vocabulary Learning and Learner Autonomy. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(3), .
- Hayta, F., & Yaprak, Z. (2013). Learner Autonomy and Computer Technology As a Facilitator of Autonomous Language Learning. *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World*, 3(2), 57-63
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford, England: Pergamon
- Jianfeng, Ch., Raj, G. S., & Ai, J. T. T. (2018). The Correlations among Learning Motivation, Autonomy and Language Proficiency in Chinese EFL Context. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network Journal*, 11(1), 1-14
- Joshi, K.R. (2011). Learner Perceptions and Teacher Beliefs about Learner Autonomy in Language Learning. *Journal of NELTA*, 16(1-2), 13-29. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v16i1-2.6126>
- Jianfeng, C., Raj, G.S., & Ai, J.T. (2018). The Relationships Among Language Learning Strategy, Motivation, Anxiety and Autonomy in Chinese EFL Learners. *International Journal of Engineering and Technology*, 7, 508.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy. 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin, Eire: Authentik.
- Lu, J., & Fan, S. (2013). Gender Differences in Autonomous Learning: A Study of Non-English Majors in a Chinese University Discourse. *The Internet Journal Language, Culture and Society*, 36, 18-27
- Mardjuki, M. S. (2018). Learner Autonomy: Gender-Based Perception among EFL Indonesian Students. *Indonesian Journal of EFL and Linguistics*, 3(1), 1-17
- Mistar, J. (2001). Maximizing Learning Strategies to Promote LA. *TEFLIN Journal*, 12(1), 88-100. Available at www.journal.teflin.org/index.php/journal/article/download/232/222.
- Mısır, H., Koban, D. K., & Koç, S. E. (2018). An Analysis of Learner Autonomy and Autonomous Learning Practices in Massive Open Online Language Courses. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL*, 4, 24-39. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call4.3>
- Muliyah, P., Aminatun, D., Nasution, S., Hastomo, T., Sitepu, S., Tryana. (2020). Exploring Learners' Autonomy in Online Language-Learning in STAI SUFYAN TSAURI MAJENANG. *Getsempena English Education Journal*, 7(2), 382-394. <https://doi.org/10.46244/geej.v7i2.1164>
- Nabila, T. F. (2019). Teachers and students' perception of learner autonomy in language learning at Sman 1 Gedangan Sidoarjo. (Unpublished Master's Thesis). Uin Sunan Ampel Surabaya University. Retrieved from http://digilib.uinsby.ac.id/38707/2/Tuchfah%20Fulan%20Nabila_D75215113.pdf.
- Orawiwanakul, W., & Wichadee, S. (2017). An Investigation of Undergraduate Students' Beliefs about Autonomous Language Learning. *International Journal of Instruction* 10(1), 117-132.
- Pokhrel, S. (2016). Learner Autonomy: a Western Hegemony in English Language Teaching to Enhance Students' Learning for Non-Western Cultural Context. *Journal of NELTA*, 21(1-2), 128-139. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v21i1-2.20209>

- Reinders, H., & White, C. (2011). Learner Autonomy and New Learning Environments. *Language Learning and Technology*, 15(3), 1–3.
- Reinders, H., & White, C. (2016). 20 Years of Autonomy and Technology: How Far Have We Come and Where to Next? *Language Learning & Technology*, 20(2), 143-154.
- Solomon, G., & Schrum, L. (2007). *Web2.0: New Tools, New Schools*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.
- Stroupe, R., Colin, R., & Tomita, K. (2016). Developing autonomous learners in Japan: Working with teachers through professional development. In R. Barnard, & J. Li, (eds.), *Language Learner Autonomy: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Asian Contexts* (pp 43-61). IDP Education (Cambodia) Ltd.
- Thang, S. M & Alias, A. (2007). Investigating Readiness for Autonomy: a Comparison of Malaysian ESL Undergraduates of Three Public Universities. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 6 (1), 1-18
- Varol, B., & Yilmaz, S. (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:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.038
- Wang, Y., & Wang, M. (2016). Developing learner autonomy: Chinese University EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices. In B. Roger, & L. Jinrui, (eds.), *Language Learner Autonomy: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Asian Contexts* (pp. 23-42). IDP Education (Cambodia) Ltd.

Appendices

Appendix A. Learners' awareness in language learning

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
1	I think I have the ability to learn English well	40	5	31	3.9	71	9	122	15.2	388	48.4	221	27.6	609	76	3.897
2	I make decisions and set goals of my learning	37	4.3	46	5.4	41.3	9.7	135	15.8	439	51.3	199	23.2	638	74.5	3.835
3	I make good use of my free time in studying English	52	6.1	167	19.5	58.1	25.6	170	19.9	372	43.5	95	11.1	467	54.6	3.359
Grand mean																3.697
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix B. Learners' self-efforts in learning English

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
4	I preview before the class (i.e., see summary, lessons etc.)	63	7.9	150	18.7	213	27	145	18.1	342	42.6	102	12.7	444	55	3.293
5	In the class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when I can speak in English	43	5.4	66	8.2	109	14	111	13.8	342	42.6	240	29.9	582	73	3.811
6	I speak confidently in front of the people	84	10.5	146	18.2	230	29	208	25.9	258	32.2	106	13.2	364	45	3.157
7	I make notes and summaries of my lessons	53	6.6	132	16.5	185	23	127	15.8	363	45.3	127	15.8	490	61	3.428
8	I talk to the teachers and friends outside the class in English	89	11.1	195	24.3	284	35	152	19	274	34.2	92	11.5	366	46	3.062
Grand mean																3.350
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix C. Learners' broader autonomous activities beyond the class

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
9	I practice English outside the class also such as: record my own voice; speak to other people in English	80	10	154	19.2	234	29	134	16.7	326	40.6	108	13.5	434	54	3.241

10	I use library to improve my English	107	13.3	215	26.8	322	40	163	20.3	250	31.2	67	8.4	317	40	3.873
11	I use audio-visual materials to develop my speech such as: listen to BBC, watch English movies, read English newspapers etc.	41	5.1	60	7.5	101	13	98	12.2	332	41.4	271	33.8	603	75	3.895
12	I attend different seminars, training courses, conferences to improve my English	107	13.3	222	27.7	329	41	150	18.7	237	29.6	86	10.7	323	40	2.924
13	I take risk in learning the English language	36	4.5	89	11.1	125	16	178	22.2	334	41.6	165	20.6	499	62	3.621
Grand mean																3.511
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix D. Learners' self-esteem

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
14	I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them	34	4.2	58	7.2	92	11	125	15.6	376	46.9	209	26.1	585	73	3.789
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix E. Learners' use of references materials

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
----	------	----------	--	--	--	--	--	-----------	--	-------	--	--	--	--	--	------

		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
15	I revise lessons and seek the reference books	41	5.1	108	13.5	149	19	153	19.1	370	46.1	130	16.2	500	62	3.500
16	Besides the contents prescribed in the course, I read extra materials in advance	63	7.9	156	19.5	219	27	219	27.3	271	33.8	93	11.6	364	45	3.155
Grand mean																3.328
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix F. Learners' self-motivation in leaning

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
17	When I make progress in learning, I reward myself such as: buy new things, celebrate parties etc.	68	8.5	116	14.5	184	23	139	17.3	288	35.9	191	23.8	479	60	3.470
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix G. Learners' use of computers and internet for learning English

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
18	I use internet and computers to study and improve English	35	4.4	56	7	91	11	99	12.3	356	44.4	256	31.9	612	76	3.904
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix H. Learners' perceptions of their own roles

No	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
19	Students have to be responsible for finding their own ways of practicing English	64	8	76	9.5	140	17	117	14.6	317	39.5	228	28.4	545	68	3.676
20	Students should use much self-study materials to learn English	40	5	49	6.1	89	11	99	12.3	346	43.1	268	33.4	614	77	3.918
21	Students have to evaluate themselves to learn better	44	5.5	44	5.5	88	11	99	12.3	359	44.8	256	31.9	615	77	3.909
22	Students should mostly study what has been mentioned under the course because studying M. Ed. English course is actually for exam purpose	71	8.9	76	9.5	147	18	137	17.1	322	40.1	196	24.4	518	65	3.583
23	Students should build clear vision of their learning before learning English	36	4.5	78	6	84	10	177	22.1	371	46.3	170	21.2	541	67	3.720
Grand mean																3.761
Legend: No. = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																

Appendix I. Learners' perceptions of teachers' role

N	Item	Disagree						Undecided		Agree						Mean
		SD		D		Total				A		SA		Total		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	

24	A lot of learning can be done without a teacher.	77	9.6	90	11.2	167	21	150	18.7	300	37.4	185	23.1	485	60	3.470
25	Teachers have to be responsible for making students understand English.	38	4.7	57	7.1	95	12	106	13.2	291	36.3	310	38.7	601	75	3.95
26	Teachers should point out the students' errors.	39	4.9	30	3.7	69	9	98	12.2	347	243.3	288	35.9	635	79	4.01
27	Teachers not only have to teach 'what' but should also teach 'how' of English.	46	5.7	38	4.7	84	10	89	11.1	288	35.9	341	42.5	629	78	4.04
28	Teachers have to provide exam-oriented notes and materials	47	5.9	28	3.5	75	9	98	12.2	266	33.2	363	45.3	629	78	4.07
29	The failure of the students is directly related to the teachers' classroom employment	89	11.1	111	13.8	200	25	256	31.9	193	24.1	153	19.1	346	43	3.26
30	Teachers have to use their authority in teaching if necessary	166	20.7	133	16.6	299	37	199	24.8	200	24.9	104	13	304	38	2.89
Legend: N = Item Serial Number, N = Number of Responses, % = Responses in Percentage SD= Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly agree																