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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learner Autonomy and EFL Vocabulary Acquisition in Saudi Arabia: A Quantitative Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
  *Corresponding Author a.najah@seu.edu.sa	This study explored the autonomy levels of Saudi undergraduates in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) vocabulary at a university employing a blended learning approach. It also examined the impact of academic level, Grade Point Average (GPA), and gender on these autonomy levels. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed, using a web-based questionnaire to gather data. The survey items were divided into two categories: independent and dependent. The results showed that students demonstrated high levels of autonomy in vocabulary learning while still valuing teacher guidance, with dependency ranked at a moderate level. Senior students exhibited the highest autonomy, and there was a noticeable increase in autonomy from the sophomore to senior years. Students with higher GPAs also displayed greater autonomy. Additionally, female students showed higher levels of autonomy than male students, although both genders had similar levels of dependency, emphasizing the importance they placed on teacher support. These findings have implications for promoting learner autonomy in EFL vocabulary learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning. It is considered essential for language learners because it helps them overcome obstacles and effectively communicate in a new language (Sutrisna, 2021). It constitutes the fundamental foundation on which all language skills are developed (Rasouli & Jafari, 2016). According to Wilkins (1972), "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Therefore, it is essential that EFL learners achieve vocabulary proficiency. Research indicates that tertiary EFL students must develop self-sufficiency in learning vocabulary to achieve adequate competence, particularly given their limited exposure to English in classroom settings (Haddad, 2016). In other words, EFL students must be autonomous in learning vocabulary to master the language effectively.

The concept of learner autonomy (LA, hereafter) has emerged as a crucial factor in the efficacy of EFL learning (Benson, 2011; Haddad, 2016; Tran, 2020). Yet, scholars such as Palfreyman (2003) and Shahid et al. (2022) have argued that LA is a Western concept related to individualism and not as prevalent in Eastern and Asian cultures, in which there is a continued preference for a teacher-centered approach. Ceylan (2015) also observed that, although students in these areas may desire independence, the cultural tendency toward a teacher-centered approach reduces autonomy. However, Benson (2013) argued that there are variations in autonomy among individuals and autonomy may manifest differently within individuals, depending on the context. Therefore, this study focuses on evaluating LA based on Saudi Arabia's (SA) cultural context. It seeks to examine the level of autonomy in Saudi undergraduate students' vocabulary acquisition and whether Grade Point Average (GPA), academic level, and gender affect EFL vocabulary learning autonomy.

1.   LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1.   Learner Autonomy

In the 1970s, the concept of autonomy in language teaching and learning was first explored, and it has been highlighted significantly more toward the late 20th century (Benson, 2011). It has been examined from several perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Scholars have indicated that autonomous learners can take charge of their education and develop the skills necessary for lifelong learning, which is education's ultimate goal (Benson, 2012; Sadaghian & Marandi, 2016; Teng, 2019). The term "learner autonomy" in language learning is understood in numerous ways, using diverse terminologies, such as "learner independence," "self-regulated learning," "self-direction," "self-education," "autonomous learning," "independent learning," "self-access learning," and "self-efficacy" (Benson, 2005; Chong & Reinders, 2022; Ivanovska, 2015; Teng, 2019). However, Benson (2005) stated that these different terms refer to ways of learning independently, while autonomy refers to "abilities and attitudes" (p. 114), implying that learning independently is not the same as having the capacity to learn independently.

In existing literature, there is a notable degree of consensus regarding the definition of LA, which indicates that autonomy pertains to learners' ability and capacity to demonstrate more dominance and control over their learning and the ability to choose resources that facilitate their learning process. This definition is supported by various scholars, including Dickinson (1987), Holec (1981), and Littlewood (1996). Holec's (1981) definition of LA is widely regarded as the most influential one because it refers to the capacity of learners to assume responsibility for their own learning (p. 3). This suggests that learners must make decisions regarding every aspect of their education. Similarly, Dickinson (1987) defined autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (p. 11). According to Littlewood (1996), the fundamental elements of autonomy consist of two inseparable components, namely, the "ability" and "willingness" of learners to make independent decisions (p. 427). "Ability" requires "knowledge" of available choices and the "skills" needed to implement the best choices, whereas "willingness" requires "confidence" and "motivation" to make the necessary decisions (Littlewood, 1996, p. 428).

Benson (2011) delineated the concept of LA in language education into three distinct categories: technical, psychological, and political. The technical perspective focuses on abilities or techniques for autonomous learning. The psychological perspective focuses on the cognitive abilities of learners that enable them to be accountable for their own learning. The political perspective focuses on independence by providing learners with control over their learning content and processes. According to Benson (2011), these three perspectives are essential for creating an optimal educational environment. He has emphasized the significance of conceptualizing LA as the "capacity" rather than the "ability" to "control one's own learning" (p. 58). "Control" has three dimensions that can be exercised through learning: content management, cognitive processes, and educational content. Content management involves controlling when, where, and how people learn a language. Cognitive processes describe the control exercised over the manner in which language is learned. Educational content refers to what language has been learned and to what extent. Thus, controlling for education may indicate a link between learning and goals. Benson (2011) highlighted the complex nature of autonomy, which can manifest in diverse ways depending on personal attributes, contextual factors, and environmental influences.

Benson's (2011) perspective is closely related to the constructivist approach, which provided the theoretical foundation for this study. In constructivism, knowledge is constructed when learners actively interact with the new material instead of relying solely on their teachers as passive recipients of knowledge. Little (2007) pointed out that LA is the "product of an interactive process in which the teachers gradually enlarge the scope of their learners' autonomy by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning" (p. 3). Thus, instructors facilitate the independent development of learners' understanding, fostering their autonomy. The constructivist approach asserts that self-directed learning is an essential foundation for achieving learner autonomy. Therefore, instructors must empower students to exercise autonomy within and beyond

the classroom because empowerment is a crucial foundation for their continued development (Najeeb, 2013).

1.2. Learner Autonomy in EFL Learning

Within the realm of EFL language education, many scholars have investigated LA in learning contexts, including Gholami (2016) in Iran, Shahid et al. (2022) in Pakistan, Sakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı (2019) in Turkey, and Yosintha and Yunianti (2021) in Indonesia. The literature concerning LA encompasses a wide variety of research aimed at operationalizing the concept of LA and identifying effective strategies for promoting it. LA is frequently implemented through the manifestation of learning behaviors. The process includes a range of activities, such as making informed choices regarding learning, establishing objectives, delineating learning materials, choosing suitable resources and techniques, tracking advancement and efficacy, and assessing outcomes (Chong & Reinders, 2022; Law, 2022). The justification for conducting research in LA has been established, indicating that LA holds significant importance because it fosters a sense of accountability among learners toward their own learning process and promotes the development of self-management skills, ultimately leading to improved intrinsic motivation and success in learning. Little (2007) asserted that autonomous learners are effective and successful because they are capable of applying their academic competencies and expertise beyond the classroom. Furthermore, Benson (2011) emphasized that learners who acquire a new language tend to take responsibility for their own learning, and those who do not possess this attribute can cultivate it. Additionally, it has been established that self-directed language learning is more effective than non-self-directed learning (Benson, 2011). This has been supported by empirical findings, such as in Sakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı's (2019) study in which the findings showed a strong positive correlation between Turkish EFL learners' autonomy levels and their academic performance, highlighting the importance of promoting autonomy in language learning contexts to enhance academic success.

1.3. Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is the cornerstone of all language skills because communication is challenging without proper vocabulary. According to Schmitt (2000), "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" (p. 55). Therefore, mastering vocabulary is crucial for EFL learners, especially those at the tertiary level, who must expand their vocabulary beyond the classroom independently.

Research on vocabulary learning and teaching has primarily focused on two approaches: implicit and incidental learning, or explicit and intentional instruction of vocabulary (Decarrico, 2001; Regina & Devi, 2020). The traditional teaching style is related to explicit vocabulary learning in which learners participate in vocabulary-focused exercises (Decarrico, 2001). It also includes determining the words that learners must know, delivering words for the first time, building on word knowledge, and developing proficiency with known words (Hunt & Beglar, 2002). Incidental vocabulary learning occurs when learners learn vocabulary while focusing on something else, such as comprehending a text or using language for communicative purposes (Decarrico, 2001). According to Decarrico (2001), explicit vocabulary instruction is essential in the early stages of language learning because it is difficult for novices to guess meaning from the context. Beyond a certain degree of competence, learners typically learn vocabulary implicitly.

The role of LA in vocabulary acquisition is critical, particularly given limited exposure to language in the classroom setting. Adequate language exposure is deemed necessary for proper vocabulary acquisition (Almusharraf, 2021; Haddad, 2016). Haddad (2016) explained the benefits of LA in vocabulary learning, calling it a "privilege" because autonomous learners have advantages over those who are not autonomous. Autonomous learners are motivated to learn, which leads to effective vocabulary acquisition. They have more opportunities for English communication in foreign settings and are more confident. Promoting autonomy in vocabulary learning also improves learners' active engagement in language learning.

1.4. Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Learning in Non-Western Contexts

Many recent studies related to LA, such as Abadi and Baradaran (2013), Shams (2013), Aalinezhad et al. (2021), Tuan (2011), and Tran (2020), have been conducted in Eastern and Asian cultures. In Iran, Abadi and Baradaran (2013) conducted a study with 190 Iranian EFL learners at three proficiency levels—high, low, and advanced—to investigate the relationship between LA and vocabulary acquisition strategies. Two questionnaires and two language proficiency tests were used to collect the data. The findings revealed a substantial positive association between vocabulary learning strategies and LA, leading researchers to conclude that the higher the level of LA, the more vocabulary learning strategies were utilized. Consequently, highly independent learners were discovered to have access to tools that simplify and manage the learning process. They are in charge of their own education and have learned how to manage many connected sentiments, such as anxiety about making mistakes. In the same context, Shams (2013) investigated the level of autonomy and vocabulary knowledge of EFL Iranian students in a hybrid-learning (HL) vocabulary course. The course combines traditional classroom instruction, computer-assisted language instruction, and self-directed learning. The data were gathered using a mixed research approach, and the results showed that HL increased the participants' vocabulary knowledge and level of autonomy. In a recent study, Aalinezhad et al. (2021) demonstrated that blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online instruction, significantly enhances LA and vocabulary achievement among Iranian EFL students, outperforming traditional face-to-face instruction.

In Vietnam, Tuan (2011) quantitatively examined students' and teachers' attitudes and strategies toward vocabulary-learning autonomy. Two questionnaires were designed, one for first-year college students (140 participants) and the other for teachers (13 respondents). The findings demonstrated that, despite students' awareness of the significance of autonomy in vocabulary learning, they did not practice self-learning effectively due to a lack of confidence and motivation. Similarly, Tran (2020) conducted mixed-method research to investigate higher students' attitudes regarding LA in English vocabulary learning. Two hundred responses to the questionnaire were collocated with Vietnamese students majoring in English, along with 10 semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that even though the participants were cognitively aware of the value of LA in vocabulary learning, they were affectively and behaviorally uninterested in LA for English vocabulary learning.

1.5. Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Learning in the Saudi Arabian Context

LA within the Saudi Arabian context has been the subject of research in the field of EFL learning and teaching, as in Alrabai (2017a, 2017b), Khreisat and Mugableh (2021), and Alharbi (2022). Alrabai (2017a) surveyed 630 Saudi students to investigate the relationship between LA and academic performance in English learning. These findings indicated that learners generally lack autonomy. However, there was a substantial difference between males and females, with females being more autonomous, higher achievers. Similarly, Alrabai (2017b) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate Saudi students' readiness to learn English independently. Data were collected from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore how learners felt about their responsibilities, ability to make decisions, motivation, involvement in activities related to autonomy, and ability to take charge of their own learning. The results of this study show that Saudi students are not ready for autonomous learning.

Recent studies have reported contradictory findings. Khreisat and Mugableh (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous language learning at Jouf University. The study involved surveying 312 Saudi students and conducting semi-structured interviews with 14 students and six teachers. The findings indicated that the students perceived their teachers as primarily responsible for almost 50% of their learning practices. The results also showed that students had limited exposure to and experience with independent learning, and there were no significant differences between male and female students. Teachers were found to be aware of autonomous learning and its importance, as well as perceiving it positively. In contrast, Alharbi (2022) found that Saudi female undergraduate students are highly autonomous in virtual EFL classrooms. Data were collected from 280 students via an online questionnaire and from 15 teachers via semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that 64% of the students exhibited a

high degree of autonomy in virtual EFL sessions, with their autonomous learning influenced by factors such as motivation, constructive feedback, and educational culture.

Regarding vocabulary learning, few studies have investigated LA and vocabulary learning in SA (Almusharraf, 2018, 2021; Ghobain, 2020). Almusharraf (2018) qualitatively investigated the level of autonomy of Saudi female university students learning English and how professors support autonomy in vocabulary development. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six students and four teachers, along with classroom observations. The findings revealed that teachers understand the notion of autonomous vocabulary learning, and it has a significant impact on their learners' level of autonomy. Recently, Almusharraf (2021) conducted a qualitative study that focused on Saudi female English-major students' perceptions of LA in learning and developing English vocabulary. Data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, student reflections, and English autobiographies. The participants reported that their autonomy in learning increased their vocabulary repertoires. They also stated that teachers' encouragement was one factor that promoted their learning autonomy. Furthermore, the findings highlighted how diverse autonomous learning strategies enhance students' sense of self-possession, confidence, and learning outcomes. However, Ghobain's (2020) quantitative study, which examined the impact of Saudi medical students' autonomy levels on learning vocabulary, revealed that the participants were moderately autonomous. The findings also indicated that although students were aware of LA, they relied heavily on their teachers.

Despite the growing interest in LA and vocabulary learning, research remains limited, particularly in SA. Recent studies such as Alharbi (2022) and Almusharraf (2018, 2021) have conducted qualitative investigations focusing exclusively on female students. According to Almusharraf (2021), there is a need to quantitatively explore LA and vocabulary learning, specifically considering various factors such as gender differences. To address this gap, this study aims to explore the degree of autonomy in vocabulary learning as perceived by Saudi undergraduates and assess the impact of academic level, GPA, and gender on their autonomy to provide a more comprehensive understanding of LA in vocabulary learning. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the autonomy level of Saudi undergraduates in their learning of EFL vocabulary?

2. To what extent do factors such as academic level, GPA, and gender contribute to student autonomy in EFL vocabulary learning?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

A descriptive quantitative approach was used for this investigation, using a web-based questionnaire to collect data. The survey instrument was adopted from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ), originally created and implemented by Egel (2003) and subsequently utilized by several scholars, including Gholami (2016) and Ghobain (2020). The study conducted by Ghobain (2020) focused on four dimensions to examine the level of autonomy in vocabulary acquisition, which was adopted in this study. The four dimensions are "Readiness for Self-direction," "Work in Language Learning," "Importance of the Class/Teacher," and "Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision." Eight items were selected to assess autonomy along these dimensions, with each item classified as independent or dependent, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of survey items

Dimensions	Items	Classifications
Readiness for Self-direction	1. I usually set my own goal for each semester	Independent

Work in Language Learning	2. While learning English, I like activities in which I can learn on my own 3. I use my own methods to learn vocabulary in English 4. I think that I learn English better when I work on my own	Independent Independent Independent
Importance of the Class/Teacher	5. My teacher always has to guide me in learning English 6. I can learn English only with the help of my teacher	Dependent Dependent
Role of Teacher: Explanation /Supervision	7. I want the teacher to give us the words that we are to learn 8. I learn better when the teacher explains something on the board	Dependent Dependent

2.2. Context

This study was conducted at the Saudi Electronic University in SA. It is a pioneering university in integrating technology in education. It uses a blended learning approach that combines online and traditional face-to-face instruction. It employs technological systems as a Learning Management System (LMS), facilitating access to online educational resources that students can engage with both synchronously and asynchronously (Alsaedi & Alhumsi, 2024). Its purpose is to deliver outstanding and flexible education and promote lifelong learning for all members of society. It provides graduate and undergraduate programs, including the English undergraduate program in which the survey was conducted.

2.3. Participants

Participants included 160 Saudi undergraduate students majoring in English. The majority of participants were females (61.3%) compared to males (38.8%). Regarding academic level, the majority of participants were sophomores (46.3%), followed by juniors (35.0%) and seniors (18.8%). In terms of GPA, most students had an excellent GPA (41.3%), while 31.3% achieved a very good GPA, 21.3% had a good GPA, and 6.3% barely passed. Regarding age, the largest age group was 24–29 years old (35.0%), followed by those ages 18–23 years old (32.5%), with smaller proportions ages 30–35 years (21.3%) and above 35 years old (11.3%). Table 2 presents the demographic data of the participants.

Table 2. Distribution of the study subjects according to their demographic data

Demographic data	Frequency (N=160)	Percent
Academic Level		
▪ Sophomore	74	46.3
▪ Junior	56	35.0
▪ Senior	30	18.8
GPA		
▪ Excellent	66	41.3
▪ Very Good	50	31.3
▪ Good	34	21.3
▪ Pass	10	6.3
Gender		
▪ Male	62	38.8
▪ Female	98	61.3
Age		

▪ 18-23	52	32.5
▪ 24-29	56	35.0
▪ 30-35	34	21.3
▪ Above 35	18	11.3

2.4. Data collection

The data were collected at the author's university, adhering to the ethical standards established by the institution's Ethics Committee and receiving approval under the number (SEUREC-4507). Informed consent was obtained from all of the participants.

2.5. Data analysis

The collected data were reviewed, coded, and analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Table 3). Descriptive statistical analyses included the calculation of the mean (M), and standard deviation (SD) for numerical data, while frequencies and percentages were used for categorical variables. Inferential statistical tests were applied using two-tailed tests with an alpha level of 0.05, where p-values ≤ 0.05 were considered statistically significant. Additionally, the independent samples t-test was used to assess significant differences between the means of two independent groups, and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the means of three or more independent groups.

Table 3. Reliability of Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Independent	0.816
Dependent	0.773

3. RESULTS

The first research question explored Saudi undergraduate students' autonomy levels in EFL vocabulary learning. Table 4 provides the descriptive statistics for the LA based on independent and dependent dimensions.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

Dimensions		N	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
Independent	Readiness for Self-direction	1	3.79	4.00	1.05
	Work in Language Learning	3	11.54	12.00	2.82
	Independent	4	15.33	16.00	3.51
Dependent	Importance of the Class/Teacher	2	5.64	5.00	2.28
	Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision	2	7.34	7.00	1.89
	Dependent	4	12.98	12.50	3.65

As the above table indicates, for independent dimensions, the "Readiness for Self-direction" has a mean score of 3.79, while "Work in Language Learning" shows a higher mean of 11.54. The overall "Independent" score has a mean of 15.33. For the dependent dimensions, the mean score for "Importance of the Class/Teacher" is 5.64, while the mean for "Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision" is higher at 7.34. The overall "Dependent" score stands at 12.98, which is lower than the overall mean of the "Independent" dimensions. This suggests that participants tended towards more independence in their vocabulary learning.

Table 5 displays the mean score percentages for the "Independent" and "Dependent" dimensions. The "Independent" category, which includes "Readiness for Self-direction" and "Work in Language Learning," has a higher overall weighted mean score (3.83) and mean score percentage (76.63%) compared to the "Dependent" category (weighted mean: 3.24, mean score percentage: 64.88%). Within the "Independent" category, "Work in Language Learning" achieved the highest mean score percentage (76.92%), indicating a strong inclination toward independent learning. Conversely, in the "Dependent" category, the "Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision" received the highest rank with a mean score percentage of 73.38%, highlighting the significance of teacher involvement in certain aspects of learning. Overall, this table suggests that learners tend to favor independence but still recognize the importance of the teacher's role in specific contexts.

Table 5. Mean score percent of Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

	Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Weighted Mean	Level	Mean score percent	Rank	Overall Rank
Independent	Readiness for Self-direction	3.79	1.05	3.79	High	75.75%	2	2
	Work in Language Learning	11.54	2.82	3.85	High	76.92%	1	1
	Independent	15.33	3.51	3.83	High	76.63%	1	
Dependent	Importance of the Class/Teacher	5.64	2.28	2.82	Moderate	56.38%	2	4
	Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision	7.34	1.89	3.67	High	73.38%	1	3
	Dependent	12.98	3.65	3.24	Moderate	64.88%	2	

Regarding the second research question, the analysis assessed the impact of factors, such as academic level, GPA, and gender, on student autonomy in EFL vocabulary learning. To explore the influence of academic level on student autonomy, a one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's post-hoc tests were conducted. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Relationship between academic level and learner autonomy

	Dimensions	Academic Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Ind	Readiness for Self-direction	Sophomore	74	3.62	1.16	1.83	0.164
		Junior	56	3.96	0.99		

		N	Mean	Std. Dev	F	Sig.
	Senior	30	3.87	0.82		
Work in Language Learning	Sophomore	74	10.89**b**	2.95	4.76*	0.010
	Junior	56	11.79**ab**	2.88		
	Senior	30	12.67**a**	1.88		
Independent	Sophomore	74	14.51**b**	3.83	4.35*	0.015
	Junior	56	15.75**ab**	3.45		
	Senior	30	16.53**a**	2.10		
Importance of the Class/Teacher	Sophomore	74	5.78	2.00	0.91	0.403
	Junior	56	5.71	2.61		
	Senior	30	5.13	2.29		
Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision	Sophomore	74	7.05	2.14	1.57	0.210
	Junior	56	7.61	1.56		
	Senior	30	7.53	1.74		
Dependent	Sophomore	74	12.84	3.79	0.41	0.666
	Junior	56	13.32	3.53		
	Senior	30	12.67	3.61		

(Leftmost spanning label: "Dependent")

*p < 0.05; F: one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's post hoc tests (Honest Significant Difference)

Table 6 illustrates the relationship between academic level and LA, as measured by the LAQ. In the "Independent" category, statistically significant differences are observed in "Work in Language Learning" (p = 0.010) and the overall "Independent" category (p = 0.015), suggesting that autonomy in these areas increases as students' progress from their sophomore to senior years, with seniors demonstrating the highest autonomy. However, "Readiness for Self-direction" did not show a significant difference (p = 0.164), indicating that students' readiness for self-directed learning remained consistent across different academic levels.

As for the "Dependent" category, no statistically significant differences are found for either "Importance of the Class/Teacher" (p = 0.403) or "Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision" (p = 0.212). This suggests that students across all academic levels value the teacher's role, similarly, reflecting a stable need for teacher involvement regardless of academic progression.

Similar tests, including a one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's post hoc test (Honest Significant Difference) were conducted to examine the influence of GPA on LA in EFL vocabulary learning. Table 7 illustrates the impact of GPA on LA as measured by LAQ.

Table 7. Relationship between GPA and learner autonomy

Dimensions		GPA	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Independent	**Readiness for Self-direction**	Excellent	66	3.70	1.23	0.39	0.759
		Very Good	50	3.80	0.99		
		Good	34	3.88	0.84		
		Pass	10	4.00	0.67		
	Work in Language Learning	Excellent	66	11.52	3.38	1.34	0.263
		Very Good	50	11.04	2.93		
		Good	34	12.29	1.43		
		Pass	10	11.60	0.84		

Dependent	**Independent**	Excellent	66	15.21	4.24	1.03	0.381
		Very Good	50	14.84	3.52		
		Good	34	16.18	2.01		
		Pass	10	15.60	1.07		
	Importance of the Class/Teacher	Excellent	66	5.33	2.34	2.68*	0.049
		Very Good	50	5.36	2.28		
		Good	34	6.24	2.13		
		Pass	10	7.00	1.76		
	Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision	Excellent	66	6.94**a**	2.13	3.84*	0.011
		Very Good	50	7.32**ab**	1.78		
		Good	34	8.24 **b**	1.23		
		Pass	10	7.00 **ab**	1.76		
	Dependent	Excellent	66	12.27**a**	3.92	3.21*	0.025
		Very Good	50	12.68 **ab**	3.69		
		Good	34	14.47 **b**	2.68		
		Pass	10	14.00 **ab**	3.27		

*p < 0.05; F: one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's post hoc tests (Honest Significant Difference)

As Table 7 shows, in the "Independent" category, no statistically significant differences were found across different GPA categories for "Readiness for Self-direction" (p = 0.759), "Work in Language Learning" (p = 0.263), or the overall "Independent" category (p = 0.381). This finding suggests that the level of independence in learning does not vary significantly according to the students' GPA.

In the "Dependent" category, significant differences were observed for "Importance of the Class/Teacher" (p = 0.049) and "Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision" (p = 0.011), indicating that these aspects of learner dependence are influenced by GPA. The overall "Dependent" category also showed significant variation (p = 0.025). Students with "Pass or Good" grades reported a higher dependency on the teacher's role compared to those with higher GPAs, suggesting that reliance on teacher support tends to decrease as academic performance improves.

For the influence of gender on LA in EFL vocabulary learning, Welch's t-test was used to determine whether there were significant differences between the means of male and female students. Table 8 displays the impact of gender on LA.

Table 8. Relationship between gender and learner autonomy

Dimensions		Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Independent	Readiness for Self-direction	Male	62	3.58	1.22	1.88[WT]	0.06
		Female	98	3.92	0.90		
	Work in Language Learning	Male	62	10.97	3.11	2.05*	0.04
		Female	98	11.90	2.58		
	Independent	Male	62	14.55	4.08	2.11*[WT]	0.04
		Female	98	15.82	3.01		
Depend	Importance of the Class/Teacher	Male	62	6.16	2.33	2.34*	0.02
		Female	98	5.31	2.20		
		Male	62	7.19	2.15	0.77	0.45

	Role of Teacher: Explanation/Supervision	Female	98	7.43	1.71		
	Dependent	Male	62	13.35	4.08	1.05	0.30
		Female	98	12.73	3.36		

*p < 0.05; WT (Welch's t-test)

Table 8 presents the relationship between gender and LA based on the LAQ using Welch's t-test to analyze the differences. For "Readiness for Self-direction," females (M = 3.92, SD = 0.90) show a higher mean than males (M = 3.58, SD = 1.22), with no statistically significant difference (p = 0.06). In "Work in Language Learning," females (M = 11.90, SD = 2.58) significantly outperform males (M = 10.97, SD = 3.11) with a p-value of 0.04. For overall independence, females (M = 15.82, SD = 3.01) showed a significantly higher mean than males (M = 14.55, SD = 4.08; p = 0.04). Conversely, no significant differences were found between dependent learning dimensions.

In short, the results indicate that Saudi learners generally tend to be autonomous in their EFL vocabulary learning, yet they also acknowledge the significant role that teachers play in the learning process. Furthermore, the findings reveal that dependence on teacher support decreases among students with higher GPAs, implying that dependence on teacher support tends to decline as academic performance increases. The results also show that LA in EFL vocabulary learning increases from the sophomore to senior years in the "Independent" dimensions. However, there are no significant differences in the "Dependent" dimensions, indicating uniform reliance on teacher support across all levels. Additionally, the results indicate that females generally score higher than males in "Work in Language Learning" and overall independence, with statistically significant differences, while dependency levels on teachers are similar for both genders, suggesting the essential role of teachers' guidance during their learning process.

4. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the outcomes of this study in relation to the previously stated research questions and relevant existing literature. Regarding the first research question, this study found that Saudi EFL undergraduates generally tend to be autonomous in their vocabulary learning rather than being completely dependent learners. This result aligns with the findings of Aalinezhad et al. (2021), Shams (2013), and Alharbi (2022), who observed that EFL students demonstrated independence in vocabulary learning. These results could be explained by the fact that these studies were conducted in non-traditional learning environments, specifically within hybrid or virtual instructional settings, similar to the context of this study. This might indicate that LA is generally less likely to manifest significantly in traditional EFL contexts where instruction is predominantly teacher-centered rather than learner-centered. Previous studies in traditional instructional settings, including Tuan (2011), Tran (2020), Alrabai (2017a, 2017b), Ghobain (2020), and Khreisat and Mugableh (2021) reported that EFL learners have low to moderate autonomy levels. Thus, the results of this study support the findings of previous studies indicating that blended learning can be an effective approach for enhancing EFL vocabulary learning and promoting LA. These findings highlight the significance of a learner-centered approach in promoting and encouraging autonomous learning habits among EFL students.

The second research question aimed to determine the effects of factors such as academic level, GPA, and gender on LA in EFL vocabulary learning. In terms of academic level, this study found that LA in EFL vocabulary learning increases in the "Independent" dimensions from the sophomore to senior years, indicating that students become more autonomous as they progress through their studies. Despite the tendency toward autonomous learning, students at all academic levels value teacher guidance during their learning processes. This result is consistent with the findings of Almusharraf (2018, 2021), who reported that participants demonstrated autonomy in their vocabulary learning while also emphasizing the importance of teacher support and supervision in the learning process, which promotes their autonomy. Thus, instructors play a crucial role in promoting autonomy and

should encourage students to practice their autonomy inside and outside of the classroom (Najeeb, 2013; Ghobain, 2020).

Regarding the impact of GPA on LA, this study revealed a notable decline in dependence on teacher support as GPA increased. This result is consistent with the findings from Abadi and Baradaran (2013) and Şakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı (2019). These studies demonstrated a positive correlation between autonomy levels and academic performance, implying that increased autonomy leads to better academic outcomes. This emphasizes the importance of fostering autonomy in language-learning settings to enhance academic success.

Regarding the impact of gender on LA in EFL vocabulary learning, the results indicated that males and females demonstrated a high level of autonomy in their learning despite similar levels of reliance on teacher guidance. However, female students were more autonomous than their male counterparts. This is consistent with Alrabai (2017a), who found substantial disparities between Saudi males and females, with females demonstrating greater autonomy and higher achievement levels. However, these findings diverge from those of Khreisat and Mugableh (2021), who reported that Saudi students had little experience with independent learning and found no significant gender differences in their autonomy levels. In short, although both genders showed high levels of autonomy in EFL vocabulary learning, females generally displayed greater autonomy than males, indicating subtle yet significant gender differences in educational outcomes. These contrasting findings highlight the need for further research to elucidate the relationship between gender and autonomy in educational settings.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored LA in EFL vocabulary learning and examined whether factors such as academic level, GPA, and gender influence LA in EFL vocabulary learning. The findings indicate that Saudi learners exhibited a high level of autonomy and a moderate level of dependency. Regarding academic level and GPA, the results revealed that students with higher GPAs enjoyed a higher level of autonomy, and seniors were the most autonomous learners. Regarding gender, the findings indicated that females were more autonomous than males, although both reported similar percentages regarding the importance of teacher support.

The findings of this study have substantial pedagogical implications for promoting LA in EFL vocabulary acquisition, which is essential for curriculum developers and educators. While students generally favor independent learning, the ongoing need for teacher help at different academic levels necessitates a balanced instructional approach. Therefore, language instructors should be aware of and trained to act as facilitators to provide the necessary guidance while promoting autonomy to enhance LA in vocabulary learning. They could employ different methods, such as problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, task-based activities, and project-based learning, to empower students and help them be autonomous (Almusharraf, 2018; Khreisat & Mugableh, 2021). Furthermore, given that female students demonstrate greater independence in vocabulary learning, investigating their teaching and learning strategies could provide valuable insights for enhancing the autonomy levels of male students. In short, this study points out the importance of fostering an educational environment that supports LA while recognizing the significance of teacher support.

This study has several limitations that are worth noting. First, it was conducted at a single university. Including participants from multiple universities could yield more comprehensive insights into the autonomy levels of Saudi EFL students in vocabulary learning. Second, this study primarily employed a quantitative method, with surveys as the main data collection tool. Future research could use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, to provide deeper insights and considerably enrich the findings.

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