Factors affecting learner autonomy in the context of English language learning

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ABSTRACT

Several studies emphasized the importance of learning autonomy as a crucial component of persistent learning. Those studies revealed that autonomous learners are more likely to succeed in comparison to passive learners. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the factors affecting learning autonomy and to examine the differences between the reported factors and academic level. The researcher developed a questionnaire after extensive research on the questionnaires used in previous studies. The data have been collected from (232) undergraduate students, who were randomly selected from the Department of English Language at King Khalid University. The results showed that learning autonomy is influenced by five internal factors (i.e., psychological aspects, learning strategies, cognitive abilities, metacognitive abilities, and critical thinking), and three external factors (i.e., the role of the teacher, the task, and the environment). The results also showed that most of the internal and external factors have no statistically significant differences attributed to academic level. The results of this study recommended that educators modify their pedagogical approaches to provide students with more choices, problem-solving, and independent learning possibilities.

Keywords: learning autonomy, autonomous learners, Saudi EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The status of learning English in Saudi Arabia has run into diverse issues, which can be attributed to traditional teaching techniques. Recent research has emphasized the importance of replacing teacher-centered teaching with learner-centered approaches (Tran & Vuong, 2022). Yet it is obvious that learners rely on pre-determined assignments or learning patterns and must adhere to them (Nghi & London, 2018). The concept of autonomy in language learning has been widely discussed among experts in this field, and it has witnessed great progress in terms of exploration and implementation.

Learning autonomy is rapidly becoming the most effective strategy in language teaching (Pedley et.al., 1998). Autonomous learning has been viewed in terms such as 'self-direction', 'independent learning', and 'self-learning', all of which refer to similar concepts. Autonomous learners are identified according to some traits, such as enthusiasm and learning responsibility; they are more likely to produce good learning outcomes (Wang et.al., 2016).

Indah et.al. (2021) defined autonomous learners as learners who learn independently. Similarly, Firat (2016) indicates that autonomous learners can decide their learning needs and how to tackle the problems they face during the learning process. Littlewood (1996) explains learning autonomy as learners' willingness to make choices independently. The learners'

willingness relies heavily on their responsibility and motivation for the required choices. As a result, teachers would be in a better position to promote autonomous learners if they knew the effects of autonomous learning.

Autonomy in language learning entails control over management, content, and cognitive processes. Learners are accountable for observing their active roles throughout the learning process. This observation can be accomplished by developing certain learning strategies and selecting their favorite learning methods and materials (Richard & Rodgers, 2014). However, several factors would affect the development of learning autonomy (LA), both negatively and positively. These factors are divided into internal and external factors, Internal factors include learning strategies and habits, psychological aspects, awareness, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, critical theory, constructivism, and positivism. External factors include the environment, the tasks, and the teachers (Tran & Vuong, 2022).

Begum and Chowdhury (2016) indicated that the use of various learning strategies is strongly associated with learning autonomy. These learning strategies may help or hinder learners from becoming autonomous learners. Psychological aspects are also one of the factors that may affect learning autonomy. Psychological aspects comprise motivation, learners' attitudes, and anxiety. According to Wenden (1998), learning autonomy is highly affected by learners' attitudes, especially if they do not exert the necessary effort to learn autonomously. Zhao and Qin (2021) assert that assiduous learners are more likely to set learning goals, and they often have optimistic views about learning.

Tran and Vuong (2022) agree with this point of view and stress the need to help students strike a healthy balance between self-assurance and trust in others. Several studies have highlighted the significance of intrinsic motivation in driving (LA)'s growth. Strong motivation improves participation in learning activities, as stated by Spratt et al. (2002), and Esch (2014) argues that intrinsic motivation is necessary for (LA). Zhang (2021) also argues that learners with tremendous enthusiasm are more likely to go on and utilize their learning techniques more effectively.

Another factor that seems to affect LA is the fear of learning a new language. Karakis (2020) argues that students lose independence when their levels of anxiety increase. This might be due to the pupils' shyness and reliance on their instructors. That's why they don't like to take any risks (Karakis, 2020). According to Balçikanli (2010), a lack of learning skills and knowledge is associated with subpar performance in an independent study. Tran and Duong (2018) concur that students will be more optimistic and self-reliant if they have prior knowledge in a subject area relevant to the course's objectives.

Furthermore, Leaver et.al. (2005) emphasized the importance of metacognitive strategies in enhancing (LA). These strategies include planning, thinking, monitoring, and assessing one's learning potential. Those who can put them to use are better able to control their learning and take charge of their development as learners. These strategies help learners become more collaborative and confident when studying a foreign language (Leaver, et.al., 2005). In addition, learners may employ their cognitive abilities in the process of language acquisition via strategies including repetition, resourcefulness, translation, note-taking, deduction, contextualization, transfer, inference, and clarifying queries. Once students have learned how to use these techniques, they can learn independently (Tran & Vuong, 2022).

Critical theory is another factor that affects learning autonomy. As acknowledged by Leaver et al. (2005), analytical thinking is useful in LA. Instead of trying to understand and explain everything, this method promotes criticism and evolution. This allows them to study on their own and form their understanding. To help them decide whether or not to continue exploring the issue, students are allowed to do so from several perspectives.

In addition, learners may benefit from constructivism strategy because it makes it easier for them to infer new information from what they already know. Its anti-positivist stance aids (LA) progress, and individual curiosity and exploration were also encouraged (Tran & Vuong, 2022). The positivism method also highlights the teachers' role as knowledge facilitators. Therefore, students will lose interest in taking charge of their education and become receptive rather than active participants. This is an ongoing problem that prevents (LA) from progressing.

External factors, on the other hand, include the teachers, the tasks, and the environment. The greatest method to assist improve LA, according to many scholars, is for instructors to do more than just act as information transmitters in conventional classrooms. Teng (2018) noted that just because students can self-regulate their learning doesn't mean they really would. Kemala (2016) argued that effective educators provide students with opportunities to create learning goals and choose suitable learning instruments.

Alonazi (2017) argued that instructors should play many roles, such as guide, resource, and facilitator, to help students become more self-reliant. Further, as evidenced by the results of Le and Tran (2022), most EFL students are more engaged in studying when taught by a teacher who is enthusiastic about teaching. Students believe that their instructor's enthusiasm will lead to improved grades and more participation in class (Tran & Le, 2022).

Tasks that must be completed, according to Kemala (2016), have a significant impact on LA, either positively or negatively. Students will become more intrinsically motivated if they focus on assignments that are both interesting and challenging. Students, on the other hand, may get dissatisfied with boring assignments. This viewpoint is similar (in various aspects) to Tran and Duong's study (2022). Their observations suggest that pupils who understand the significance of a task (such as a portfolio) benefit from a range of benefits, including increased self-management, self-assessment, decision-making ability, and so on.

Benson (2013) argued that LA is significantly influenced by environmental elements, such as situational and social circumstances. The social side of education is enhanced through the involvement of parents, siblings, extended family, friends, and instructors. Conversely, self-directed students benefit from social connections with their classmates. As a result, students may find it easier to work together in this social situation. Similarly, Dang's (2010) findings suggested that students benefit from technological advancements in education because they are more likely to share and seek out information and collaborate on projects with their peers. Kemala (2016) argued that students are more motivated to study when they are actively engaged in group activities because they can exchange ideas, learn from one another, and inspire one another.

The situational facet incorporates study tools and materials. Few textbooks such as Rein Ders and Balcikanli (2011), had a major effect on LA's evolution, and many gave pupils little opportunity for practice. According to Tomlinson (2012), most commercially generated products concentrate on teaching their customers about language characteristics and helping them to practice these skills. As a result, while studying these textbooks, pupils have fewer opportunities to develop independence in language learning.

Kemala (2016) indicated that materials have an impact on students' levels of engagement and motivation. According to Harmer (2012), learning is more likely to occur when the material is both interesting and relevant. Additionally, Alzubi s research (2021) in Asia and Europe on the impacts of mobile devices on LA among students finds the same conclusion: mobile devices play a key role in affecting LA in EFL settings, notably in reading and writing, vocabulary, and grammatical skills.

Based on the previous explanations, it can be assumed that the vast majority of educators feel that self-directed students have a significantly better chance of academic success than their teacher-dependent counterparts. Therefore, the majority of pupils are anticipated to study independently. However, many aspects contribute to a learner's performance while they're on their own. There have not been enough research works conducted to draw any firm conclusions on these elements.

Since research about the elements that impact autonomous learners still gets little attention in the context of Saudi English language instruction, it will be interesting to examine autonomous learning more extensively with a focus on autonomous learners. It is anticipated that the research findings will help and support dependent learners in their efforts to improve their English skills. The present research aims at addressing the following research questions: (1) What are the factors affecting autonomous learning in the context of English language learning?. (2) Do the affecting factors reported by the students vary across academic levels?

METHOD

Research Design

This research aims to better understand the factors influencing (LA) in the context of English language learning. Therefore, a quantitative research design is more appropriate for this kind of subject for examination, since the goals of the study relate to a particular phenomenon that strives to describe and evaluate. This study used a quantitative research approach because it is most suited to elucidating the process by which events and activities occur (Maxwell, 2022).

Participants

The current study sample was (232) undergraduate students, who were randomly selected from the Department of English Language at King Khalid University. The mother tongue of those students was the Arabic Language, and their age ranges from 19-23 years. The students were selected from different academic levels (first, second, third, and fourth years). Table (1) below shows the distribution of participants according to their academic levels.

Table 1. Distribution of participants according to their academic level

Academic Level	Frequency	Percentage
First Year	61	26.3
Second Year	58	24.2
Third Year	58	25
Fourth Year	55	24.5
Total	232	100

Table 1 shows that the number of first-year students was (61) with a percentage of (26.3%), followed by second-year students (56; 24.2%), third-year students (58; 25%), and fourth-year students (57;24.5%) respectively.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used in the present study was a two-part questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire asked about some personal information of the participants, such as gender, academic level, and their score on the Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP). The second part of the questionnaire contained (48) items asking about the internal and external factors affecting students' learning autonomy. The questionnaire was developed after extensive research on the questionnaires used in previous studies. The researcher utilized and adapted questions from well-established surveys known to have good psychometric qualities. This is a crucial stage in the item generation process, as it contributes to stronger proof of validity and reliability (Dörnyei & Griffee, 2010). The details of the adapted items and their sources are presented in Table (2).

Table 2. Sources of the questionnaire's items

No. of items	Source
6	Daflizar (2022)
3	Hidayati (2018)
3	De Grandi (2019)
3	Al-Khasawneh & Al-Omari (2015)
12	Oxford (1990)
6	Kobylarek et.al (2022)
6	Alonazi (2017)
9	Tran & Vuong (2022)

After completing the questionnaire, participants gave their informed permission for this research. All participants were made aware of their freedom of choice about their participation. In addition, participants were made aware of data collection processes and how that information will be utilized to mitigate any negative outcomes or extra expenses. According to Burns (1993), anonymity in research occurs when neither the participants nor the researcher can be identified via their replies.

Participants' names were withheld from the questionnaire to maintain their anonymity in this research. Instead, the questionnaire was administered without the participant's permission. Contrarily, secrecy means that the information participants submit will not be shared with other parties. Confidentiality was maintained throughout and after the current study's data collecting and analysis phases by not disclosing the identity of the study's participants.

Data analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows 26.0 was used to record and tabulate questionnaire responses to establish causal correlations between learning autonomy and academic level. The primary goals of the current study were accomplished using a variety of statistical approaches. Descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (ANOVA) are all parts of this toolkit. The students' answers to the factors affecting their learning autonomy were summed up using descriptive statistics like means, standard deviations, and frequencies. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were also used to figure out the student's academic level.

To compare the means of more than two categories of a variable, statisticians employ a technique called analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Howitt and Cramer, 2003). This statistical technique was used to explore the correlation between students' academic level and their answers to many dimensions of their learning autonomy.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

The results of this study are presented and tabulated according to the research questions. The following table presents the overall mean scores for both internal and external factors as reported by the students.

Table 3. Overall mean scores for internal and external factors

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Internal Factors	232	3.40	.366
External Factors	232	3.34	.382
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The table above showed that the students reported a slightly higher score for internal factors (M=3.40, SD=.366), in comparison to external factors (M=3.34, SD=.382). The following table presents the mean scores for the five dimensions of internal factors affecting learning autonomy. These dimensions include learning strategies, psychological aspects, metacognitive abilities, cognitive abilities, and critical thinking.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the internal factors

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological Aspects	232	4.17	.517
Critical Thinking	232	4.16	.520
Cognitive Abilities	232	3.44	.515
Metacognitive Abilities	232	2.95	.472
Learning Strategies	232	2.30	.484
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The table above showed that psychological aspects are the most effective factor in students' learning autonomy (M=4.17, SD=.517), followed by the critical thinking factor (M=4.16, SD=.520), cognitive abilities (M=3.44, SD=.515), metacognitive abilities (M=2.95, SD=.472), and learning strategies (M=2.30, SD=.484). The following table presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the external factors as reported by the students.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the external factors

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The Tasks	232	3.83	.704
The Role of the Teacher	232	3.29	.716
The Environment	232	2.89	.461
Valid N (listwise)	232		

Regarding the external factors affecting learning autonomy, the tasks factor scored the highest mean score (M=3.83, SD=.704), followed by the role of the teacher (M=3.29, SD=.716), and the environment factor (M=2.89, SD=.461). The following table presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the items of each internal factor.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for learning strategies factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I like to know about the culture of English speakers	232	2.96	1.10
I practice English in groups	232	2.79	1.00
If I am having trouble following a conversation in English, I will urge the other person to repeat themselves or speak more slowly	232	2.59	.988
When I make a mistake speaking English, I always ask native speakers to help me out	232	2.41	.935
I ask questions in English	232	1.53	1.13
I consult English speakers when I commit mistakes	232	1.50	.501
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The results of the first internal factor (learning strategies) showed that the statement I like to know about the culture of English speakers scored the highest mean score (M=2.96, SD=1.10), followed by I practice English in groups (M=2.79, SD=1.00) If I am having trouble following a conversation in English, I will urge the other person to repeat themselves or speak more slowly (M=2.59, SD=.988) When I make a mistake speaking English, I always ask native speakers to help me out (M=2.41, SD=.935), I ask questions in English (M=1.53, SD=1.13), and I consult English speakers when I commit mistakes (M=1.50, SD=.501). It can be noticed that the mean scores of all items related to this factor were less than (3.00), and this indicates a relatively low mean score for this factor. The following table depicts the descriptive statistics for the second internal factor (psychological aspects).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for psychological aspects factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
When I speak in English class, I never feel sure of myself	232	4.59	.702
I don't see why I should study things that aren't going to be on the test	232	4.52	.708
I don't find my class very interesting, so I do as little as possible for it	232	4.45	.851
I study hard because I'm interested in what I'm learning	232	4.34	.842
I become nervous when I speak in a language lesson without preparation	232	4.06	.930
I experience anxiety and confusion when speaking in English class	232	3.09	1.32
Valid N (listwise)	232		

Concerning the psychological aspects factor, the students scored high scores in approximately all items related to this factor. The statement When I speak in English class, I never feel sure of myself scored the highest mean score in this dimension (M=4.59, SD=.702), followed by I don't see why I should study things that aren't going to be on the test (M=4.52, SD=.708), I don't find my class very interesting, so I do as little as possible for it (M=4.45, SD=.851), I study hard because I'm interested in what I'm learning (M=4.34, SD=.842), I become nervous when I speak in a language lesson without preparation (M=4.06, SD=.930), and I experience anxiety and confusion when speaking in English class (M=3.09, SD=1.32). The next table presents the descriptive statistics for the third internal factor (metacognitive abilities).

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for metacognitive abilities factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I seek out as many opportunities as possible to use English	232	4.45	.881
I am conscious of my English flaws and utilize this information to improve	232	4.00	1.22
I reflect on my English learning development	232	2.81	1.04
I attempt to determine how to become a better English learner	232	2.58	1.01
I have distinct objectives for enhancing my English skills	232	2.41	.958
I seek opportunities to absorb as much English as feasible	232	1.49	.501
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The results of this factor revealed that the item I seek out as many opportunities as possible to use English got the highest mean score (M=4.45, SD=.881), followed by I am conscious of my English flaws and utilize this information to improve (M=4.00, SD=1.22), I reflect on my English learning development (M=2.81, SD=1.04), I attempt to determine how to become a better English learner (M=2.58, SD=1.01), I have distinct objectives for enhancing my English skills (M=2.41, SD=.958), and I seek opportunities to absorb as much English as feasible (M=1.49, SD=.501). The following table shows the descriptive statistics for the fourth internal factor (cognitive abilities).

Table 9. Descriptive statistics for cognitive abilities factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I frequently speak or write novel English terms	232	4.57	.710
I attempt to identify patterns in English	232	4.42	.884
I watch English-language television programs and English-language films	232	4.09	.913
I use English to make notes, messages, letters, and reports	232	3.10	1.36
I usually begin talks in English	232	2.90	1.13
I practice the sounds of English	232	1.54	1.11
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The results concerning the cognitive abilities factor showed disparate mean scores. The statement I frequently speak or write novel English terms scored the highest mean score (M=4.57, SD=.710), followed by I attempt to identify patterns in English (M=4.42, SD=.884), I watch English-language television programs and English-language films (M=4.09, SD=.913), I use English to make notes, messages, letters, and reports (M=3.10, SD=1.36), I usually begin talks in English (M=2.90, SD=1.13), and I practice the sounds of English (M=1.54, SD=1.11). The following table reveals the descriptive statistics for the last internal factor (critical thinking).

Table 10. Descriptive statistics for critical thinking factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The same information may be conveyed in a variety of ways	232	4.51	.714
I give several examples when I speak English	232	4.42	.874
I enjoy integrating information from various texts	232	4.36	.810
I can see the text's structure and could modify it	232	4.25	1.02
I enjoy discovering new meanings in familiar texts	232	3.90	1.00
I have difficulty with paraphrasing	232	3.50	1.35
Valid N (listwise)	232		

As shown in the table above, most of the items of the critical thinking factor got high mean scores. The statement The same information may be conveyed in a variety of ways scored the highest mean score (M=4.51, SD=.714), followed by I give several examples when I speak English (M=4.42, SD=.874), I enjoy integrating information from various texts (M=4.36, SD=.810), I can see the text's structure and could modify it (M=4.25, SD=1.02), I enjoy discovering new meanings in familiar texts (M=3.90, SD=1.00), and I have difficulty with paraphrasing (M=3.50, SD=1.35). The following results depict the descriptive statistics for the external factors affecting learning autonomy.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics for the role of the teacher factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The teacher encourages me to make study plans	232	4.55	.724
The teacher is always positive and supportive especially when giving feedback	232	4.22	.855
The teacher helps me to set up my learning objectives	232	2.93	1.11
The teacher helps me to reflect on my learning progress	232	2.89	1.18
The teacher helps me to select my learning materials	232	2.70	1.63
The teacher helps me to evaluate my learning and progress	232	2.47	1.57
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The results showed that teachers play a vital role in enhancing learning autonomy. The item the teacher encourages me to make study plans got the highest mean score (M=4.55, SD=.724), followed by the teacher is always positive and supportive especially when giving feedback (M=4.22, SD=.855), the teacher helps me to set up my learning objectives (M=2.93, SD=1.11), the teacher helps me to reflect on my learning progress (M=2.89, SD=1.18), the teacher helps me to select my learning materials (M=2.70, SD=1.63), and the teacher helps me to evaluate my learning and progress (M=2.47, SD=1.57). The descriptive statistics for the tasks and the environmental factors are shown in the following tables.

Table 12. Descriptive statistics for the tasks factor

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
When it comes to English assignments, I take great care to comprehend everything	232	4.42	.922
The textbook contains a great deal of information that is inaccurate or obsolete	232	3.79	1.24
There aren't many assignments in my coursebooks that motivate me to learn more	232	3.72	1.27
Some learning tasks in my course book are beyond my comprehension	232	3.72	1.34
Before I do any English work, I think about how much I know about the topics	232	3.69	1.24
I have opportunities to collaborate with my colleagues in English class activities	232	3.62	1.35
Valid N (listwise)	232		

The participants reported that careful work in the English tasks is the most important element of this factor When it comes to English assignments, I take great care to comprehend everything (M=4.42, SD=1.63), followed by The textbook contains a great deal of information that is inaccurate or obsolete (M=3.79, SD=1.24), there aren't many assignments in my coursebooks that motivate me to learn more (M=3.72, SD=1.27), some learning tasks in my course book are beyond my comprehension (M=3.72, SD=1.34) Before I do any English work, I think about how much I know about the topics (M=3.69, SD=1.24), and I have opportunities to collaborate with my colleagues in English class activities (M=3.62, SD=1.35).

Table 13. Descriptive statistics for the environmental factors

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I think I learn better in a more flexible learning process	232	3.62	1.35
There are no native English speakers in my area with whom I can practice	232	2.96	1.53
I like to work with other students to learn from them	232	2.81	1.15
My university's library does not have enough English language books	232	2.73	1.47
The teacher needs to encourage pair work to learn more effectively	232	2.67	1.60
I communicate with my instructor and friends outside of the classroom	232	2.54	1.62
Valid N (listwise)	232		

As depicted in the table above, most of the items of environmental factors got relatively low mean scores. The statement I think I learn better in a more flexible learning process (M=3.62, SD=1.35), followed by There are no native English speakers in my area with whom I can practice (M=2.96, SD=1.53), I like to work with other students to learn from them (M=2.81, SD=1.15), My university's library does not have enough English language books (M=2.73, SD=1.47), the teacher needs to encourage pair work to learn more effectively (M=2.67, SD=1.60), and I communicate with my instructor and friends outside of the classroom (M=2.54, SD=1.62). The following results provide answers to the second research question: Do the affecting factors reported by the students vary across academic levels?

Table 14. ANOVA results of the factors affecting learning autonomy

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Internal Factors	Fresh Students	61	3.40	.351	
	Sophomores	58	3.40	.448	
	Junior Students	58	3.41	.283	.999
	Senior Students	55	3.40	.374	
	Total	232	3.40	.366	
External Factors	Fresh Students	61	3.32	.340	.988
	Sophomores	58	3.33	.467	
	Junior Students	58	3.34	.390	
	Senior Students	55	3.35	.323	
	Total	232	3.34	.382	

The results revealed in the table above showed that students from different academic levels reported convergent mean scores concerning the internal and external factors affecting their learning autonomy. The results of the ANOVA test showed no statistically significant differences between learning autonomy and the student's academic level ($p > .05$). The following table shows the ANOVA results of the dimensions of internal factors and learning autonomy.

Table 15. ANOVA results of the internal factors affecting learning autonomy

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Learning Strategies	Fresh Students	61	2.20	.468	
	Sophomores	58	2.46	.516	
	Junior Students	58	2.30	.413	.018
	Senior Students	55	2.23	.504	
	Total	232	2.30	.484	
Psychological Aspects	Fresh Students	61	4.22	.452	
	Sophomores	58	4.03	.648	
	Junior Students	58	4.25	.466	.100
	Senior Students	55	4.20	.462	
	Total	232	4.17	.517	
Metacognitive Abilities	Fresh Students	61	2.96	.440	
	Sophomores	58	3.06	.497	
	Junior Students	58	2.83	.468	.067
	Senior Students	55	2.98	.468	
	Total	232	2.95	.472	
Cognitive Abilities	Fresh Students	61	3.43	.476	
	Sophomores	58	3.42	.603	
	Junior Students	58	3.49	.483	.852
	Senior Students	55	3.41	.499	
	Total	232	3.44	.515	
Critical Thinking	Fresh Students	61	4.20	.523	
	Sophomores	58	4.05	.594	
	Junior Students	58	4.19	.399	.325
	Senior Students	55	4.19	.543	
	Total	232	4.16	.520	

The ANOVA results of the relationship between the internal factors of learning autonomy and academic level showed no statistically significant differences in the students' responses and four internal factors (i.e., psychological aspects, metacognitive abilities, cognitive abilities, and critical thinking ($p>.05$). However, there was a statistically significant difference between the students' responses with regards to learning strategies factor in favor of sophomore students ($p<.05$). The ANOVA results of the relationship between external factors of learning autonomy and academic level are shown in the following table.

Table 16. ANOVA results of the external factors affecting learning autonomy

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
The Role of the Teacher	Fresh Students	61	3.60	.729	
	Sophomores	58	2.96	.538	
	Junior Students	58	3.05	.612	.000
	Senior Students	55	3.56	.733	
	Total	232	3.29	.716	
The Tasks	Fresh Students	61	3.57	.659	
	Sophomores	58	4.04	.743	
	Junior Students	58	4.06	.606	.000
	Senior Students	55	3.64	.669	
	Total	232	3.83	.704	
The Environment	Fresh Students	61	2.80	.443	
	Sophomores	58	3.00	.496	
	Junior Students	58	2.92	.433	.094
	Senior Students	55	2.84	.455	
	Total	232	2.89	.461	

The ANOVA results of the relationship between the external factors of learning autonomy and academic level showed statistically significant differences in the students' responses and two external factors (i.e., the role of the teacher, and the tasks) in favor of fresh students and junior students successively (p<.05). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the students' responses with regards to the environment factor and academic level (p>.05).

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that English-majored students are influenced by both internal and external factors in the enhancement of learning autonomy. Concerning internal factors, psychological aspects were reported to be the most effective factors in learning autonomy such as anxiety, fear, and motivation. This result is consistent with Tran and Vuong's (2022) study which found that motivation may bring a sense of learning autonomy.

According to the results of the current study, there was a relationship between critical thinking and learning autonomy. Previous research works (Benson, 2013; Leaver et al. 2005) confirmed the role of critical thinking in attaining learning autonomy. These studies concluded that critical thinking can reliably predict learning autonomy in the context of EFL learning. These results are in line with Littlewood's (1996) and Teng's (2018) studies which found that students with higher levels of autonomy are more likely to have critical thinking abilities.

In addition, the results of this study show that learning autonomy is more effective when students use their chosen learning strategies, especially cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This finding is in line with Qin's (2016) speculations. According to Qin's findings, students who are invested in a topic over an extended period have optimistic dispositions toward education. Because of this, the topic would be studied more intently, and a goal for improvement would be established.

This study also emphasized the importance of linguistic proficiency. This result is consistent with Tran and Duong's (2018) discovery. They concluded that the more information, awareness, and learning skills students have, the more autonomous they become. Students who are familiar with English grammar and vocabulary, for example, will feel more secure in their ability to study both inside and outside of the classroom.

The participants of this study reported sufficient use of metacognitive strategies that allow them to organize, think through, monitor, and analyze their learning. They may set their own learning goals and use effective strategies to reach those goals. This implies that the growth of learning autonomy is contingent on their learning styles. This is consistent with Leaver et al. (2005) who highlighted the importance of metacognitive strategies to develop learning autonomy. They indicated that students' constructivism regarding their methods of learning is further highlighted when they are allowed to study via independent investigation.

On the other hand, the tasks factor was the most crucial external factor. It was found that autonomous learners pay extra attention to the given tasks. This result confirms is consistent with Begum and Chowdhury's (2016) study which emphasized the importance of learning tasks in learning autonomy. Self-directed students would prioritize their work, and they would set aside study time to complete classroom tasks. They put forth effort to prepare themselves intellectually for the challenge ahead. Attractive and difficult tasks have a substantial impact on the independent learner, and students who can work alone are pushed to do so, and sometimes even required to.

The role of teachers has also been an important factor in learning autonomy. Actions such as suggesting or providing students with further reading materials, allowing them to arrive at their conclusions, inviting any questions or inquiries, etc. were seen promoting components for learning autonomy. Kemala (2016) has come to similar conclusions. She thought it would be beneficial to provide pupils greater leeway in choosing or using their learning methodologies. Alonazi (2017) described teacher roles in independent language classrooms as supervisor, resource, counselor, and facilitator.

The environmental factors were the last external factor that would influence learning autonomy. The participants of this study reported the extreme importance of this factor in developing their independent learning. Dang (2010) pointed out that students' friends and family

also affect learning autonomy. The respondents to the questionnaire of the current study reported that they look up to their friends and acquaintances who are fluent in English. As Dang (2010) underlined, this is the "social context" that fosters an atmosphere where students may engage in meaningful interactions with their peers.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that would affect learning autonomy in the context of EFL learning in Saudi Arabia. It also aimed at examining the differences between those factors and academic level. The results showed that learning autonomy is influenced by five internal factors (i.e., psychological aspects, learning strategies, cognitive abilities, metacognitive abilities, and critical thinking), and three external factors (i.e., the role of the teacher, the task, and the environment). The results also showed that most of the internal and external factors have no statistically significant differences attributed to academic level.

Having discovered the characteristics that influence LA among English major students, it is recommended that educators modify their pedagogical approaches to provide students with more choices, problem-solving, and independent learning possibilities. Teachers also have a major influence on students' motivation and self-confidence, both of which are critical for bolstering students' capacity for independent learning. Teachers are also urged to go beyond the textbook when devising innovative ways to get their kids excited about learning English. Based on the results of this investigation, it is strongly suggested that students develop their own goals and strategies for learning English. As a result, they should set realistic goals for their English language study and develop effective teaching strategies.

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