Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Development for Saudi University Female EFL Learners: Students’ Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examined how female English language learners in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) realize learner autonomy, especially in the context of the learner’s meaning development via purposeful vocabulary acquisition. EFL students’ perceptions and applications of autonomous learning strategies for the purpose of English vocabulary development were investigated, as well as their adapted methods for learning English. Data collection included face-to-face semistructured interviews of 8 students from two different classrooms, classroom observations, participants’ reflections on specific English coursework, and English learning autobiographies. The findings revealed the students’ appreciation of the English language and showed how various autonomous learning methods developed their sense of self-possession.

Keywords: Learning autonomy, Vocabulary development, Independent learning, Foreign language learning, Language learning perceptions, EFL students, Classroom practices
1. Introduction

The French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, made an important observation about human learning:

Make your pupil attend to the phenomena of nature, and you will soon arouse his curiosity. But to nourish this curiosity, be in no hurry to satisfy it. Suggest problems but leave the solving of them to him. Whatever he knows, he should know not because you have told him, but because he has grasped it himself. Do not teach him science: let him discover it. If ever you substitute authority for reason in his mind, he will stop reasoning, and become the victim of other people’s opinions... (Boyd, 1958, pp. 73-76)

Rousseau made it clear that learners should take responsibility for their own learning. His thoughts aligned with the learner autonomy approach, which has been shown to lead to success in learning and development within and across multiple subject areas in education (see, for example, Nguyen & Gu, 2013; Tok, 2011).

Scholars (e.g., Abadi & Baradaran, 2013; Haddad, 2016; Tuan, 2011) who study learner autonomy in English vocabulary learning, especially in a context where English is not the first language, theorize that vocabulary learning necessitates autonomous learning to self-select and self-apply vocabulary knowledge in various real-life contexts. These scholars also believe that giving students the freedom to engage in informal and anxiety-free contexts will develop their vocabulary acquisition and foster meaning-making for new vocabulary, thereby leading, for example, to higher levels of literacy.

According to Benson (2007), learner autonomy is defined as a learner’s readiness and competence in taking accountability for suggesting, implementing, monitoring, and assessing his/her learning in cooperation with, and with support from, the teacher. It is as important for one to develop learning autonomy as it builds up one’s other cognitive and metacognitive capabilities. As such, educators should take stock of their pedagogical practice to see how well they measure up in supporting their students’ learning autonomy development. Students must also take responsibility for developing and applying strategies that will make them successful autonomous learners. The purpose of this study, therefore, is examine students’ perspectives on their development as autonomous learners and the factors that help or hinder this development. In particular, the research reported here examines English language learning and learner autonomy development in female university EFL learners in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learner Autonomy and its Significance

Learner autonomy has been a major area of interest in language teaching and learning. Holec (1981), within the Council of Europe’s modern languages project, defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3) and suggested that it is a legitimate and desirable goal of language education. Benson (2001) argued that learners who lack autonomy are incapable of developing appropriate learning situations and self-preparation.
From the word “autonomy,” it is understood that this learning process will require the personal initiative of the learner. It should be recognized that autonomy is multidimensional and has different results in different learning situations; however, generally speaking, research has demonstrated that autonomous learning allows learners to make the best use of learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom (Benson, 2001; Little, 2007). When learners take control of their own learning, such as reflecting on their writing, they will likely learn better and in a manner that can make their learning journey memorable because it is guided by the learners themselves (Douillard, 2002).

Haddad (2016) stressed the significance of learner autonomy in vocabulary learning. He argued that when learners identify language learning strategies, they gradually develop their autonomy through individual selection and application of different words in diverse contexts. The idea of learner autonomy suggests that students have freedom and independence to study on their own, as guided by the curriculum that the teacher provides. Autonomy in language learning allows room for creativity and stimulation on behalf of the learners. With the help of teachers, learner autonomy may be the most effective method of improving the vocabulary development of students (Tuan, 2011).

When learners develop creativity and innovativeness, they become self-reliant (Yan, 2012); Yan (2012) stated that, in the autonomous learning setting, “teachers must shift their roles from a dominator to a director and let the students learn positively” (p. 562). When students learn vocabulary autonomously, they tend to search for the right pronunciation of words, as well as spelling, without being affected by the cultural background of the teacher, making his or her pronunciation or reading the only source of input. Additionally, considering the workload that teachers have during lesson preparation, they may fail to provide adequate instruction for all students. Therefore, the practical way of studying and answering this problem is by providing methods for teachers to foster learner autonomy. For instance, using technology to help guide learners in their vocabulary development is one of the methods that teachers can adopt to facilitate the progress of learner autonomy (Muchlis, 2015). Consequently, EFL students can expand their vocabulary as well as develop their scope of knowledge with the help of technology.

2.2 Why is Learner Autonomy Important in Vocabulary Development

English language acquisition requires the skills to perceive and understand the language as well as to communicate using words and sentences (Ellis, 1994). Vocabulary learning is at the core of English language acquisition, because learners cannot communicate orally or verbally without using fundamental and academic vocabulary. Because effective vocabulary learning requires learning the language inside and outside the classroom, learners must become autonomous and make conscious efforts to learn vocabulary on their own. Arabic students also consider English language learning to be a challenging and complicated mission due its different grammar, phonetics, spelling, and vocabulary usage (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Thus, learner autonomy is important in enhancing vocabulary knowledge because target-language input is often limited to the second language classrooms; yet, a greater abundance of exposure is generally required for language skills to develop efficiently. When
teachers adopt pedagogical reforms to effectively guide learners to be independent in the language learning process, students may be able to attain comprehensible input and meaningful discourse.

Little (2007) confirmed that language learner autonomy is realized when “the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other” (p. 15). When the learner initiates the learning process, he or she will be responsible for making sense of various vocabulary in different contexts and fully comprehending the meaning of each word with its appropriate contextual usage (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). The questions that may linger in many learners’ minds are whether, through autonomy, they will grasp all that they are required to grasp and whether they will attain proper knowledge of the English language.

2.3 How Can Learners Become Autonomous in Vocabulary Development

When learners of English as a foreign language realize that any foreign language necessitates learning its words, spelling, and usage, they should appreciate the importance of promoting learner autonomy in identifying and using words in different oral or written contexts. Learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is central, as it gives the learner many ‘privileges,’ such as self-motivation, that lead to more effective vocabulary learning. Additionally, learner autonomy opens up opportunities for English communication in a foreign setting and helps to meet the diverse needs of learners at all levels. Learner autonomy also supports students’ readiness for active language learning (Haddad, 2016). As such, the vocabulary learning process runs through the learners’ own reflections and perceptions of the best working strategies in language learning.

It is important to note that learner autonomy in this present study is situated within a social practice rather than as an individual act. In individualized autonomous learning, learners are fully on their own and they receive no guidance from the teacher. On the other hand, in socialized autonomous learning, learners are monitored and guided by the teacher, while they have freedom of choice in learning. Therefore, while learners are encouraged to practice autonomy through interdependence and collaboration, their practice should occur within a social context (Little, 2007). As Toohey and Norton (2003) stated, “autonomous learners have variable motivations, learning styles, cognitive traits, strategies and personality orientations that are seen as causal of their success or failure in language learning” (p. 58). As such, learners are responsible for choosing their own working strategies in vocabulary learning and applying them within a social context that can construct individuals and their learning.

According to Brockett and Hiemstra’s (1991) theoretical self-directed learning perspective, learners are expected to have a level of autonomy that allows them to play a major role in their own vocabulary learning and to take responsibility for knowing when, how, and why to apply knowledge. This perspective constitutes a series of learning processes that entail “planning, implementing, and evaluating a learning experience” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 24) and is a fundamental part of adult education and lifelong learning. As Du (2013) stressed, although school teaching instruction plays an important role in shaping students’
learning development, students have the choice to be autonomous learners beyond the classroom, but not necessarily inside the classroom. In independent vocabulary learning, students are required not only to know new words but also to know their parts of speech, examples of usage in situations, and applications of vocabulary within different contexts. Schmitt (1997) proposed a taxonomy of second language vocabulary learning strategies that is divided into two main categories: “strategies for the discovery of a new word’s meaning” (p. 7) (e.g., analyze part of speech, affixes and roots, and check for L1 cognate) and “strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered” (p. 7). For example, when learners interact with native speakers, connect a word to a personal experience, or connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms, they will feel authoritative in their own learning development.

2.4 Vocabulary Development and Autonomy in Learning in the Context of the KSA

Learner autonomy is particularly important in the context of the KSA where there is more emphasis on teacher-centered learning (Al-Seghayer, 2011). In the KSA, English is a required subject in public schools from the elementary level through the college level. In public elementary schools (4th grade–6th grade), “students have two 45-minute English classes a week. However, in intermediate and secondary stages, the number of classes increases to four classes per week, and each class lasts for 45 minutes” (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015, p. 37). As such, English language instruction at the university level in the KSA primarily concentrates on students who want to specialize in English-only majors, such as English linguistics, translation, English literature, and scientific and medical majors. Based on the available majors and rules, some students of other majors, such as communication and education, have the option to take one English course each year as an elective.

2.5 Learner Autonomy as a Social Phenomenon

It is important to clarify that this study is intended to explore EFL learning and learners in a social context. As such, the establishment of their own identification and authority of some parts of their learning process occurs within a social context. Benson (2011) stressed that autonomous learning is situated within social learning strategies inside and outside the classroom environment. He offered some traits of autonomous learners, such as understanding word usage within social contexts, using best learning approaches to convey meaning, and evaluating their own decision-making processes. It is also worth mentioning that the teacher’s role in autonomous learning is not passive; it is an active involvement that necessitates direct and indirect guidance, feedback, and assessment. The teacher is mainly a mentor, trainer, and enabler of students’ individually directed practice. As Pichugova, Stepura, and Pravosudov (2016) stated, “It is not realistic to expect students to take responsibility for their learning from one day, or even month, to the next” (p. 4). Promoting learner autonomy inside the classroom requires extensive time, planning, and teaching approaches that primarily depend on the teacher. Autonomy also develops progressively through the development of a set of skills, such as “metacognitive skills which relate to capacity for critical reflection, decision-making, independent action and transferring what they have learned to other contexts of learning” (Pichugova et al., 2016, p. 2). Therefore, for
students to master these essential skills, they have to get the right guidance from their teacher. Learners are, therefore, challenged to monitor their language learning by getting the teacher’s support when needed, reflecting on their own intellectual processes, assessing their performance, and making significant choices regarding their English learning development.

2.6 Purpose of the Study

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are female university EFL students’ perceptions regarding autonomous learning strategies in English vocabulary learning?

2. At the end of one semester, how do the female university EFL students evaluate the autonomy-fostering activities, if there are any, in terms of motivational value and usefulness?

3. To what extent, if any, do female university EFL students deploy autonomous learning strategies while learning English (especially vocabulary) in a foreign language context?

4. What types of autonomous learning strategies do female university EFL students use to increase their level of English proficiency?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study took place at an all-female university in the KSA that offers degrees at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. Participants were selected from those who were enrolled in Level 7 classrooms within the Department of English Language and Literature. Instructors for these classrooms were asked to inform their students about the study and to ask them to contact the researcher if they were interested in participation. Students were also told that the decision about whether or not to participate in the study would not affect their grades and that participants would be issued certificates upon completion of the study.

Eight students agreed to participate in the study. The profiles of these students is included in Table 1. All names for the participants are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participants’ Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Course Instructor</th>
<th>Language(s) Spoken</th>
<th>Length Intensive Learning English</th>
<th>English Proficiency Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atheer</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Khlood</td>
<td>Arabic, English</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azzah</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Khlood</td>
<td>Arabic, English, Chinese</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dema</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Faten</td>
<td>Arabic, English</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Faten</td>
<td>Arabic, English</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.2 Procedures

Data on the participants were collected through classroom observations, semistructured interviews, participants’ reflective statements, and their learning autobiographies. The specifics of each type of data collection follow.

While conducting classroom observations, the researcher centered her attention on the amount and nature of student participation, the nature of the instruction provided, and the degree and type of interactions between instructor and students. Both Drs. Khlood’s and Faten’s lectures were observed twice a week for 8 weeks. All lectures were audiorecorded and transcribed. The researcher also completed reflection notes on each session. Analysis of these data followed the guidelines offered by Wajnryb (1992).

Each of the 8 participants was interviewed three times for between 30 and 45 minutes each time, during which time the interviews were audiorecorded. The participants were first interviewed prior to the summer term (June 2017) to gather general information about their preferred method of learning and their perceptions about learner autonomy. After 4 weeks of the summer term (July 2017), participants were again interviewed to learn more about their attitudes toward the current method of instruction they were receiving and their beliefs about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Faten</td>
<td>Arabic, English, Japanese</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maha</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Faten</td>
<td>Arabic, English, French</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ragad</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Khlood</td>
<td>Arabic, English</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Khlood</td>
<td>Arabic, English, French</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Intermediate level was assigned to participants who spoke and understood English reasonably well and used basic tenses but had problems with some grammar and vocabulary choices. Advanced level was assigned to participants who spoke and understood English reasonably well and used complex structures but had minor problems with grammar and vocabulary choices.*

During this study, the participants were enrolled in a course that focused on 19th-century English novels. Elements of fiction (character, plot, point of view, setting, style, and theme) were the core emphases of the course.

Participants were enrolled in two different classes, each with a different instructor. Based on interviews with the two instructors, Dr. Khlood, in whose classes Atheer, Azzah, Ragad, and Sara were enrolled, perceived autonomous learning strategies for English vocabulary learning as beneficial to her students’ learning and promoted their use within her classroom, while Dr. Faten, in whose class Lena, Dema, Fatima, and Maha were enrolled, perceived traditional teaching as the only effective method in learning, disapproved of autonomous learning strategies, and avoided using them inside her classroom.
its effectiveness. Finally, at the end of the term (August 2017), the participants were interviewed to obtain their final thoughts about their learning experiences. All audio recordings were transcribed and were analyzed thematically.

The participants were asked to write a reflective statement (1–3 pages in length) at the end of the semester as an evaluation of the instruction they received and as an opportunity for them to reflect on their own thinking development inside and outside the classroom. Analysis of the data from these reflections focused on the relationship between the nature of the instruction the participants received and their vocabulary growth, as well as identification of any features related to autonomous learning.

Finally, the participants were asked to write a learning autobiography (1–3 pages in length), which described their journey as EFL students not only to uncover some aspects of autonomous vocabulary learning, but, also, as Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) stated, to “promote personal history as a site of struggle over identity” (p. 420). These learning autobiographies were gathered and analyzed at the end of the summer term (August 2017).

Corbin and Strauss’s (1990) open-coding system was used as the first level of data analysis. Using this system, the researcher read and inductively coded every sentence of the classroom observations, interview transcripts, reflective statements, and learning autobiographies. “Thick description” (Geertz, 1973) was employed to give details of the participants’ thoughts and actions and to situate and explain specific examples of cultural and social connections within the educational setting. Next, the analysis was guided by characteristics of constructivism and transformative learning theories (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Mezirow, 2000), which describe the learner’s control over his or her learning. Finally the corpus of data was reduced, codes were condensed into manageable sections of analysis, the participants’ thoughts were summarized, and superfluous data were discarded. From this, initial themes were generated from the coded data. Two colleagues, both doctoral candidates, were asked to undertake a peer review of the analysis to identify any perceived discrepancies between the coded data and the initial themes. After reviewing the peers’ notes and feedback, the researcher made revisions to the themes.

4. Results

The results as they pertain to students’ perceptions about and evaluation of the autonomous learning approach, the degree to which they deploy autonomous learning strategies, and the types of strategies they use to develop their vocabulary knowledge are presented here. The order in which the results are presented correspond to the order of the four research questions that underpin this study.

4.1 Students’ Perceptions about Autonomous Learning Strategies

This section provides results that attempt to answer the research question “What are female university EFL students’ perceptions regarding autonomous learning strategies in English vocabulary learning?” The results are organized according to the following themes: autonomous learning as a window to the outside world, as a pathway to academic success, and as guided practice.
4.1.1 Autonomous Learning as a Window to the Outside World

As an example of how the participants used autonomous learning as a window to the outside world, Atheer stated that she used self-directed learning as her primary approach to developing her English vocabulary knowledge. Atheer explained in her writing sample that English connects her to the world by using the language to contact native speakers and to expand her views using different perspectives. She mentioned that, because of her English knowledge, she became more aware of different cultures around her and distinct personalities, as exemplified by the following passage from her learning autobiography:

“The most incredible thing in learning language is it’s expand your mind, make you think in different ways, different aspects of life, different interests, and make you more involved in the great language world. This made me a learner seeker, I want to know more about anything I hear around me. Language opened my eyes to the world so now I see everything around me in bigger image. I’ll never stop learning, never stop loving this great language, and never stop sharing this love with others until I become an influencer and I change someone’s life.”

Likewise, Lena, expanded on her devotion to learning the English language by saying the following in her learning autobiography:

“I started to look up in English materials for example magazines, newspapers, kids tv and even my father collage books and brochures. I did that without making from my family tired. I discover that self-learning method is the best method for me to continue learning. I encourage myself to read books in any field including things I’m not interested in, also to watch tv especially political and sport news.”

Fatima mentioned, in her learning autobiography, that she used English to talk to English-speaking people. In her learning autobiography, she opened up by saying the following:

“Studying English language makes me happy, confident and patient. I know that I’ll get it as everyone in the world but needs time. With English I know about knew cultures, new friend because I believe the limit of my languages is the limit of my world.”

4.1.2 Autonomous Learning as a Pathway to Academic Success

Dema demonstrated her sense of agency about her learning progress by stating, during her interview session, “I think when a person learns by him/herself it did not get lost, it sticks to their minds.” Dema, in her learning autobiography, justified the motives behind focusing on the self-learning method as follows:

“Since I majored English I think my writing went the wrong way, of course I am planning to return it to the perfect way. I am still amused by English language I am still learning new things about it every time and not stop reading. And now I am planning to make a very successful job out of it one day.”
Likewise, Fatima believed that the teacher’s role is critical in guiding students to be autonomous learners. She indicated that she personally preferred to be involved in the learning process as an active participant. For example, she stated that she talks to salesmen as an exciting autonomy technique to increase her vocabulary knowledge. She described her English investment in vocabulary learning as follows:

“I said learning from the signs is the most effective way for me, for example when I see the fruit and vegetable names in a piece of paper with pic I’ll not memorize it as if I went to supermarket and read the signs and ask the salesman about it to listening from him again.”

Atheer also mentioned that she liked to practice with her friends as she talked in English and expressed her opinion comfortably without feeling shy or afraid of making mistakes. She stated:

“On the top of learning development is self-learning and practicing, the more you practice the great results you will have. Working on yourself and by your own is more effective. After this come teacher's efforts, their knowledge, and methods of teaching the curriculum provided.”

It appears from Atheer’s words that she was assured that the development of self-learning does not have expedited results but is a cultivating and gradual process. She seemed to believe in the efficacy of the teachers’ input, curriculum, and methodological approaches. Nevertheless, Atheer appeared certain that the learner-centered approach is valuable for her English vocabulary development as indicated by the following statement:

“Self-learning was my truly friend since 2014 in learning English. I built myself, I created my text books, I wrote tons of vocabulary lists and I, in order to improve my speaking skill, spoke to myself in the mirror as if were a native friend’s of my mine.”

Sara stated, in one of her interviews, that she liked to learn with her friends, especially those who were at the same level of English or better. She claimed that communicating with English speakers made her mind acquire information faster. She justified her learning method by saying, “Learning by myself I would slow a lot.” She liked to be engaged in a group while learning English in a natural setting. She also stated that, “The purpose and the love for the English language were the main factors that helped me to improve.” Similarly, Lena stated that she liked to work in a group to test her vocabulary knowledge. She also mentioned that she was trying to explore, and to taste, the joys of English literature and its great creative language.

As with all of the other participants, Maha supported the use of autonomous learning methods to boost her English vocabulary knowledge. She stressed that she read academic texts to develop her English lexical knowledge. In her interview session, Maha stated that, “Reading academic books will give us a huge number of new vocabularies, also making many sentences for the words will help us to memorize them.”
4.1.3 Autonomous Learning as Guided Practice

Azzah explained in her interview session that, because of the limitations in the curriculum and teaching methods in the English department at her university, she was navigating her own English learning development. She discussed how challenging it was to be in a learning environment with little guidance and no step-by-step instructions. She further disclosed that, during her English learning, she only enjoyed one class, which was a student-centered one; all of her other classes were teacher-centered classrooms. In her interview session, she stated that she was more comfortable in a student-centered learning environment. While she believed that teachers were guides in acquiring new skills, knowledge, and instructional adaptations required at the undergraduate level, she had employed some self-learning techniques to nurture her English vocabulary learning. This included creating notebooks that built on her own vocabulary knowledge.

Sara wrote the following in her learning autobiography: “After middle school, my language level was fallen, and I had a simple knowledge comparing to the high school curriculums.” Sara believed that English classes in her middle school had not prepared her to understand the English curriculum in high school, and she ended up graduating from high school with little English knowledge. She pointed out that there was a deficiency of school preparedness and support for English learning.

Ragad, in the same vein, stated that she preferred to use an autonomous learning approach to develop her English vocabulary knowledge. However, she needed her English teachers to guide her as to what, where, and how to learn vocabulary and its usage in different contexts. In one of her interview sessions, she stated:

“I learn two vocabularies mostly every day, learn how to write, pronounce, use them in different styles of sentences. It’s effective under my hopes. Using only English either speaking with me or texting me. I would come backward years to tell my English teachers to try using Arabic with us. Since most of schools’ teachers teach only the theoretical parts of the curriculum and mostly ignore the practical parts, the students will not be well educated and learned.”

Ragad further explained how she had negative experiences with some of her past and current EFL teachers. She described how their teaching approaches hindered her learning progress. She stated that Dr. Khlood was the only good example of someone making learning English easy and enjoyable. While she attempted, on her own, to discover vocabulary learning techniques to develop her English lexical knowledge, she still needed teachers’ guidance and support.

Maha also stressed the importance of using active learning strategies to recall vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, Maha, in her learning autobiography, advised EFL teachers and students as follows:

“Self-studying is a good way of studying, but it is not the purpose of classes and teachers. As long as we have time, teacher, students and class, each one suppose to play his role. As a teacher, you suppose to try to make the subject understandable in an easy way beside giving
assignments that will help the students’ thinking out of the box, and as student, you suppose to make an effort to understand the subject and get the knowledge. In conclusion, the learning process is not one person job but is many people collaborate to get the benefits.”

4.2 Students’ Evaluation of the Novel Classrooms

This section presents data that are meant to answer the research question, “At the end of one semester, how do the female university EFL students evaluate the autonomy-fostering activities, if there are any, in terms of motivational value and usefulness?” Information about students’ attitudes on the two different teaching approaches and their opinions and evaluations of each instructor’s style and the methods used in her instruction are provided.

4.2.1 EFL Students’ Views of Dr. Khlood’s Novel Classroom

The four students who were enrolled in Dr. Khlood’s classroom stated that Dr. Khlood established a learner-centered classroom, within which she continued in her role as a teacher but also facilitated a collaborative learning community.

4.2.1.1 A Class of Interactive Communication

Atheer explained how pleased she was with Dr. Khlood’s use of different interactive teaching strategies in the field of literature, where she allowed for student interactions inside the classroom. Atheer stated:

“I mostly learn vocabulary by direct teaching, which is based on repeating the words or translating them without applying them to real-life event. In Dr. Khlood’s class, she asks us to do more active things like asking questions, guessing the answers, and thinking. Listening is really boring, but with Dr. Khlood’s way, she asks us to listen to the real news and apply the language in real examples, which is full of joy.”

Atheer explained that learning mostly through lectures was not helpful to her English language development. She justified her stance by referring to some strategies that worked for her. In her reflective statement, Atheer wrote, “What I mostly liked in Dr. Khlood’s class are classrooms activities, fun assignments, games, questions during the lecture, peer student lecturing, and student point of view about the lecture.” She explained how Dr. Khlood encouraged the students to connect many events in the novel with their real-life experiences or events. Atheer also stated that she had developed many learning skills in Dr. Khlood’s class, the most beneficial one being her ability to freely express her opinion inside and outside the classroom using a variety of expressions. She stated that she was very shy about participating in class and she was fearful of making mistakes; however, with time and with Dr. Khlood’s help and encouragement, she became more comfortable expressing what she thought.

4.2.1.2 A Class of Instructional Adaptations

Azzah expressed the following insights about her experience as a student in Dr. Khlood’s class:
“Very few of teachers were allowing us to participate and swim in our own imagination. By giving students the freedom to speak in class and discuss all types of subjects, this will help extending the students’ knowledge and make them want to be more familiar with the outside world.”

In her reflective statement, Azzah portrayed Dr. Khlood’s class as “The most fun and interesting class ever,” and she said, “I wish all my classes were of the same methods as Dr. Khlood had followed because unfortunately few of them allowed students’ participation and interactions.” Azzah also mentioned that Dr. Khlood made the class beneficial for the students. One way Dr. Khlood accomplished this, as she explained, was by teaching students one-on-one, and as a group, about how to use analysis and interpretation techniques. For example, Azzah indicated that while Dr. Khlood taught the novel class, she gave the students quotations from the novel and asked them (as a group) to analyze the conveyed meaning in 10–25 minutes. Azzah further explained that while Dr. Khlood was listening to their different interpretations of the given quotation, she kept encouraging students by using positive words. Accordingly, Azzah stated that she felt this manner of teaching the novel was useful for learning new vocabulary and understanding the text, without the instructor emphasizing students’ mistakes.

During her second interview, Sara explained how she perceived her teachers’ methodological approaches to teaching English vocabulary in the EFL classrooms. She stated that, “Most teachers use the traditional way of delivering the lesson, which is boring. Sometimes, I like to learn things based on real situations and require more activeness inside the classroom.” Furthermore, Sara indicated that many of the implemented strategies were not a good fit for her English learning needs, but she indicated that Dr. Khlood’s commitment to promoting autonomous learning approaches helped her to develop her English vocabulary knowledge. In her course reflective statement, Sara mentioned how Dr. Khlood made the course fun by giving interesting examples and by challenging her students with some questions that pushed them to pursue answers eagerly. Moreover, Sara believed that Dr. Khlood helped her students to boost their vocabulary knowledge by encouraging them to not only learn about the story of the novel, but also to add new vocabulary words to their journal list.

Ragad stated during one of her interviews that some of her teachers permitted an autonomous learning approach for the purpose of English vocabulary development, but the majority followed the traditional way of teaching. She believed that an independent learning strategy was an effective one, and she justified her answer by saying, “When the learner is given a room, he/she will be more productive.” In her reflective statement, Ragad wrote:

“Because most of us do not know what does ‘novel analysis’ mean exactly, we faced some problems to discuss what we understand. However, Dr. Khlood did not let the class finished without every student tell the others at least one information about novel. She used almost all the most effective teaching methods starting from projector to the worksheet. The best part was dividing the class into groups and each group had a leader. The work was organized very well. It helps to develop and overcome weaknesses without embarrassment by learning from others and listing to different points of view.”
4.2.2 EFL Students’ Views of Dr. Faten’s Novel Classroom

The four students, who were enrolled in Dr. Faten’s classroom stated that Dr. Faten established a teacher-focused classroom, in which she controlled the entire classroom climate.

4.2.2.1 A Class of Dynamical Constraint

Fatima stated that Dr. Faten disregarded her and other students’ learning needs and degrees of engagement, as her primary goal was to deliver the lesson. In one of her reflective statements, Fatima wrote:

“The novel course with Dr. Faten was so difficult for me because it was taking a long time and effort. I can’t catch all her reading. The work she gave must done on three stages which needed lot of tools and dictionaries to have a good piece of work. Everything was manual because the online sources was rare and hard to find. Not only that but also I didn’t know how to manage the work, how to prepare, and how to make sure it is done perfectly. One thing that destroyed my last chance to be a good English learner was a comment of Dr. Faten said, ‘Even if you studied English for 10 years, you will not be able to write well because you don’t live in USA or United Kingdom.’ She also said, ‘Your writing will not be approved and trusted because if you don’t have contact with English natives.’ Those words smashed the effort I have and turned me to inactive listener.”

Similarly, Dema stated in her reflective statement that, “All I have learned is teacher talking all the time, and making fun of our answers.” Dema explained that she desired to feel appreciated and respected while being involved in a negotiable learning process. In her response to Dr. Faten’s novel class, Dema mentioned that Dr. Faten’s main strategy was standing up front and reading the novel, which was “so boring I couldn’t focus.” She stated that the novel included many words that were not explained [by Dr. Faten] or placed in context to draw an understating of the whole text. She said, “Because Dr. Faten was talking all the time, I lost attention in understanding the story of the novel or other connection details.”

Lena reflected on Dr. Faten’s instruction as follows:

“The redundant teaching of Dr. Faten destroy my learning progression. I was feeling boring, nothing new, the same way repeated over and over again. I shocked and thought about class dropping, but I can’t since it is required class.”

During an interview session, Lena expanded on her thoughts about how she faced many difficulties with Dr. Faten and other teachers who were not willing to allow the students to take roles inside the EFL classrooms. She mentioned an example where she tried to interpret the novel line by guessing the answers and, instead of Dr. Faten encouraging her attempts and participation, Dr. Faten humiliated her by saying, “You don’t understand.”

Finally, Maha mentioned, during one of her interview sessions, that she believed that there was a lack of teaching tools related to self-learning or autonomous learning approaches in
vocabulary development. In her statement reflecting on the novel course, Maha described Dr. Faten’s class as follows:

“When Dr. Faten first came to the class, she started reading the assigned novel, so I thought that just because it is the first lecture, but that was her method of teaching, reading the novel without any explanation, and whenever she was tired, she let one of us continue the reading. In addition, she didn’t discuss to analyze the authors’ words. The lecture was about listening without understanding and whenever we ask about something, her answer was not clear.”

4.3 Students’ Deployment of Autonomous Learning Strategies

This section presents results that answer the research question, “To what extent, if any, do female EFL university EFL students deploy autonomous learning strategies while learning English (especially vocabulary) in a foreign language context?” These results are organized to differentiate between the student use of autonomous learning strategies within Dr. Faten’s classroom, where a teacher-centred approach to learning was used, and Dr. Khlood’s classroom, within which a student-centred approach was observed.

4.3.1 EFL Students as Passive Followers in Dr. Faten’s Classroom

Observational data collected from Dr. Faten’s lectures shed light on students’ exclusion from the learning process. The following excerpt is taken from Dr. Faten’s third lecture in the novel class:

Dr. Faten: How many of you did the homework? It seems like just the same hands raising who are writing, reading, the same hands. The rest are not concerned, should I say. Can you tell me you wrote something? Hello? Did you write? Yes. Can you just read what you wrote?

Dr. Faten: Yes.

Student: I wrote about satire.

Student: The same…

Dr. Faten: What? Read it now.

Student: The satire here under the British government and inside was is an important event.

Dr. Faten: Is that it? Why is it important? Why do you think it’s important? What are you talking about?

Student: I don’t know…

Dr. Faten: Can you understand what’s written there if you don’t read? I’ve given you a task to do at home. You don’t do it, yes? Four days is not enough to do it? You read only that passage, even that one page I give you. I’m doing the reading for you. It’s very sad to see only a couple of students doing the work. And that’s always the case, whether it’s summer or not summer.

Another example of students’ exclusion from participation is shown in Dr. Faten’s sixth lecture of the novel class:
Student: Is it multiple choice or essays?

Dr. Faten: You don’t understand, you should be prepared for both.

Student: Can you give us examples?

Dr. Faten: No, you should study from your notes.

Dr. Faten: I’ve given you some questions to answer. It will describe the whole thing. I gave you very specific questions there to answer. What I’m seeing, I found a lot of the students who were confused with what to write there, “A detailed account.” You had to the satirical part; you had to explain what’s going on. What analysis are you going to make? Wh-questions.

Dr. Faten’s teaching was undoubtedly challenging, as she expected students to record all her thoughts and interpretations of the novels, asking students to memorize them and reproduce them in their midterm and final papers. When the researcher observed her classroom, she noticed that the students seemed confused, reluctant to learn, and less motivated to explore other learning resources that would supplement the given materials.

4.3.2 EFL Students as Agents in Learning in Dr. Khlood’s Classroom

By contrast to the environment within Dr. Faten’s classroom, Dr. Khlood’s students were allowed to take full responsibility for language learning development. The following excerpt of Dr. Khlood’s communicative classroom interaction was aimed to introduce the classroom rules and nature of classroom interactions:

Dr. Khlood: By the way, I don’t really have any rules in class. You’re free to eat and drink as long as you’re paying attention and you feel comfortable. You can always bring chocolates and give to the whole class, you like that, right?

Student: Yes!

Dr. Khlood: Distribute some love. That’s it. Have a great day, you can go. I don’t have anything else to give. Please make sure you get the book as soon as you can. Watch the clips I’ve sent you and start to do some reading.

Student: Tomorrow?

Dr. Khlood: Do I have it tomorrow? Yes, if you did some search even on your phone and you saved it, like, you screenshot it, then you can use it. This will probably take you—I promise you, less than minutes. If you really focus you can do it in minutes. Do some research on one
of these points and pack the information within you. Because it will help you better. That’s it. Here we go.

Student: Can I research with my friend here?

Dr. Khlood: Absolutely, and we can do think, pair, and share. Thanks for you!

It appears from this extract that students were positioned in a friendly learning environment, and they were comfortable and engaged in negotiating their learning process. The students in Dr. Khlood’s class explained in their interview sessions that they were allowed to lead their own learning process as they perceived the learning environment as a supportive, creative, and positive learning setting. Students were also encouraged to use multiple ways to gather the required information to learn the content. Whenever a student asked, negotiated, or suggested, Dr. Khlood offered multiple active methods to build a classroom community that supported student learning development, knowledge, and agency.

4.4 Students’ Autonomous Learning Strategies for Vocabulary Development

The following section answers the research question, “What types of autonomous learning strategies do female university EFL students use to increase their level of English proficiency?” These strategies included using digital tools, using a notebook strategy, reading books, engaging in the university’s English conversation sessions, using translation techniques, and practicing in a real-life context.

4.4.1 Using Digital Tools

During an interview, Atheer explained that she utilized, “Movies, TV shows, YouTube and blogs, songs, shopping websites, iPhone games, PlayStation4” as tools to develop her English vocabulary knowledge. She stated, “I’m not a full autonomous learner. I still need to have more skills like learning by reading books. But instead of the book, I’m a TV-shows lover, so I think it is useful as much as reading.” Atheer also indicated that she attempted to improve her English language proficiency by exploring English learning apps, assessing her learning development, and learning from internet resources.

As indicated in an interview session, Fatima positioned herself as a self-directed learner when she related how she cooks while reading from recipes online or listening to chefs on YouTube, reads English bloggers, or watches and listens to makeup tutorials. She also stated, “Some time I wrote it on my little board or sticky note, then put it on my disk.” She confirmed that her learning was combined with fun, as she mostly learned from signs, advertisements, social media networks, and other useful apps, such as TED.

Fatima named her written essay, Struggle to Passion, within which she indicated that she still has issues with English grammar and vocabulary; nevertheless, she remained an active participant in the learning process and took initiative in overcoming her struggles in English. For example, she used street signs, television commercials, and social media networks to develop her English vocabulary knowledge.
Maha also conveyed, during one of her interviews, that the secret behind her advanced level of English was “Seeing movies to learn the language and the culture of the world at the same time.”

4.4.2 Using a Notebook Strategy

Azzah stated in her interview session that her English investment was mainly focused on writing notebooks that she made especially for building up her own vocabulary lists. During an interview session, Azzah said, “I have them on my desk. When I read a book, I keep one close, so I can write down any new word I come across and then later I look up the words.” She further explained that she reread the written words the following day and she kept going back to the previous ones until she had made sure they were stuck in her mind.

4.4.3 Reading Books

Azzah reflected on her English vocabulary learning process by saying, “I need to work on my reading books part. I have a love-hate relationship with books.” She explained that she needed to enhance her English reading skills, believing that reading more textbooks is valuable for English language development. Sara indicated, in her learning autobiography, that she liked to read the news in English every day and that she spent time sorting through written narratives and reading multiple genres to benefit her English vocabulary knowledge.

4.4.4 Engaging in the University’s English Conversation Sessions

Atheer stressed that teachers and classmates’ English conversation sessions were another factor in her vocabulary development. Azzah also appreciated the student-centered approach to increasing students’ classroom talk and discussion. Azzah further emphasized that the change of routine practices that she experienced in her English learning was driven by former teachers who used active teaching methods and who encouraged and motivated her to learn. She stated that her previous teachers “defined” her future by helping her to formulate academic plans and by teaching her how to be actively involved in the learning process.

4.4.5 Using Translation Techniques

Dema conveyed what she believed made her an autonomous learner by saying, “Thinking in different ways than your mother tongue language and seeing movies or TV show without looking to the translation subtitle.” She mentioned that translating each new word helped in scaffolding from Arabic to English. Dema indicated that she used English-Arabic translation to aid her in exploring the meaning of one word in different contexts and in applying it in real-life settings. She stressed that thinking and talking in English is a better way to develop her English vocabulary knowledge.

Maha also claimed that using Arabic benefitted her linguistic development in English. She mentioned, in her learning autobiography, that English learning necessitates a self-exploration and investigation to understanding the knowledge gap in Arabic and English.
4.4.6 Practicing in a Real-Life Context

Sara stressed that she practiced learning new English words in context, linking them to her personal experiences in order to recall them later. She mentioned that learning the pronunciation and spelling of English words was a core goal of her English learning, as she aimed to develop her lexical knowledge. To access the correct pronunciation and spelling of words, she usually used iPhone apps to help with translation, pronunciation, and placing words in context. In her learning autobiography, she wrote:

“The biggest challenge was communicating with my British teachers who could speak no word in Arabic. I was disappointed since I was embarrassed of making some mistakes. I decided to challenge myself and start my own learning. I used to spend five hours a day after school to learn English. I used so many books, websites, and application to improve my knowledge and whenever I had a question I would go to my British teachers and ask them and they were always willing to answer.”

In one of her interview sessions, Lena explained that she started learning English when her father began teaching her English rules and structures. While she described her language learning as a challenging experience, she continued her efforts by attending a formal institution where she discovered her weaknesses and strengths. She also utilized an autonomous learning approach to enhance her motivation and language awareness, which involved English vocabulary knowledge. She clarified her learning method by saying, “[I am] studying new vocabularies, knowing how to write and pronounce them also using them in different style of sentences.” Lena noted that she engaged native English speakers in conversation and used these occasions to identify underdeveloped areas of her language proficiency. As such, she believed that she had achieved most of her learning goals and she was content with her English learning results.

Finally, Ragad explained that she used English occasionally outside the classroom in cafes and restaurants, with her housemaid (who only spoke in English), and when she was traveling. She also said during her interview session that she put much time and effort into learning English outside the classrooms. She mentioned that she spent half an hour daily studying the English language, which represented a decision to monitor her own English knowledge growth.

5. Discussion

5.1 Students’ Perceptions and Learning Practices

The findings from all 8 EFL students’ interviews and learning autobiographies showed that the students believed that promoting learner autonomy could productively increase their vocabulary learning development and language learning. The results also showed that EFL learners are willing and capable of taking responsibility for their learning, but they are not necessarily encouraged by the teachers to do so. In addition, the autobiographies confirmed the students’ appreciation towards the English language, their various attempts at using autonomous learning methods, which developed their personal autonomy, and that
self-exploring, comparing, and contrasting using their native language assisted their vocabulary development.

The findings from students’ reflective statements suggested that students who were enrolled in the student-centered approach gave positive feedback regarding the teacher’s style of teaching and their English learning development. On the contrary, students who were enrolled in the teacher-centered approach gave negative feedback regarding the teacher’s style and pedagogical methods. In the student-centered classroom, where students are posing the questions, answering them, taking notes, and working individually and in groups, there exists a higher level of interaction. In contrast, in the teacher-centered classroom, where students are merely listening and taking notes, there is a lower level of engagement. The findings from classroom observations also revealed that students’ prior knowledge and real-life experiences in language learning had a significant impact on language development. Lastly, the findings of students’ interview sessions, reflective statements, and learning autobiographies show that student preparedness for English learning was lacking in their school.

5.2 The Current Context of Learner Autonomy in the EFL Classroom

Observations during classroom lectures revealed that autonomous learning is an effective remedy for many concerns happening in traditional teaching, because it increases engagement and stimulates constructive learning outcomes. Based on classroom observation data, in the autonomous learning classroom, students appeared to achieve a high level of engagement inside the classroom. The instructor gave her students ownership over their learning, assisted them in making decisions, and valued their opinions on the relevance of the content. The findings from Dr. Khlood’s autonomous learning classroom indicate that learner autonomy opens up great opportunities for students’ engagement in learning, because it is a developmental process that requires the effort of both the students and the teacher. It also appears that Dr. Khlood created a student-centered atmosphere, where she encouraged students’ inventiveness, contributions, and self-evaluation, which increases student engagement in learning. This finding aligns with various approaches shown to be most effective in language development. Researchers (e.g., Hargreaves, 2014; Kristmanson, Lafargue, & Culligan, 2013; Li, 2015; Yeung, 2016) claimed that student autonomy in learning shows a positive result on students’ learning engagement. Findings from these studies also suggested that when teachers allow student self-assessment, students’ learning outcomes improve. Dr. Khlood more closely aligned herself with some of the tenets of constructivism theory by using feedback strategies that seemed to be useful in encouraging independent and self-constructive learners. Although the data of classroom observation showed Dr. Khlood’s encouragement of autonomous learning strategies, her support to foster learner autonomy step-by-step using various strategies and resources were needed. Dr. Khlood fostered autonomy approaches that prepared her students to do a critical reflection of given texts and independent learning choices, which assisted them in “transferring what they have learned to other contexts of learning” (Pichugova et al., 2016, p. 2). These active practices concur with transformative learning theory’s tenets in which learners are challenged to monitor their language learning, reflect on their own intellectual process, elaborate on
meaning structures, modify personal understanding, transform knowledge, assess their performance, and make significant choices regarding their English learning development. The findings from this study also showed that by allowing the students to build on their own educational and social goals with respect to vocabulary improvement, they will not only be engaged in a learning process but will also be involved in a meaningful mission as it relates to their real-life events.

On the other hand, in the teacher-centered classroom, classroom interactions were driven by the teacher rather than developed by the students. The primary focus of the classroom was knowledge transmission in which students passively received information. As a result, students scored low on engagement levels as they had limited allowance for interactions and involvement in the learning process. These findings are consistent with Al-Seghayer’s (2014) argument that if most EFL teachers play the role of knowledge givers, they lessen students’ enthusiasm and motivation in their English learning. These inactive practices conflict with the transformative learning theory’s tenets in which learners are encouraged to be actively involved in their language learning, to reflect, and to make changes that nurture their own intellectual process. As a result, Dr. Faten needed to be more interactive, creative, and reflective in her planning and teaching, which includes the implementation of new teaching strategies that advocate for self-learning and exploratory methods. As an emic observer, the researcher believed that the primary factor behind the absence of a high engagement level was related to the teacher’s method of instruction. Not only was it primarily based on lecturing, but it was also far from authentic and experiential. Benson (2007) claimed that teachers should guide students into various practical methods for learning vocabulary and ask them to self-govern their vocabulary development by selecting their appropriate method for learning and practicing in authentic situations. In this current research, it was observed that the classroom that catered to students’ interests led to better comprehension in their classroom interactions and a higher level of engagement while learning the new language. In contrast, in the traditional classroom, it was noticed that where there were limited student-teacher conversations, the level of engagement among students was considered low.

Al-Seghayer (2011) argued that Saudi EFL teachers should use their given autonomy to modify textbooks to meet students’ culture and needs. In this study, it is also worth mentioning that teachers who are not familiar with the local context, create a challenge for learning. In both observed novel classrooms, the instructors discussed Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Dr. Khlood connected some aspects and events in the novel with the students’ real-life examples. Dr. Khlood allowed the use of the students’ first language for second language linguistic support to encourage them to be self-reflective and comparative while they learned about a different era and culture. The use of these teaching practices is consistent with the beliefs of Dirks (1998), who described transformative learning theory as “consciousness raising,” (p. 3) which refers to “a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives” (p. 3). Dr. Khlood demonstrated her ability to facilitate the transformation of one culture and language to another by allowing students’ self-reflection and open dialogue. However, in Dr. Faten’s teacher-centered class,
there was limited involvement of students’ interactions in the classroom, which hindered their linguistic, social, cultural, and cognitive development. Therefore, investigating the impact of the transition from Saudi culture and language to the Western one has the potential to ease the EFL learning process.

5.3 Students’ Perceptions and Applications of Autonomous Learning

From students’ perception and application of autonomous learning strategies in vocabulary development, the data from student interviews and learning autobiographies reveal that all participating 8 EFL students were highly positive about the effectiveness of such an approach. Although some students are naturally autonomous in their social life activity, the study shows that students’ autonomy in vocabulary learning can only be developed if the learner has extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to self-select, explore, translate, apply, and practice in authentic learning settings. This finding agrees with Sanacore (2008) who claimed that learners’ freedom of learning choice in the English language learning classroom develops intrinsic motivational factors that aid in vocabulary knowledge and communication skills. Therefore, in this study, it can be argued that autonomous learning leads to higher motivation to learn the English language.

This study reveals autonomous learning attempts from EFL learners, which are evidence of their readiness to be fully autonomous in their learning. This finding contradicts Al-Seghayer’s (2014) claim that EFL students “perceive English as a dry and boring subject learned for instrumental purposes, chiefly to pass an examination” (p. 19), but confirms his findings that students in knowledge-giver situations “passively assimilate the teachers’ explanations, work through the textbook, and read the text verbatim” (p. 19). As such, this kind of learning environment limits students from being engaged in their own English learning. However, the students in this study were or would most likely have been willing and active participants if they were or had been given the opportunity to be active. They shared in their learning autobiographies and their interview sessions that different autonomous approaches helped them improve their English vocabulary knowledge. These approaches included utilizing English movies, TV shows, YouTube channels, blogs, songs, shopping websites, games, reading books, exploring learning apps, assessing learning development, and learning about other internet resources. Student participants also recommended writing notebooks for building up their own vocabulary, reading the news online every day, writing narratives, translating important new words to scaffold their understanding from one language to another, sharing content through social networks, and applying the English language in real-life situations. The significance of these active practices accords with Little’s (2007) views of constructivism in language learning. As he stated: “Each of us constructs his or her own knowledge through the (unconscious, implicit) interaction between what we already know and the new ideas, information and experiences we encounter” (p. 20). The data collected from interview sessions and learning autobiographies confirm that students follow the underpinnings of Constructivist learning theory by demonstrating their commitment to their own language development.
Furthermore, the study’s findings from students’ learning autobiographies reveal that the participants appreciated English because it allowed them to accelerate opportunities for their learning development. These students showed a clear investment in the English language because they perceived it as a necessary language to communicate with other parts of the world. They placed the English language in an international context as a key to understanding Western cultures, socializing with English speakers, and planning for better career options. As such, the students’ valuation of the English language was linked to their future employment, social opportunities, and cultural events. Benson (2011) claimed that the development of students’ autonomy is a necessity for the kind of involvement in society, in which the learner is respected and self-determined. In other words, learner autonomy is the foundation of basic human rights. Also, the participants’ perception of the global spread of English led them to understand its significance in the development of English language teaching as a professional future path in management, education, and communication. Because these students had a global perspective that English would allow them to accomplish their goals, they tended to have a higher proficiency through continued practice. This conversational belief in the global power of English is an indicator of the learners’ agency to learn English for their own benefit (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). Such learners are cognizant of English needs worldwide as they are users and agents in its spread. Also, students who have the opportunity to study abroad have the advantage of not only developing their English language but also understanding other cultures and norms. The clear evidence of these participants’ appreciation and investment in English learning corroborates the tenets of transformative learning theory. Mezirow (1991) described how learners improve and employ critical self-reflection to change or confirm their perceptions and knowledge. The students who participated in the study showed their development and change in opinion of English as a foreign language from a difficult language to learn to an interesting and mandatory language. They associated English with understanding other people in social media, securing a future job, and communicating with the English-speaking community.

From such behaviors and perspectives, the findings of the study confirm Alrashidi and Phan’s (2015) claim that technology allows EFL Saudi learners to interconnect with individuals across geographical borders using various types of social media contents for the purpose of learning English. For example, the participants showed their commitment to using technology to enhance their English lexical development and socialize with English-speaking people around the world. These indicators of autonomous learning approaches are consistent with the constructivist approaches that support self-directed learning as an essential condition for language development. Duffy and Jonassen (1992) stressed that the individual contribution in learning plays a vital role in developing essential skills of learner autonomy. They further explained some characteristics of the autonomous learner, which include learners’ construction of knowledge and application of learning in real-life situations as a format for questioning, analyzing, exploring, and examining their own learning development.

The data from the two EFL classroom observations, students’ interviews, and their learning autobiographies confirm the significance of the existence or absence of Dickinson’s (1993) five autonomous learner characteristics of learner autonomy. Firstly, the participants
understood the purpose of educational choices because they had an adequate understanding of language learning. However, only some of them, the four who were enrolled in Dr. Khlood’s classroom, were given chances to contribute to classroom decisions, such as modifications in the syllabus. Secondly, in this study, only four students who were enrolled in the autonomous learning classroom were allowed to plan their own learning development using time management techniques and learning tools for current learning aims and future ones. Thirdly, markers of learner autonomy can be seen in all student participants. Oxford (1990) described using learning strategies, such as metacognitive, social, and affective strategies, to stimulate the learning environment. In the autonomous learning classroom, learners are given the opportunity to use metacognitive strategies, such as previewing the task, evaluating, confirming, and self-assessing their own learning process. With respect to social strategies, learners were encouraged to ask questions for explanation or evaluation and communicate with the other students and the instructor for self-reflection. With respect to the effective strategies, instructors should pay attention to the learners’ emotional state. For example, they should use tools to help lower the learners’ levels of anxiety and to encourage them to self-assess to promote self-confidence. Fourthly, the participants who were enrolled in Dr. Khlood’s classroom were given the time to try learning strategies to help them become more independent and take more control over their learning status. Lastly, some EFL learners were encouraged to reflect on their own learning progress and teaching methods, because they were given opportunities to self-direct their learning goals.

The findings from this study indicate that learner autonomy develops personal autonomy in various ways. The narratives from EFL learners are consistent with the Constructivist learning tenets in which students are equipped to be fully autonomous and take agency over their own learning. Benson and Voller (1997) argued that when learners are given the opportunities to explore their own learning and monitor their learning development, they raise their sense of responsibility and accountability over their own learning. For example, the participants in this study were seeking materials for themselves and creating a curriculum for vocabulary development. There are also examples, within this study, that show when the participants chose their own method of English vocabulary learning, such as using internet resources or other sources. In these cases, they were developing not only academic language skills but also social and personal skills (e.g., engaging in social media), which could prepare them for life’s obligations.

It is also worth mentioning that the majority of the participants admitted that school played a relatively limited role in providing strong support for second language acquisition and autonomous learning. As such, the learning environment should be designed to challenge EFL learners and enhance their agency to be actively involved in the learning process. The novel studies class, in this case, should have included active learning strategies, because, as Pichugova et al. (2016) claimed, raising students’ cognitive abilities can transfer to what they have learned to broader contexts. Norton (2010) addressed the difficulties of English literature classes as follows:

“The challenge for literacy educators is to reconceptualize classrooms as semiotic spaces where children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal
texts, including visual, written, spoken, auditory, and performative texts. Scaffolding such a curriculum is a theory of meaning-making in which children are not only the users, but also the makers of systems of communication.” (p. 5)

While teachers play a crucial role in educating students regardless of their age, the notion that teachers know everything makes students somewhat reluctant to do their own research and studies. Furthermore, students may rely solely on the knowledge passed down by their teachers and disregard the thought that their teachers may also be wrong or provide false information. Norton’s (2010) suggested a vital need to encourage teachers to foster autonomy in literacy classes to enable students to have a better understanding of English concepts and knowledge in the learning environment. Benson (2001) also affirmed that students usually feel confident and productive if they are asked, individually and collectively, to explore and negotiate their learning processes. Thus, this study stresses the significance of fostering autonomous learning to explore different methods that can aid teachers in enhancing student autonomy in vocabulary development for university-level English language learners.

The findings also illuminate the areas that can be used to develop new teaching methodologies that cater specifically to student needs. Within this study, the use of the students’ native language in the traditional classroom was neither encouraged nor allowed. Consequently, instructional knowledge transformation was ineffective due to the lack of understanding of the students’ requirements; the teacher also failed to help them develop an interest in learning English. The use of the native language, Arabic, and the encouragement from the instructor to use the native language, plays a vital role in establishing significant links with the structure and parts of speech of the two languages, which helps the student to construct and develop a mind map of the English language (Pichugova et al., 2016). Students can then use permutations of the grammar and the vocabulary base formulated through class learning to create their own literary work. The composition can be further enhanced with the help of a teacher, thereby raising the level of language learning and ensuring that the transfer of instructions takes place when the mind of the student is open for learning. Alrashidi and Phan (2015) emphasized the importance of using the mother language, Arabic, to assist the understanding of the foreign language, English, and help students discover the best way of learning English vocabulary. In this study, the findings reveal that the participants used Arabic as a useful tool in their EFL classrooms to bridge the differences between the languages. They used Arabic to translate new words, to describe thoughts, to clarify meanings, and to help each other in their groups. Consequently, it is recommended that the teacher encourage the use of the native language in the classroom and create lingual comparisons between the native language and the foreign language to enhance the learning outcomes in all the interactions. In the study, Dr. Khlood promoted the use of Arabic for support in understanding the wider context for specific literary works. Ryan (1991) argued that one of the characteristics of autonomous learning is that the learner is given the opportunity to make decisions in the learning process. Within the current study, data from learners’ interview responses and from their learning autobiographies align with the tenets of constructivist learning theory, in that they questioned, analyzed, explored, translated, and played a central role in facilitating and controlling their own learning. More specifically, they
frequently mentioned using Arabic as a scaffold for learning English terms in a self-direction fashion.

In general, this study revealed that there are certain aspects of teaching and learning that are particularly effective for EFL student learning development. The student-centered approach is valuable in increasing students’ interest in language development. More importantly, the findings reveal the main factor that plays a role in the learners’ English language development—their previous English learning experience. Public, as opposed to private education, is a cause for the various English levels among these undergraduate students. In the context of this study, students who were enrolled in private schools were more advanced than learners who studied in public classrooms. Public schools in Saudi Arabia are not as sufficiently equipped for English language learning as are private schools, where English is a core subject (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Previous studies (e.g., Abadi & Baradaran, 2013; Agustin-Llach & Alonso, 2017; Du, 2013; Haddad, 2016) have shown that considering students’ prior knowledge and real-life experiences in language learning has a significant impact on language development. The findings from the current study parallel those of previous studies, which showed positive experiences in language learning when EFL learners’ prior knowledge and experience are accessed and activated. When students are given choice and independence in real-life settings and allowed to ask questions and negotiate their learning development, they formalize in their minds their own unique style of learning, which enables them to cross existing boundaries of knowledge that they possess.

Learner autonomy and vocabulary development are inextricably connected, as is evident in the rise of students’ engagement in learning when they are given the opportunity to use English vocabulary inside and outside the classroom for the purposes of everyday activities (Scott-Monkhouse, 2012; Vela & Rushidi, 2016; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009). The current study confirms the idea that the instructor’s practices and behavior significantly influence the classroom’s learning environment. As such, teachers should continuously support student-initiated knowledge to nurture the dynamic nature of active and lifelong learning. Finally, this study argues that there are two significant pillars to EFL English development: a natural learning setting that supports student autonomy and a learner’s motivation and willingness to take charge of his/her learning development.

6. Conclusion

All 8 participating EFL learners believed that promoting learner autonomy could productively increase their vocabulary learning development and language learning. This research also found all of the participants were willing and capable of taking responsibility for their learning when encouraged by their teachers to do so. Not surprisingly, all of the participants evinced qualities of being bilingual. Not only did they show their appreciation of the English language, but also that the use of their native language, Arabic, in self-exploring, comparing, and contrasting, assisted in their vocabulary development. The participants’ attempts at autonomous learning approaches led to their sense of personal autonomy and the student-centered classroom resulted in a higher level of engagement than the teacher-centered classroom. This last finding about the students pointed to their prior knowledge and to the
fact that their real-life experiences in language learning had a remarkable influence on their language development.

This study brings to light the necessity for further review of the role of EFL learners in developing the required skills for the English language. Because this study primarily explored the participants’ insights into autonomous learning strategies in vocabulary development, future studies are recommended to examine how to adapt and implement autonomous learning strategies inside EFL classrooms. Further emphasis should also be placed on studies that offer specific guidance and learning strategies on learner autonomy in English education in the KSA classroom and outside of where language learning takes place. Teachers can support students’ learning needs to appropriately promote the students’ decision making in learning, and to guide them in developing learner autonomy regardless of their English proficiency levels.

References


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