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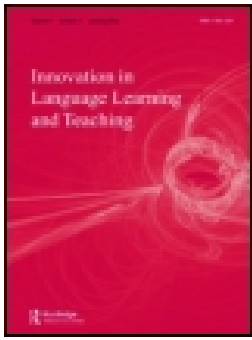
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Revisiting Saudi EFL learners' autonomy: a quantitative study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs, the relation between their autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices, and the major obstacles against their autonomy.

Design/methodology/approach: In this quantitative study, a survey questionnaire was administered to 350 (N=350) students in the English Language Center of a public university in Saudi Arabia. The SPSS version 26 was used to conduct the statistical analysis of the data. Pearson's correlation analysis and the Paired t-test were used after the normality test of the studied data, and the percentage analysis was used to gauge the major obstacles for Saudi EFL learners' autonomy.In this quantitative study, a survey questionnaire was administered to 350 (N=350) students in the English Language Center of a public university in Saudi Arabia. The SPSS version 26 was used to conduct the statistical analysis of the data. Pearson's correlation analysis and the Paired t-test were used after the normality test of the studied data, and the percentage analysis was used to gauge the major obstacles for Saudi EFL learners' autonomy.

Findings: The findings revealed that Saudi EFL learners are autonomous. A paired t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices among the participants. In addition, Pearson's correlation test detected a statistically significant positive relationship between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. The study also identifies the following major obstacles against Saudi EFL learners' autonomy: over reliance on their teachers and on their test results, lack of opportunity to express their opinions about learning and not discussing how they work out their learning tasks.

Originality/value: Autonomy studies conducted in the Saudi EFL contexts have adopted only the dichotomous view of learner autonomy in which learners are categorized either autonomous or non-autonomous. No reported studies seem to explore the 'Alternative view' (Little, 2011) of learner autonomy, which challenges this dichotomous view and looks beyond the categories of autonomous and non-autonomous language learners. Similarly, it also appears that examining the relation of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices has been overlooked. Therefore, the current study aims to present an in-depth understanding of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy with sound theoretical underpinning and methodological rigour. Adopting Little's (2011) alternative view of learner autonomy as its theoretical framework.

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The close connection between learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning is well established (e.g. Ablard and Lipschultz 1998; Corno and Mandinach 1983; Dafei 2007; Murray, Gao, and Lamb 2011; Palfreyman and Smith 2003). The concept of learner autonomy in language education was first reported by Henri Holec in his *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* published by the Council of Europe in 1979, and his definition of learner autonomy: 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec 1981, 3) is considered as the most frequently cited definition (Benson 2009; Little 2007).

Low English proficiency and achievement of Saudi EFL learners are constant concerns for language educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in the Saudi EFL context (Alrabai 2016). For instance, the average TOEFL test score in 2009 was 57 out of 120. This score was the lowest in the Middle East and the second lowest in the world (Alrabai 2016). This statistic clearly depicts the problematic EFL teaching and learning situations in Saudi Arabia. A variety of complex and multi-dimensional factors could be responsible for this situation. However, the fundamental problem behind these EFL learners' low English proficiency tends to lie in their failures 'to identify and achieve their learning goals' and their being 'dependent, reticent, and passive' (Alrabai 2016, 10). Precisely, this frustrating situation appears to expose the absence of EFL learners' autonomy in the Saudi educational context. However, Little (2011) argued that learners' lack of autonomy in their learning of an additional language should not be interpreted as their inherent inability of being autonomous as persons. Therefore, he postulated an alternative view of learner autonomy, claiming that language learners are autonomous by default because autonomy is 'part of everyone's lived experience' (188). But whether they behave autonomously or not may be conditioned by their classroom learning approach and environment. As a result, he argued that 'the crucial difference is not between non-autonomous and autonomous learners but between learners whose autonomy is focused on the business of language learning and learners whose autonomy is focused elsewhere' (189). While the recent upward trend of autonomy research (e.g. Asiri and Shukri 2020; Almusharraf 2020; Khalawi and Halabi 2020; Alhejaily 2020) is indicative of a growing awareness of learner autonomy in the Saudi EFL educational landscape, it is evident that the concept has not received as much attention as it deserves. Also, our review of the existing autonomy literature informs that there are some theoretical and methodological gaps to be addressed. For instance, autonomy studies conducted in the Saudi EFL contexts have adopted only the dichotomous view of learner autonomy in which learners are categorized either autonomous or non-autonomous. No reported studies seem to explore the 'Alternative view' (Little 2011) of learner autonomy, which challenges this dichotomous view and looks beyond the categories of autonomous and non-autonomous language learners. Similarly, it also appears that examining the relation of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices has been overlooked.

Therefore, the current study aims to present an in-depth understanding of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy with sound theoretical underpinning and methodological rigor. Adopting Little's (2011) alternative view of learner autonomy as its theoretical framework and employing a survey questionnaire, the study examines Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and the relation between their autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. It also identifies the major obstacles against their autonomy. The study concludes with pedagogical implications for fostering EFL learners' autonomy in the tertiary-level of the Saudi educational contexts.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

The current study has grounded its theoretical framework into Little's (2011) alternative view of learner autonomy and examined its claim through empirical data. Holec (1981) distinguished language learners as autonomous and non-autonomous, and the prime focus of this dichotomous

view is to support language learners' transition from dependency to autonomy by fostering their capacity for self-management (Little 2011). However, Little (2011) identified a fundamental gap in Holec's (1981) understanding of learner autonomy. He pointed out that Holec viewed language learning and the development of learner autonomy as two separate processes and thus differentiated between autonomous and non-autonomous learners. He also observed that most of the autonomy researchers took this dichotomous view for granted while researching autonomy in the second/foreign language learning. Alternatively, he theorized that 'learners of all ages have experience of what it is to be autonomous in their lives outside the educational establishment they are attending' (2) and proposed an alternative view of learner autonomy, which negates such division (i.e. dichotomous view of autonomy) and focuses on bringing language learners' autonomy engaged elsewhere to the process of language learning.

Little (2011) also argued that it would be missing the key point if a distinction is brought between autonomous and non-autonomous learners because by default every human being is autonomous. As such, it also implies that all language learners are inherently autonomous as well. However, it remains a legitimate question to ask if learners employ their autonomy in the business of learning a foreign language. As autonomy is considered a default language learners' attribute, a brief discussion on autonomous language learners' characteristics is placed in order.

Characteristics of autonomous learners

It is imperative to note that learners' autonomy positively impacts the growth of their language proficiency. Therefore, it is critical to identify autonomy characteristics of language learners so that they can be fostered in the process of language teaching and learning. The main characteristics of autonomous learners are their abilities to 'define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities' (Nunan 1995, 145), to be intrinsically motivated and aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Mynard and Sorflaten 2002), to generate and execute their choices (Littlewood 1996), and to be curious and responsible (Al-Saadi 2011). All in all, autonomous learners are efficient, self-reliant, responsible, and curious. It is not hard to see that they are the features successful language learners as well. However, it may not be guaranteed that autonomous language learners will always employ their autonomous characteristics in their efforts of language learning because beliefs may not be always transferred in actions.

Autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices

Studies on beliefs reveal a close interplay of beliefs and actions (Aragao 2011; Cotterall 1995; Kern 1995; Navarro and Thorton 2011; Riley 2009). As a dynamic and contextualized cognition, beliefs involve shaping understandings and influencing actions (Aragao 2011; Barcelos 2000), and their inseparability from identity, action, context, and social experiences cannot be denied (Kern 1995; Navarro and Thorton 2011). However, Cotterall (1995) warned that learners may acquire beliefs, 'that encourage dependence rather than independence' (200). Riley (2009) also expressed the same concern that while the positive relation between beliefs and practices could play a crucial role in enhancing learning efficacy, their disparity might negatively impact learning efficacy. Arguably, the existence of unsubstantiated beliefs may create language learning anxiety (Szocs 2017).

A number of studies have also reported that there is a strong connection between language learners' beliefs and their learning behaviors (Horwitz 1988; Kartchava and Ammar 2014; Navarro and Thorton 2011; Lai 2019) and that language learners' beliefs about autonomy significantly impact their autonomous behaviors (Cotterall 1995; Horwitz 1988; Rieger 2009). Importantly, when language learners are exposed to autonomy practices, their autonomy beliefs undergo refinement and reconstruction (Lai 2019). It is pertinent to note here that 'autonomous language learning behaviour may be supported by a particular set of beliefs' (Cotterall 1995, 196) and thus the actualization of autonomy depends on learners' autonomy beliefs (Navarro and Thorton 2011). Therefore,

the significance of foreign language learners' substantiated autonomy beliefs and their corresponding autonomy behaviors to foster the autonomous learning process is to be recognized.

In short, language learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices are interrelated, and it is possible that learners may acquire wrong beliefs about autonomy, which may negatively impact the development of autonomy.

Saudi culture, EFL and higher education systems

Despite the debate that as an educational concept based on the Western culture, learner autonomy may not be suitable for other cultures such as Saudi, it is reported that learner autonomy is integrated in the aims of the Saudi education system (Aljasir 2009; Althaqafi 2017). While Saudi is seen as a conservative society, the current 'shift in thinking within the Saudi community' along with 'an open, flexible and outgoing perspective' creates the congenial educational environment to foster learner autonomy (Althaqafi 2017, 43–44).

Going back to its early history, the use of EFL in Saudi Arabia is said to emerge when massive oil reserves were discovered in 1930, and Saudi Arabia became 'a key strategic interest to the West' (Al-Tamimi 2019, 69). Consequently, EFL in Saudi Arabia was a dire necessity to maintain communication with the increasing English-speaking expatriate community. As a matter of fact, EFL and the petroleum industry in Saudi Arabia are so connected that a new linguistic term, 'petro-linguistics' has emerged (Karmani 2005). Furthermore, the subsequent development of English as a foreign language here gave rise to its own version of the language, 'Saudi English' in which certain rule-governed variations are found to feature (Mahboob and Elyas 2014). Being first introduced as a subject at all government schools as early as in 1959 (Al-Ghamdi and Al-Saddat 2002), EFL was made compulsory for all schools students of Grade 5 and Grade 4 in 2003 and 2012 respectively (Elyas and Picard 2010). However, the first English department is reported to be established at King Saud University in 1957 (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996). Currently, many departments such as engineering, medical, science, and technical use English as the medium of instructions (Al-Tamimi 2019).

Students here enter universities after passing their twelfth grade. While the country has 26 registered public universities and 38 licensed private universities and colleges (MOE 2022), students are also funded with various government scholarships to study abroad for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies. Notably, following the requirements of 'Shariah' (Islamic Holy Laws), university education of Saudi Arabia is segregated by gender, but it tends not to affect the education quality as it is under the same curricula and examination systems (Halabi 2018). More importantly, the importance of knowledge and enlightenment is much emphasized in the Islamic Religion (Althaqafi 2017).

Autonomy studies in Saudi Arabia

A number of studies have been conducted on learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia: the relationship between EFL teachers' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices (Albedaiwi 2011), teachers' perspectives on university EFL learners' autonomy (Al-Asmari 2013), the readiness of EFL learners' autonomy (Tamer 2013), EFL teachers' opinions about learner autonomy (Alhaysony 2016), the incorporation of learner autonomy in Saudi educational landscape and culture (Althaqafi 2017), undergraduates' current practices of autonomy (Alzubi, Pandian, and Sing 2017), the relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and their EFL achievement (Alrabai 2017), the roles of the teachers in promoting learner autonomy in secondary school (Alonazi 2017), the meanings and practices of learner autonomy in the EFL context (Halabi 2018), female EFL learners' perception of learner autonomy and its preventing factors (Asiri and Shukri 2020), female teachers' autonomy teaching practices in connection with vocabulary learning (Almusharraf 2020), teachers' and learners' perception of virtual teaching and learning in connection with learner autonomy (Khalawi and Halabi 2020), female teachers' and learners' autonomy beliefs and the difference between their sets of beliefs (Alhejaily 2020).

The review of Saudi autonomy studies shows an increasing shift towards learner centeredness from the traditional teacher dominant approach in the Saudi educational landscape. Also, the autonomy research is getting currency although most of them appear to focus on teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy. However, it is evident that learner autonomy has not received its due attention in the Saudi EFL contexts.

Obstacles against Saudi EFL learner autonomy

Autonomy studies in Saudi Arabia reveals multifarious challenges in fostering EFL learners' autonomy. They vary widely and include aspects such as: autonomy awareness, uncertainty and ambiguity about learner autonomy, teaching and learning environment, curriculum and teaching methodologies, teachers' role, teaching materials, teacher inputs into teaching materials, teacher training, teachers' fear of losing control, teachers' limited expectations from students, teacher-student relations, classroom activities, language needs, foreign language learning experiences, learning habits, learning confidence and motivation, class time, rote learning, learning styles and strategies, English proficiency, English exposure, institutional barriers, schooling system, and culture and tradition (Albedaiwi 2011; Alhaysony 2016; Alrabai 2017; Asiri and Shukri 2020; Halabi 2018; Tamer 2013).

In summary, since learner autonomy seems to be a relatively new teaching and learning approach in the Saudi EFL educational landscape, it is not surprising to notice all the above-mentioned challenges. However, to establish learner autonomy for Saudi EFL learners, the gradual removal of these constraints cannot be stressed more.

Method

The study attempts to respond to the following questions:

1. What autonomy beliefs do Saudi EFL learners hold?
2. What is the relation between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices?
3. What are the major obstacles against Saudi university EFL learners' autonomy?

Participants

The study was conducted at the English Language Center (ELC) under the Faculty of Languages and Translation of a public university in Saudi Arabia. A total number of 350 male students who were studying English language as university requirement courses participated in this study. The participants were the freshman undergraduate students who were completing the university required foundation courses for two semesters before starting their majors. These courses help students develop everyday English communication skills through four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The course objectives require students to be able to learn and search information by themselves outside the class. For this reason, the courses aim to make students responsible for their own learning and encourage them to use all resources available to develop their English skills.

Instrument

The study employed the quantitative method. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The items of the questionnaire were designed based on the research questions and relevant literature reviews (e.g. Alrabai 2017; Dafei 2007). First, a pool of questions was developed and sent to three experts: one professor and two associate professors of Applied Linguistics for a review. After that, the piloting versions of the questionnaires were developed incorporating

suggestions and recommendations received from these experts. Next, the questionnaire items were piloted with students (*n* = 30), who were not included in the main study. The questionnaire had three sections: Section A about autonomy beliefs, Section B about autonomy practices, and Section C about autonomy obstacles. The final version of the questionnaire was developed after the reliability and internal consistency had been confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha (Section A: Cronbach's *α* = 0.85, Section B: Cronbach's *α* = 0.81, and Section C: Cronbach's *α* = 0.84). In order to facilitate participants' better understanding of the questionnaire items, a verified Arabic translation of the questionnaire was also included in the English version. With the consent of the class teachers, the questionnaires were administered during the class hours.

Procedures

A formal written approval from the dean of the Faculty of Languages and Translation was obtained to conduct the study in the English Language Center (ELC). However, since no demographic information of the studied participants was required and no minority group was involved, the researchers did not seek any approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university. Before administering the survey questionnaire to the participants, their verbal consent was obtained, and they were duly informed of their voluntary participation. The participants were also informed of their right to leave from responding to the questionnaire any time during filling out the questionnaire forms. Two of the researchers being present at the research location conducted the administration of the survey to the participants. When the questionnaire was administered to the participants in their classrooms, comprehensive information about the study and detailed instructions for completing the questionnaire were presented to the participants by the two researchers. They also remained available to answer any of the participants' questions during the 15–20 minutes' time to complete the questionnaire. The participants were also ensured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

Data analysis procedure

As indicated in the earlier section that no demographic information was collected from the participants, the data were analyzed anonymously. The SPSS version 26 was used to conduct the statistical analysis of the data. In this study, Pearson's *correlation analysis* and the *Paired t-test* were used after the normality test of the studied data. As per the statistical rules, the parametric test (i.e. Pearson's *correlation analysis* and *Paired t-test*) may be conducted if the data distribution is normal (Spatz 2011). Therefore, the *Normality test* (i.e. Normal Q-Q plot) was run to check if the data were normally distributed. The result of the *Normality test* suggested that the studied data were normally distributed, and thus the decision of employing the parametric test was justified. The *Paired t-test* was employed because the autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices data came from the same samples. The following hypothesis was tested under this *Paired t-test*:

> There is no significant difference between the items of autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices of the participants.

As there was no significant difference between autonomy belief and autonomy practices in the *Paired t-test* result (see Table 2 in the Result analysis section), the *Correlation analysis* was employed to investigate if there was any significant correlation between autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices data.

Result analysis

The learner autonomy scales of Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh (2017) are used as the benchmarks for this study. Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh (2017) categorized learners' autonomy based on the following
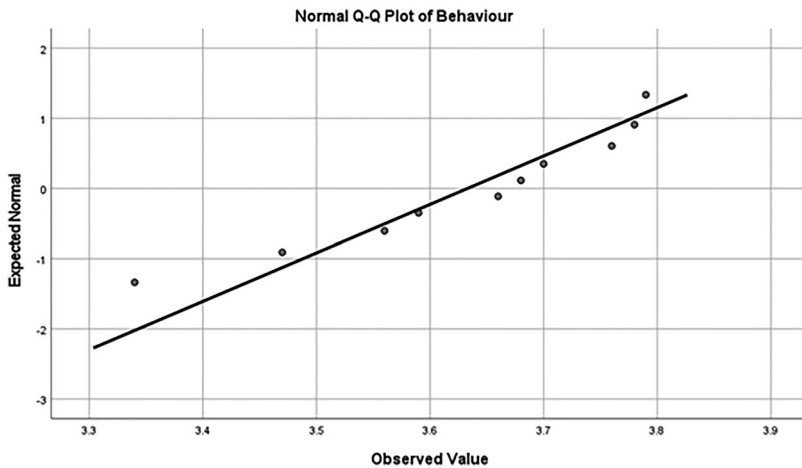
Table 1. Saudi EFL learners' autonomy.

No	Items	Mean	SD	Degree of LA based on Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh's (2017) study
1	It is my job to correct my mistakes myself	3.78	1.231	High
2	I should build clear vision of my learning	3.75	1.268	High
3	I should be able to choose the methods/strategies of learning that suits me best	3.74	1.241	High
4	I should evaluate myself to learn better	3.73	1.252	High
5	I should be good at making choices	3.69	1.283	High
6	It is my job to check my mistakes myself	3.69	1.278	High
7	I should be able to use self-study materials to learn English	3.64	1.263	High
8	I should study independently	3.63	1.275	High
9	I should change the way I learn after thinking about it	3.53	1.286	High
10	I should try to describe the learning strategies I use	3.51	1.300	High
	Overall	3.67	1.268	High
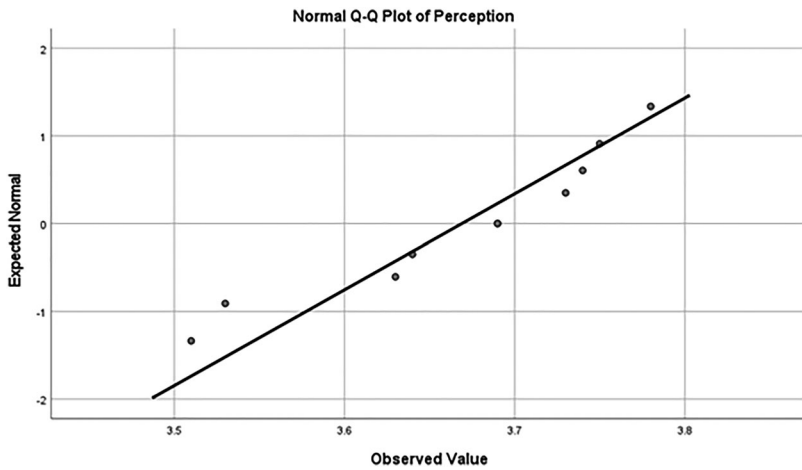
Figure 1. Normal Q-Q plot of autonomy beliefs.

Figure 2. Normal Q-Q plot of autonomy practices.
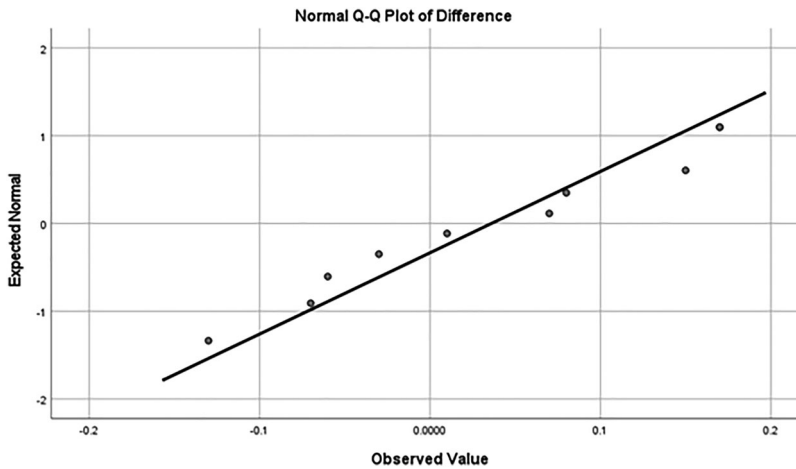
Figure 3. Normal Q-Q plot of difference = autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices.

Table 2. Paired *t*-test and correlation test of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices.

Variable	*t*	*p*-value	Correlation	*p*-value
Autonomy Beliefs – Autonomy Practices	1.054	0.319	0.668	0.035

scale of mean averages: 1–1.80 = very low; 1.81–2.60 = low; 2.61–3.40 = medium; 3.41–4.20 = high; 4.21–5 = very high.

The current study used 10 items questionnaire to estimate Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs. The descriptive analyses showed that the mean score of these items was 3.67, and the standard deviation (SD) 1.268. The findings with the *mean* autonomy beliefs score of 3.67 out of 5 revealed that Saudi EFL learners were 'high' based on Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh's (2017) study. Items 1 (*It is my job to correct my mistakes myself*) and 2 (*I should build clear vision of my learning*) received the highest scores of 3.78 and 3.75 respectively whereas items 9 (*I should change the way I learn after thinking about it*) and 10 (*I should try to describe the learning strategies I use*) were the lowest scores of 3.53 and 3.51 in turn. Table 1(organized according to the descending order of Mean scores) below shows Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs based on the scale of Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh (2017).

To run the parametric analysis, the *Normal Q-Q plot* was employed to find if the data were normally distributed. Figures 1–3 show that the data points on all the three '*Normal Q-Q Plots*' are clustered around the diagonal line. This suggests that the data (Autonomy Beliefs, Autonomy Practices, and Difference = Autonomy Beliefs – Autonomy Practices) follow approximately normal distribution.

Table 3. Major obstacles for Saudi EFL learner autonomy.

No	Items	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)
1	I depend on my teachers in regard to learning English	27.4	16.6	56
2	I only focus on test results	26.9	21.7	51.4
3	My teachers don't allow me to express my opinions on what I learn	27.4	22.3	50.3
4	I never discuss how I did an English learning task	24	26.6	49.4
5	I am unaware of self-reflection about my English learning	32.3	18.6	49.1
6	My teachers don't inform me of learning strategies	27.1	23.7	49.1
7	I think my weak proficiency in English demotivates me to learn English	29.4	23.1	47.4
8	My teachers don't encourage self-directed learning	26.6	26.0	47.4
9	My teachers don't explain the importance of strategy I use	28.6	24.6	46.9
10	I have limited exposure to English	29.5	24.9	45.8

Table 2 shows the result of the *Paired t-test* of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. Since the *p*-value (0.319) was greater than *α* = 0.05, it was concluded at 5% level of significance that there was no significant mean difference between the scores of autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. Here, based on the students' self-reporting, we tried to check whether there was any statistically significant difference in their autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices.

Since there was no significant mean difference between the scores of autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices, a *Correlation analysis* was conducted to examine the relation between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. As shown above (Table 2), there is a significant (*p-value = 0.035 < α = 0.05*) moderate positive relationship (*correlation coefficient, r = 0.668*) between autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices.

The percentage analysis was used to explore the major obstacles for Saudi EFL learners' autonomy. Table 3 displays what Saudi EFL learners considered their major obstacles against their autonomy. Saudi EFL learners perceived item 1 (*I depend on my teachers in regard to learning English*) as the greatest constraint (*56% agreed*) against their autonomy. Focusing only on the test result (item 2) was the second greatest challenge (*51.4% agreed*) for them. Items 3 *(My teachers don't allow me to express my opinions on what I learn)* and 4 (*I never discuss how I did an English learning task*) were next in order (*50.3% and 49.4% agreed* respectively).

Discussion

The current study aims to present an in-depth understanding of Saudi EFL learners' claimed autonomy beliefs, and this central aim functions as an underlying theme to establish a link among the research questions. In this pursuit, the study has examined if there is any positive link between their claimed autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. Also, it has highlighted the major challenges against fostering autonomy so that priorities can be given to eliminate these barriers. Therefore, the studied three research questions have provided a holistic support to gain the main research objective of the study.

The finding (learner autonomy mean score: 3.67 out of 5) reveals that Saudi EFL learners view themselves to be autonomous ('high' based on Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh's (2017) study). This finding aligns with the finding of Tamer's (2013) study, which revealed that Saudi university EFL learners were autonomous: 83% of the participants were shown to be adequately autonomous and with that of Halabi's (2018), which reported that Saudi EFL learners held very positive perceptions of autonomy. Notably, Halabi (2018) pointed out that Saudi EFL learners 'welcome the opportunity to become more involved in their own learning' (282) and challenged the perception that 'young Saudi students are not interested in becoming autonomous learners' (293). It is possible to deduct from this finding that Saudi EFL learners' positive attitudes about their own autonomy beliefs may correspond to their 'autonomy as a person' (Littlewood 1996, 431) and resonate with the claim of the alternative view of learner autonomy that autonomy is an inherent human feature (Little 2011). But the complete package of autonomy in the case of language learning also requires learners to be autonomous as a communicator and a learner, and thus the possibility of Saudi EFL learners as autonomous is likely to depend on whether these EFL learners would employ their autonomy to use 'the language creatively' and 'appropriate strategies for communicating meanings in specific situations' and to involve themselves in 'independent work' (Littlewood 1996, 431).

Contrarily, the study contradicts the findings of Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh (2017) and Alrabai (2017) in the sense that these studies showed tertiary-level Saudi EFL learners to be low autonomous and non-autonomous respectively. For instance, Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh's (2017) study reported the mean score: 2.49 out of 5, whereas Alrabai's (2017), the mean score: 2.35 out of 5. Notably, the study of Alzubi, Pandian, and Singh's (2017) reported 'medium' mean average for only two crucial dimensions of learner autonomy: metacognition and self-reliance (mean scores: 2.75 and 2.97 respectively) whereas Alrabai's (2017) study failed to fully recognize the concept of learner

autonomy (Halabi 2018). With that being said, it is noteworthy that there is no scope of being uncritical on Saudi EFL learners' self-reported autonomy belief statements as autonomy is 'a protean and elusive entity' (Lewis and Vialleton 2011, 206) and should never be considered 'a steady state' (Little 1991, 4). Consequently, it is not unlikely that a learner showing high autonomy in one language learning task may appear to be lacking it in another because autonomy as a permanent entity can never be guaranteed (Little 1991). Also, there is little room for generalizing the finding of Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs to other contexts because it cannot be assumed that 'beliefs identified in one group of learners are representative of the beliefs of learners of different languages, at different levels, or at different kinds of institutions' (Rifkin 2000, 407).

The second research question of the study has examined the relation between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices and found that there is a significant moderate positive correlation between their autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. Precisely, Saudi EFL learners have claimed that they follow autonomy practices according to their autonomy beliefs. The similar finding is reported in the study of Szocs (2017), which found moderately strong correlations between Hungarian language learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. Halabi (2018) also reported that Saudi EFL learners held positive beliefs about their autonomy and were 'much more positive towards autonomous practices' (282). She also noticed 'signs of autonomous practices in the English classrooms' (287). However, it contradicts the study of Tamer (2013), which found that there was a discrepancy between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. It is important to point out that there is a significant difference between the current study and the study of Tamer (2013) about collecting data of autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. In Tamer's (2013) study, the opinions of the EFL teachers were considered whereas the current study has relied on Saudi EFL learners' own statements about their autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. The researchers argue that students' opinions are as equally important as teachers in researching EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices.

Studies on language learners' beliefs (e.g. Aragao 2011; Cotterall 1995; Navarro and Thorton 2011) indicate that there is a significant impact of language learners' beliefs on their learning behaviors. According to Aragao (2011), beliefs 'tend to guide the ways in which humans move in the world' (302) and thus observing and researching learners' beliefs are important because beliefs influence 'students' action in class' (307). Therefore, the positive relation between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices might be interpreted as a positive indication for fostering their autonomy. However, it is not unlikely to find a disparity between what learners plan and what they actually do in the process of their learning. Tamer (2013) argued that the Saudi EFL learners had the 'willingness for autonomy' (73), but this willingness for autonomy did not reflect in their practices. It is also noteworthy that methodological factors may be attributed to the disparity in the findings of such studies. Arguably, a qualitative approach in investigating the relation between autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices of these same learners may yield different findings.

The final research question of the current study has tried to explore the major obstacles that Saudi EFL learners encounter, and out of 10 selected autonomy obstacles, they have identified teacher dependence, heavy reliance on test results, and lacking the opportunity to share their learning beliefs and to discuss learning strategies as their major obstacles against autonomy. These findings align with the studies of Albedaiwi (2011), Tamer (2013), Alhaysony (2016), Alrabai (2017), and Halabi (2018). As indicated in the literature review that the previous studies identified multiple challenges in fostering learner autonomy in the Saudi EFL contexts, and that these challenges vary widely, the current study has, however, narrowed down its focus to the obstacles related to learners, teachers, and learning environments as they are immediate and comparatively easier to take care of. Essentially, it goes against the tenet of learner autonomy if learners' perceived autonomy obstacles are not given the top priority when it is the learners whose autonomy we are dealing with. Any efforts to develop autonomy will be far from reality unless these obstacles are addressed and then eliminated from the Saudi EFL learning contexts. The EFL teachers can play pivotal roles in overcoming these autonomy challenges by making efforts to reduce learners'

dependence on teachers and to allow learners to share their learning beliefs. In the same vein, teachers' role is instrumental in shifting learners' focus on only test results to lifelong learning and facilitating the discussion on language learning strategies.

Therefore, the current study may potentially be a source of data for monitoring and facilitating learner autonomy in Saudi EFL educational contexts, especially when autonomy plays such an important role in language learning experience. Future studies may consider the possibility of employing alternative methodologies such as qualitative and mixed methods to assess Saudi EFL learners' proficiency in connection with autonomy and thus investigating the impacts of autonomy on learning outcomes in EFL. In this connection, the authors recommend that the use of an innovative methodology such as Q methodology may be considered for investigating the dynamics of a multidimensional, psychological, and subjective construct such as learner autonomy. To concur, Benson (2011) noted that research in the field of language learner autonomy would benefit more from adopting innovative methodological approaches. The Q methodology is said to be an effective research methodology that could systematically and thoroughly investigate subjectivity and communicability: it 'allows for the systematic investigation of subjectivity' (Cooker and Nix 2011, 25) and is 'a mathematical-statistical key to what everyone calls "mind"' (Stephenson 1993, 2).

Conclusions

The study focuses on Saudi tertiary EFL learners' autonomy beliefs, the relation between their autonomy beliefs and claimed autonomy practices, and the major obstacles against achieving autonomy. The statistical analyses reveal that Saudi EFL learners are autonomous and that there is a significant moderate positive correlation between what they believe and what they claim to practice about their autonomous learning. The study also identifies the following major obstacles against Saudi EFL learners' autonomy: over reliance on their teachers and on their test results, lack of opportunity to express their opinions about learning and not discussing how they work out their learning tasks.

The study has adopted Little's (2011) alternative view of learner autonomy as its theoretical framework, and its findings reflect the claim that learners are autonomous by default. Inevitably, there will always be a disparity between beliefs and practices, but it is critical to minimize the discrepancy between their autonomy beliefs and practices because such a mismatch may negatively impact the development of their autonomy. Similarly, what the learners consider the major obstacles against achieving their autonomy should be given the top priority, and the efforts of removing those obstacles should be reflected in policy making, curriculum development, and classroom teaching.

Due to a cultural reason, the physical access to the female students was not possible. Therefore, the study has examined the Saudi EFL male students' opinions only. Another limitation of this study is its reliance on the quantitative data alone. The future research may employ alternative methodologies such a qualitative or a mixed methods study with both female and male participants to examine the relation between Saudi EFL learners' autonomy beliefs and autonomy practices. It is also recommended that future research may explore the possibility of employing the Q methodology in researching learner autonomy as this methodology is said to capture subjectivity and communicability accurately and systematically.

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