



## THE IMPACT OF THE SHIFT TO ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EFL LEARNERS' AUTONOMY

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### **Abstract:**

Saudi EFL learners have been traditionally described as non-autonomous. During the coronavirus pandemic, Saudi universities shifted to online education. Scholars maintain that online education by its very nature enhances learner autonomy. The current study, that was conducted after students received three semesters of online education, aimed to explore the effect of the shift to online education on Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy. It also investigated gender differences in learner autonomy. Both quantitative data by means of a self-report questionnaire (N=306) and qualitative data by means of a semi-structured online interview (N=20) were collected and analyzed. Quantitative data revealed that Saudi college EFL learners are autonomous (with a total mean of 4.02 out of 5). This mean is much higher than the means obtained in studies conducted before the shift to online education. Females outperformed males in just one dimension of learner autonomy, autonomous learning enjoyment. No gender differences were found in the other dimensions of learner autonomy or total learner autonomy. Qualitative data analysis indicated that students attributed to online education improvement in five important aspects of their learner autonomy, namely, goal setting and organization of study time, the use of the Internet and social media as learning resources, the use of performance feedback, self-assessment and computer skills. An aspect that witnessed some improvement but still has room for much improvement is reflection on learning.

**Keywords:** the COVID-19 pandemic, online education, learner autonomy; gender differences, Saudi college EFL learners

### **1. Introduction**

There is an emphasis on learning at the expense of teaching in modern language education. Research findings have revealed that learner-centered classrooms lead to

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much better learning outcomes than teacher-centered classrooms. For this reason, learner autonomy (hereafter LA) has become both a means and a goal in educational systems all over the world (Nguyen, 2008; Winch, 2002). LA is even of greater significance for FL learners because they cannot attain high levels of success in language learning if they continue to be spoon-fed by teachers. The FL setting in Arab countries is input-poor because the FL is only learned and practiced in the classroom. In such settings, autonomous learning can be a determinant factor of successful language learning. However, research has reported low levels of LA among Arab learners of EFL in general and Saudi learners in particular (e.g., Alrabai, 2017; Tamer, 2013; Al-Saadi, 2011). Among the causes that researchers reported for low LA in the Saudi context are over-reliance on teachers and rote learning, which sustain throughout the educational stages (Tamer, 2013) and end with university learners *“who mostly bear the characteristics of dependent learners and who are typically accustomed to following rather than leading”* (Alrabai, 2017, p. 227). Teachers still assume the traditional role of lecturing and managing students' learning, and students still assume the role of rote learning what teachers deliver to them. Another noticeable cause is the under-utilization of the learning opportunities that recent technology offers. Throughout his teaching experience in the Saudi context that spanned for more than a decade, the author has noticed that online-based and technology-mediated resources have been under-utilized by both teachers and students. Teachers who have taken the initiative and sought to enhance their students' utilization of online and technology-mediated learning resources have reported low efficiency in the students' utilization of such resources. For instance, when asked to write a term paper or an essay, most students have the task performed by professionals or copy and paste without dealing with multiple resources effectively and critically.

Like other countries, Saudi Arabia shifted to online education (hereafter OE) during the coronavirus pandemic as a procedure for eliminating the spread of the virus. With this shift, Shaqra University used online platforms and replaced the traditional environment with virtual environment. Teachers and students received formal training on how to use platforms. Manuals and tutorials were also provided to teachers and students for the same purpose. Platforms were used for delivering instruction to students through virtual classrooms and for assessing them through built-in assessment systems. Furthermore, students could interact with teachers and colleagues about learning challenges, assignments, term papers and graduation projects. Teachers also used platforms to post additional web-based learning resources that students could access to get further knowledge, write term papers and do assignments. The assessment system in platforms provided students with immediate feedback about their performance once they submitted answers to quizzes or exams. In addition to the university's official platform, teachers and students used other online applications, e.g., Google Meet, Google Classroom, the Blackboard, Zoom and WhatsApp. OE environments by their very nature both require and promote LA (Furnborough, 2012; Murphy, 2011; Santos & Camara, 2010; Benson, 2001). Thus, the author of this study hypothesized that the OE experiment which spanned for three semesters at the time of doing this study has affected students'

autonomous learning. There are indicators of students' becoming more autonomous than they used to be before the OE experiment. This provided the impetus for conducting this study to empirically explore the impact of OE on Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy.

## 2. Statement of the problem

All studies investigating LA in the Saudi context before the shift to OE during the COVID-19 pandemic reported low levels of autonomy among university students. Research into OE and blended learning revealed that LA is enhanced by the very nature of OE. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the shift to OE might have had a positive effect on Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy. To the best of the author's knowledge, no other study has explored this topic in the Saudi context. Accordingly, this study was conducted to determine the impact of OE on Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy. Another goal was to determine gender differences in LA. More specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the level of Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy?
2. Are there gender differences in Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy?
3. What are the students' perceptions of the impact of OE on their autonomy?

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1 Definitions and views of learner autonomy

There is a universal agreement that the promotion of LA has become an incontrovertible goal of language education. A consensus also exists on the significance of LA for successful language learning, especially in FL settings where autonomous learning can compensate for the input-poor environment. However, there is no consensus on what LA is. This lack of a single theory of autonomy explains why there is no single agreed upon definition of LA and why LA is sometimes confused with other related constructs like self-regulated learning, self-instruction, independent learning, self-access learning, etc. Of course, all these terms intersect in many respects, but they are not the same. However, the elucidation of the clear-cuts among these similar but different constructs is beyond the scope of this paper. Several definitions have been given to LA beginning with Holec's "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Aspects of learning that learners need to assume responsibility for in order to be autonomous include "*determining the purpose, content, rhythm, and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes*" (Holec, 1981, p.3). Benson (2001, p. 47) offers a similar definition but replaces Holec's 'ability to take charge of' with 'capacity to take control of' on the ground that 'control' is more observable and procedural than 'take charge of'. Control, in Benson's view, covers learning management, cognitive processes and learning content. Another frequently cited definition of LA is the one given by Little that complements Holec's. Little (1991, p. 4) defines LA as "*a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action*". He adds that autonomy "*presupposes, but also entails, that the learner*

*will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts”.*

Different views of LA have been proposed, the most cited of which are Benson's and Littlewood's. According to Benson (1991, 1997), there are four dimensions or versions of autonomy: technical, psychological, political and sociocultural. Technical autonomy is concerned with cognitive, metacognitive and social skills that learners can employ to self-direct their learning. Psychological autonomy refers to affective variables such as motivation and attitude. Social interactions and cultural elements constitute sociocultural autonomy. Finally, political autonomy refers to individual and group freedom. Additionally, Benson (2001) maintains that autonomy entails that learners exercise control over learning management, cognitive processing and learning content. Control over learning management refers to one's ability to plan, organize, and evaluate learning. Control over cognitive processing means management of attention, reflection and metacognition. Finally, control over learning content refers to learners' decision making regarding learning material and tasks. Littlewood (1997: 81) has proposed a model of language learning autonomy comprising of three versions of autonomy that apply to different contexts. The first version is autonomy as a communicator that applies to the context of language acquisition. It refers to the learner's *“ability to operate independently with the language and use it to communicate personal meanings in real, unpredictable situations”*. The second version that applies to the context of classroom organization is autonomy as a learner, i.e., *“ability to take responsibility for their own learning and to apply active, personally relevant strategies”*. The last version is the autonomy that applies to a broader context. This is autonomy as a person which refers to *“greater generalized autonomy as individuals”*. Additionally, Littlewood (1996, p. 428) maintains that autonomy entails ability and willingness. Ability is made up of knowledge of choices presented to the learner and the skills of effecting the targeted choices. Willingness is made up of such affective variables as *“motivation and the confidence to take responsibility”* for decisions.

Though there is no single conception of LA, all definitions stress the fact that autonomous learners need to have a say in their learning. Thus, unlike the somehow controversial definition of LA, there seems to be a consensus on the attributes of autonomy. Little (1991, pp. 3-4) clarifies the notion of autonomy by mentioning what autonomy is not. He maintains that autonomy:

- is not exclusively a matter of how learning is organized.
- does not require the teacher to relinquish all initiative, intervention and control.
- is not something that teachers do to learners. It is not a new methodology.
- is not a single easily described behaviour. However, it can manifest itself in a very many different ways.
- is not a state achieved by certain learners ... it is likely to be hard-won and its permanence cannot be guaranteed; and the learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may be non-autonomous in another.

Sinclair (2000, pp. 7-13) compiles 13 consensual features that together give a detailed picture of the construct of autonomy. These features are listed in the following table.

**Table 1:** Features of autonomy (Sinclair, 2000, pp. 7-13)

1	Autonomy is a construct of capacity
2	Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning
3	The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate
4	Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal
5	There are degrees of autonomy
6	The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable
7	Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent
8	Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e. conscious reflection and decision making
9	Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies
10	Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom
11	Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension
12	The promotion of LA has a political as well as psychological dimension
13	Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures

Some of the features listed in table 1 are included in definitions of autonomy. Other features are not and some of these will be discussed here.

First, autonomy is not innate, i.e., no learners are born autonomous or dependent. Rather, autonomy can be acquired through the intervention of education. All learners can promote learning autonomy if certain conditions are met or if certain constraints are manipulated. According to Benson (2000), these constraints include policy constraints, institutional constraints, conceptions of language and language teaching methodologies. If the learning context is supportive of autonomous learning, learners can enhance their autonomy by progressing, as suggested by Ur (2002), from verbalization to automatization to autonomy. That is, autonomy is not acquired at once and forever. A significant factor that can either enhance or impede the promotion of LA is the role of the teacher. LA cannot develop in teacher-centered classrooms where teachers assume all responsibilities, while learners are passive and receptive all the time. The teacher should transfer to learners most responsibilities and assume the role of consultant and facilitator (Dam, 2008). This entails that teachers be cognizant of what autonomy is. According to Little (2007, p. 27) *"It is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner"*.

Second, there are degrees of autonomy and complete autonomy is idealistic. Many researchers stress that autonomy is not something that can be fully mastered once and forever. If the environment is one that nurtures LA, learners get more autonomous with time and based on factors such as their personality, their goals, and the institutional and cultural contexts (Nunan, 1997, p. 193). Dickinson (1987, p. 28) stresses that transfer of

responsibilities to learners should be gradual, so learners can cope with them. This is to conceive of dependence and autonomy as two ends of a continuum and of learners as moving, if the promotion of autonomy is targeted in the learning context, from dependence to autonomy gradually and based on one's capacity. This gradual progression from lower to higher levels of autonomy is argued by Sinclair (2000, p. 8) "*promoting LA is a matter of empowering learners so that they are in a better position to take on more responsibility for their learning than before, if they so desire*". That there is no single version of autonomy is also stressed in Smith's (2003, pp. 130-132) description of weak and strong versions of pedagogy for LA, where the weak version is concerned with raising learners' awareness of autonomous learning and furnishing them with learning strategies in order to become more self-directed in their learning. The strong version refers to learners who have become autonomous enough to indulge in learner-driven initiatives.

Third, autonomy does not mean learning alone away from teachers and peers, i.e., self-instruction. Related to this is the emphasis that autonomy does not "*require the teacher to relinquish all initiative, intervention and control*" (Little (1991, 3). Researchers stress that autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension (e.g., Little, 2004). Influenced by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development, Little (2004) emphasizes that social interactions with teachers and peers are essential for the development of LA "*our psychological autonomy derives from social interdependence*" (p. 20). Dam (1995, p. 1) asserts that autonomy "*entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others as a socially responsible person*". Stressing the role of the teacher, Benson (2007) asserts that actions of autonomous learning, i.e., suggesting, implementing, monitoring, and assessing learning are better taken in cooperation with the teacher. Similarly, Little (1996) suggests that learners cannot automatically take responsibility for their learning, and that assuming responsibility for learning should be gradual with the mediation of the teacher. Transferring responsibility for learning to learners does not, therefore, result in reducing the role of the teacher (Moore, 2007). Rather, it, as confirmed by Littlewood (1999), converts it into a facilitator of autonomous learning. In brief, autonomy can be practiced both inside and outside the classroom and it can take place with and without others. Both individual and collaborative practices of autonomy are not mutually exclusive. They are complementary and are expected to be more fruitful with the support and supervision of a teacher who is well-aware of the process of nurturing autonomy in learners.

Fourth, autonomy is not something that teachers can do for their learners, i.e., it is not a new methodology. That is, there is no specific methodology that teachers can use to turn their students into autonomous learners. Using Little's (1991) words, it is not something that can be programmed into a series of lesson plans. It is something much wider and multifaceted. In fact, many factors interplay to enhance the promotion of LA. One significant factor is the beliefs and perceptions that learners and teachers hold about autonomy. Teachers' efforts to enhance their learners' autonomy can be of little value if learners hold counterproductive beliefs about autonomy. Cotterall (1995: 195, p. 196)

argues that *“the beliefs learners hold may either contribute to or impede the development of their potential for autonomy”*. A learner who holds a belief that his/her learning is the responsibility of the teacher will resist teachers' endeavors to turn him/her into an autonomous learner. It is therefore imperative that teachers dispel any erroneous beliefs that learners hold about the learning process. By the same token, teachers should have informed beliefs about autonomy. A teacher who is not convinced of the goal of promoting LA will not work for the realization of this goal. Teachers who adopt a teacher-centered approach to learning rather than a learner-centered approach are not expected to enhance autonomy in learners (Weimer, 2002). A second factor that can enhance autonomy in learners is mastery of learning strategies. Learning strategies can be one of the tools that learners use for independent learning (Hamilton, 2013; Oxford, 2008; Scharle & Szabó, 2000, Harmer, 2007). Teachers can thus enhance active learning on the part of their students by training them on effective learning strategies.

A third factor is getting students to reflect on and self-assess their learning (Sinclair, 2010; Benson, 2001). To be autonomous, learners need to reflect on their learning and identify their strengths and weaknesses. According to Stella (2005) reflection is an integral part of exercising autonomy. Critical reflection about learning makes it possible for learners to make informed decisions about their learning and find solutions to learning challenges. However, the ability to reflect on learning does not come naturally. Thus, teachers should teach students to reflect on their learning by getting them to keep self-reflection diaries or portfolios. Teachers can also encourage self-evaluation and peer evaluation, so learners can make informed judgments about their own learning and the learning of their peers. In an empirical study, Smith and Craig (2013) taught a group of Japanese students to develop self-reflection diaries. Training had positive effects on students' perceptions of autonomous learning and made them incorporate more resources in their study plans.

A fourth factor is getting students to participate in all aspects of their learning, e.g., setting learning objectives, selecting material, tasks and learning methods, and evaluating their progress (Benson, 2006; Littlewood, 1999; Cotterall, 1995). These aspects were traditionally identified by the curriculum and the teacher. Nonetheless, in the learning environment that targets the promotion of LA, decisions about such aspects should be a shared responsibility between the teacher and the learner. Without having a say on these aspects, learners cannot have a sense of ownership of their learning. One last factor that makes the learning environment supportive of the development of autonomy is the incorporation of information and communication technology (ICT). Many scholars (e.g. Benson, 2011; Reinders & White, 2016) argue that with the effective use of ICT, learners can increase their learning resources and exercise more control over their learning. Technological devices and applications provide students with unprecedented opportunities and a wide range of alternatives to engage in self-directed learning (Reinders & White, 2016). Online tools such as chat environments, WhatsApp, Google Meet, Moodle and Zoom can increase learning avenues for learners, especially learners of other languages as foreign languages, as they help learners to overcome a deficit that

seems to be inherent in most FL settings, i.e., the input-poor environment. Recent research has shown that technology has the potential to promote autonomous learning. For instance, Rahman (2013) explored the relationship between CALL and EFL learners' autonomy and concluded that technology had a positive effect on learners' autonomy. A similar investigation by Meri (2012) revealed that CALL fostered Turkish students' autonomous language learning. Using a case study method, Zhong (2018) explored how engagement with technology-mediated environments affected a learner's approach to learning. As a result of training, the learner was reported to become a critical user of multiple online resources, a collaborative online learner and a more capable manager and organizer of learning.

### **3.2 Online education and learner autonomy**

OE environments are described by Murphy (2011, p. 18) as "*environments of necessity require learners to make choices and decisions, exercising their capacity for autonomy*". Technology-mediated environments have the inherent potential to promote autonomous behavior in learners because they facilitate self-access learning and give learners numerous opportunities to self-direct their learning (Benson, 2001). In other words, LA is facilitated by the very nature of the OE environment (Furnborough, 2012; Santos & Camara, 2010). Murphy (2011, pp. 18-19) identifies the following autonomy-enhancing features of OE: physical separation of learner and teacher and of learners from each other, learner responsibility for scheduling their study time, and availability of multiple online learning resources and activities. Spatial separation gives learners a wider opportunity to manage their learning and initiate online interactions with teachers and other learners. With time interaction can extend to others outside the learner's institution. Separated from others, learners find themselves obliged to manage their study time given that the online environment offers multiple learning resources that learners need to organize their making use of them. Learners can interact with teachers and other learners through synchronous online meetings or asynchronous discussion forums. The multiplicity of learning resources and interaction formats entails that learners make decisions about their learning and manage their time well. Learners can form online learning communities, which makes possible what scholars call collective autonomy. Online applications such as video-conferencing and discussion forums can provide authentic learning opportunities to those who learn a FL where the direct environment does not provide many of such opportunities (Chan & Chan, 2011).

Murphy (2011, p. 25) investigated how the autonomy of two FL distance learners grew as a result of learning in a distance learning environment. It was found that the two learners enhanced a better capacity for autonomous learning, i.e., making decisions about their learning based on their needs and preferences, choosing to engage with some course components rather than others, creating practice opportunities, and evaluating their progress. Similarly, Zhong (2018) examined how the autonomy of a learner engaged with a technology-mediated environment evolved. Formative qualitative data analysis revealed noticeable changes in the learners' approach to learning, namely becoming a



critical user of multiple online resources, a collaborative online learner and a more capable manager and organizer. In a sample of 100 Iranian EFL learners, Honarзад and Rassaei (2019) found a strong relationship between out-of-class online language learning activities and LA. In a quasi-experimental study on Iranian EFL learners, an experimental group that received CALL outperformed a control group that did not receive CALL in LA (Farivar & Rahimi, 2015). This same finding was reached in similar studies on CALL (Rahman, 2013; Meri, 2012).

### **3.3 Learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi educational context has always been described as featuring by teacher dominance, learner over-reliance on teachers and rote learning (e.g., Asiri & Shukri, 2020; Alrabai, 2017; Tamer, 2013; Al-Saadi, 2011). Researchers called for changing this by making a *“shift from teacher-lecturing and spoon-feeding to students owning their responsibilities to become independent learners”* (Tamer, 2013, p. 73). Lecturing by teachers and listening by students are the roles assumed by teachers and students from the time students start their schooling until they graduate from university (Tamer, 2013, p. 12). The research documented the autonomy-poor environment in various educational stages in Saudi Arabia. Using student questionnaire, Tamer (2013) assessed the readiness of 121 Saudi university male students on a preparatory English program to assume autonomous learning of English as a FL. Students were found to lack *“the sense of being responsible for cognitive and metacognitive learning aspects in learning English inside and outside the classroom”*. Students did not engage in voluntary learning activities and showed reluctance to take charge of their learning. This was attributed to *“students’ over-reliance on teachers and the spoon feeding habit”* (Tamer, 2013, p. 8). In addition, 10 teachers voiced in interviews with the researcher that LA was hard to achieve owing to the prevalence of rote learning among Saudi learners. However, they believed that if administrative restrictions were eliminated and students received the right form of teaching, there could be a gradual transition to LA. Alzubi, Singh and Pandian (2017) explored LA practices among 208 Saudi students at the preparatory year, Najran University. The results revealed a low level of LA and the researchers called for pedagogical treatments like strategy instruction to develop LA in the Saudi EFL context. Alrabai (2017) explored the level of LA in a large sample of 630 university EFL Saudi students. The participants were found to be non-autonomous with a mean autonomy score of 2.35 out of 5. The researcher thus recommended spreading awareness of LA in the Saudi EFL setting and using practical means to shift Saudi learners from dependent to independent learners. More recently, Asiri & Shukri (2020) investigated 150 Saudi preparatory year female EFL students’ perspectives of LA using a LA questionnaire. The participants were found to have negative perspectives of LA.

### **3.4 The shift to online education in Saudi Arabia**

Like other countries, Saudi Arabia shifted to OE during the coronavirus pandemic as a procedure for eliminating the spread of the virus. Before this emergent shift, the

conventional classroom-based education mode was the mainstream in most Saudi universities, including Shaqra University where this study was conducted. Universities installed online platforms where the traditional classroom was replaced by the virtual classroom. In Shaqra University, the Moodle platform was mainly used for delivering instruction and assessing students. Teachers and students received formal training provided by the Deanship of Information Technology and E-Learning and the Deanship of Development and Quality on how to use the platform. Manuals and tutorials were also provided to teachers and students for the same purpose. The platform was used for delivering instruction to students through virtual classrooms and for assessing them through a built-in assessment system. Furthermore, students could interact with teachers and colleagues about learning challenges, assignments, term papers and graduation projects. Teachers also used the platform to post additional web-based learning resources that students could access to get further knowledge, write term papers and do assignments. The assessment system in the platform provided students with immediate feedback about their performance once they submitted answers to quizzes or exams. The university also allowed for the use of other online applications such as Google Meet, Google Classroom, the Blackboard, Zoom and WhatsApp. It was also observed that students established online small communities both with and without teacher membership to discuss topics of shared interest. Before this shift, distance communication was only used for such purposes as informing students about emergencies like the cancelation of classes. Thus, it is safe to say that it was the first time for students to get involved in real distance education.

### **3.5 Gender differences in learner autonomy**

The majority of studies reported gender differences in LA in favor of females. In a Turkish sample, females reported being more competent and more participatory than males in activities related to autonomous learning (Üstünlüoğlu, 2009). Saudi female EFL learners displayed more interest and more autonomous behavior than males, even though all learners were non-autonomous (Alrabai, 2017). T-tests and interview data revealed significant differences in LA between male and female Indian school learners in favor of females. Also, Thai female students had a higher level of beliefs about LA than male students (Orawiwatnakul & Wichadee, 2017).

## **4. Method**

A mixed-methods approach involving quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis was used in this exploratory study. The participants responded to a researcher-developed questionnaire probing LA. Data of students' responses to the questionnaire were treated quantitatively. Furthermore, semi-structured online interviews were conducted with 20 participants to probe their perceptions of the impact of OE on aspects of their LA. Data obtained from the interviews were treated qualitatively.

#### 4.1 Participants

The participants were 306 English majors (184 females and 122 males) from five colleges at Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia. The study questionnaire was sent to students electronically with the help of heads of the English departments. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online with 20 participants (10 boys and 10 girls). The participants were from different study levels. They were Saudis majoring in English as a FL. They were similar in language experience and received similar teaching for all teachers at the university teach according to unified course descriptions that specify teaching and assessment strategies.

#### 4.2 Instruments

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments. Quantitative data about students' level of autonomous learning was collected by a researcher-developed questionnaire. Qualitative data regarding the impact of OE on students' autonomous learning was collected via an online semi-structured interview. The construction of the questionnaire began with a literature review of LA and of scales measuring it (Zhang & Li, 2004; Dafei, 2007; Macaskill & Taylor, 2010; Cotterall, 1999). Accordingly, several items were either adopted or adapted from existing questionnaires. Other items were developed by the author. The questionnaire that originally had 46 items was face validated by five EFL professors. Based on those professors' feedback, four items were excluded for being repetitive and six items were reworded. The resulting 42 items were then translated into Arabic. A back-translation was performed by a translation professor to establish the accuracy of the translation. Based on this procedure, some items in the Arabic questionnaire were reworded.

The 42-item questionnaire was then electronically administered to English majors from five colleges at Shaqra University at the end of the academic year 2020-2021, i.e., after three semesters of OE. A total of 306 male and female students responded to the questionnaire. Collected data were then subjected to explanatory factor analysis. To establish the factorability of the 42 items, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy, Bartlett's test of Sphericity and the discriminant of table R were computed. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was .792, which was acceptable. Bartlett's test of Sphericity was 3430.769 ( $p < .000$ ), which was significant. Finally, the discriminant of table R was above .00001 (1.863E-011). This indicated that factor analysis could be performed on the questionnaire data.

Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation and eigenvalues of  $>1$  was then used in order to determine items to be retained. Items with factor loadings less than .4 or those that loaded significantly on more than one factor were deleted (8 items) and the correlation matrix was reanalyzed. This left the questionnaire with 34 items. Four factors emerged that explained 74.886 of the total variance in scores. Examination of the content of items that loaded onto the factors resulted in labeling them as autonomous learning practices (12 items accounting for 39.15 of the variance), autonomous learning self-efficacy (10 items accounting for 20.31 of the variance), autonomous learning beliefs

(eight items accounting for 11.04 of the variance), and autonomous learning enjoyment (four items accounting for 4.5 of the variance). Table 2 below shows factors and items loaded on them.

As to reliability, the subscales of autonomous learning practices, autonomous learning self-efficacy, autonomous learning beliefs, autonomous learning enjoyment, and the total questionnaire yielded significant alpha reliability estimates (.88, .87, .65, .72, and .93 respectively), revealing that the questionnaire was quite reliable. The final version of the questionnaire thus consisted of 34 items answered based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree =5 to strongly disagree =1. Only one item was reverse coded.

**Table 2:** Factors and items loaded on them

<b>Autonomous Learning Practices (% Variance = 39.15)</b>		
1	I Use My Free Time to Improve My English Proficiency.	.682
2	I Note My Strengths and Weaknesses in Learning English.	.778
3	I Set Goals for My English Study.	.794
4	I Organize and Allocate Time Well When I Study English.	.684
5	I Talk To The Teacher About The Quality Of My Work And Assignments.	.846
6	I Keep A Notebook Where I Jot Down E. Vocabulary And Important Information.	.785
7	After A Test, I Always Review Difficult Material to Be Sure I Understand It All.	.798
8	I Finish My Assignments in My English Course on Time.	.744
9	I Reward Myself, Such as Going Shopping, Playing, Etc., When I Make Progress.	.736
10	In The Class, I Try to Use Every Opportunity to Take Part in Activities.	.665
11	I Review Before the Class.	.708
12	I Seek Alternative Solutions When I Face a Difficult Problem.	.769
<b>Autonomous Learning Self-Efficacy (% Variance = 20.31)</b>		
1	I Have My Own Ways of Testing How Much I Have Learned.	.679
2	I Can Work Well on My Weaknesses in My English Study.	.684
3	I Know How to Study English Well.	.596
4	I Can Check My Work for Mistakes.	.628
5	I'm Good at Using Resources Like the Internet for My English Study.	.846
6	I Can Make Use of English Movies to Promote My English Proficiency.	.784
7	When I Use the Internet, I Know How to Select Material That Suits My Purposes.	.604
8	When I Face Challenges in My Study, I Control My Negative Feelings.	.633
9	I Can Self-Evaluate My Learning in Total.	.573
10	Even When Tasks Are Difficult I Try To Stick With Them.	.569
<b>Autonomous Learning Beliefs (% Variance = 11.04)</b>		
1	It Is Important to Me to See the Progress I Make.	.543
2	My Success In Learning English Mainly Depends On My Own Efforts.	.761
3	The English Teacher Is Responsible for My Learning.	.861
4	It Is Up to The Learner to Find Opportunities to Practice the Foreign Language.	.515
5	Language Learners Are Responsible for Planning for Their Own Learning.	.587
6	The Role of The English Teacher Is to Help Me Learn by Myself.	.577
7	Students Should Design the Teaching Plan Together with Teachers.	.837
8	I Am Open to New Ways of Doing Familiar Things.	.722
<b>Autonomous Learning Enjoyment (% Variance = 4.5)</b>		
1	I Enjoy Learning New Things in English Language Classes.	.474
2	I Like Being Set At A Challenge In English Language Classes.	.408

3	I Enjoy Finding Information About New Topics in English on My Own.	.413
4	I Am Happy Working on My Own.	.476

Additionally, a semi-structured interview was used to probe students' perceptions of the impact of OE on their autonomous learning. Twenty semi-structured interviews (10 boys and 10 girls) were conducted via Google Meet. The interviews were conducted in Arabic. The interviews were content analyzed for main themes (Dinçer, 2018). Questions used in the interview were:

- 1) How did you find OE vs. traditional classroom-based education?
- 2) Is the English teacher responsible for your learning?
- 3) How has OE affected the way you: (a) learn the language, (b) manage and organize your learning, (c) assess your performance, (d) deal with learning challenges, and (e) collaborate with teachers and colleagues?

### 4.3 Data analysis

The data obtained from completed questionnaires were analyzed via the SPSS 15.0 package program. Means and standard deviations were used to identify the level of students' LA. Oxford's (2001) scoring system was used to identify whether the mean was high (3.5 or higher), medium (2.5-3.4), or low (2.4 or lower). Correlations were used to identify the relationship between LA and academic achievement (identified by students' GPAs). Gender differences in LA were explored by computing the independent samples t-test. Data from the semi-structured interviews were content analyzed.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Student's level of autonomous learning

To identify students' level of autonomous learning, Descriptives of the participants' responses to the LA questionnaire were computed. These results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Descriptives of the participants' responses to the LA questionnaire

	Items	N	M	SD
	<b>Autonomous Learning Practices</b>			
1	I finish my assignments in my English course on time.	306	4.16	.836
2	I seek alternative solutions when I face a difficult problem.	306	4.15	.743
3	I set goals for my English study.	306	4.10	.893
4	I reward myself, such as going shopping, playing, etc., when I make progress.	306	4.07	1.06
5	I use my free time to improve my English proficiency.	306	4.06	.827
6	After a test, I always review difficult material to be sure I understand it all.	306	4.05	1.03
7	I organize and allocate time well when I study English.	306	3.98	.959
8	I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English.	306	3.95	1.01
9	In the class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in activities.	306	3.93	.988
10	I talk to the teacher about the quality of my work and assignments.	306	3.85	.930
11	I keep a notebook where I jot down E. vocabulary and important information.	306	3.83	1.16
12	I review before the class.	306	3.51	1.12

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	Total	306	3.97	.964
<b>Autonomous Learning Self-efficacy</b>				
1	I'm good at using resources like the Internet for my English study.	306	4.40	.791
2	I can make use of English movies to promote my English proficiency.	306	4.38	.868
3	When I use the Internet, I know how to select material that suits my purposes.	306	4.22	.847
4	Even when tasks are difficult I try to stick with them.	306	4.11	.881
5	I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned.	306	4.11	.810
6	I can work well on my weaknesses in my English study.	306	3.95	.979
7	I can check my work for mistakes.	306	3.92	.910
8	I can self-evaluate my learning in total.	306	3.92	.834
9	I know how to study English well.	306	3.91	.864
10	When I face challenges in my study, I control my negative feelings.	306	3.72	1.06
	Total	306	4.06	.884
<b>Autonomous Learning Beliefs</b>				
1	It is important to me to see the progress I make.	306	4.41	.665
2	My success in learning English mainly depends on my own efforts.	306	4.38	.771
3	The role of the English teacher is to help me learn by myself.	306	4.11	.934
4	Students should design the teaching plan together with teachers.	306	4.11	.881
5	I am open to new ways of doing familiar things.	306	4.06	.851
6	It is up to the learner to find opportunities to practice the foreign language.	306	4.05	.926
7	Language learners are responsible for planning for their own learning.	306	4.03	.841
8	The English teacher is responsible for my learning.	306	2.60	1.49
	Total	306	3.93	.877
<b>Autonomous Learning Enjoyment</b>				
1	I am happy working on my own.	306	4.27	.905
2	I enjoy new learning things in English language classes.	306	4.10	.940
3	I enjoy being set at a challenge in English language classes.	306	4.06	.855
4	I enjoy finding information about new topics in English on my own.	306	4.03	.983
	Total	306	4.11	.921

As listed in Table 3, the means of items under the autonomous learning practices dimension (12 items) ranged from 4.16 (SD=.836) to 3.51 (SD=1.12), with a total mean of 3.97 (SD=0.964). All item means and the total mean were high, all above 3.50. This indicates that students were autonomous in terms of the practices of LA. Means of items under the autonomous learning self-efficacy dimension (10 items) ranged between 4.40 (SD=.791) to 3.72 (SD=1.06), with a total mean of 4.06 (SD=.884). All item means and the total mean were high. This means that students were self-efficacious about their LA. As to the autonomous learning beliefs that included eight items, item means ranged between 4.41 (SD=.665) to 2.60 (SD=1.49), with a total mean of 3.93 (SD=.877). But for one item, all item means and the total mean of the dimension were high. Only the item 'The English teacher is responsible for my learning' received a medium rating. Item means for the autonomous learning enjoyment dimension (four items) ranged between 4.27 (SD=.905) to 4.03 (SD=.983), with a total mean of 4.11 (SD=.921). Again, all item means and the total mean were high, indicating that students enjoyed autonomous learning.

## 5.2 Gender differences in Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy

To identify if there were significant differences between male and female students in LA, the t-test for independent samples was used. Table 4 presents these results.

**Table 4:** Gender differences in Saudi college EFL learners' autonomy?

Test	Group	N	M	SD	t-value	Sig.
Autonomous learning practices	Boys	122	3.92	.6462	.723	.471
	Girls	184	3.99	.6317		
Autonomous learning self-efficacy	Boys	122	4.09	.5691	.499	.618
	Girls	184	4.04	.6291		
Autonomous learning beliefs	Boys	122	3.87	.4220	1.19	.235
	Girls	184	3.96	.4315		
Autonomous learning enjoyment	Boys	122	4.25	.5448	2.03	<b>.044</b>
	Girls	184	4.02	.7488		
Total	Boys	122	3.99	.4998	.061	.952
	Girls	184	4.00	.5438		

As listed in Table 4, there were no statistically significant differences between male and female participants in three of the four dimensions of LA and in total autonomy. Female participants outperformed male participants in one dimension, autonomous learning enjoyment.

## 5.3 Students' perceptions of the impact of online education on their autonomy

Students' responses to the interview questions revealed eight main themes: attitudes towards OE, responsibility for learning, goal setting and organization of study time, use of the Internet and social media, use of performance feedback, self-assessment, reflection on learning, and improved computer skills. The following table summarizes the main themes that emerged from boys' and girls' responses.

**Table 5:** Summary of the themes emerged in the semi-structured interview

No.	Themes	Mention		%
		Girls	Boys	
1	Favorable views on OE	Girls	10	100
		Boys	10	
2	Learning as a shared responsibility	Girls	9	80
		Boys	7	
3	Goal setting and organization of study time	Girls	8	70
		Boys	6	
4	Use of the Internet and social media	Girls	9	90
		Boys	9	
5	Use of performance feedback	Girls	8	75
		Boys	7	
6	Self-assessment	Girls	6	50
		Boys	4	
7	Reflection on learning	Girls	3	25
		Boys	2	
8	Improved computer skills	Girls	10	100

		Boys	10	
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### 5.3.1 Attitudes towards online education

All students voiced favorable views about OE. They mentioned that classroom-based education allows for direct contact with teachers and colleagues. However, they confirmed that OE was the only viable alternative to pursue their study during the pandemic and that it saved the time they used to waste commuting to their colleges. Most of them reported that OE was comfortable and that it helped them to concentrate more given the absence of sources of distraction. When asked if they would like to pursue OE after the pandemic, all of them expressed a wish to receive their education via the two modes of online learning and classroom-based education.

### 5.3.2 Responsibility for learning

Eighty percent of the students maintained that learning is a shared responsibility between learners and teachers. They elaborated that most responsibility for learning should be assumed by learners under teachers' guidance. They shared the following viewpoints:

*"I need to do most of the work, but I need the teacher to guide my efforts because he is an expert and can help me learn well."* (A six level female student)

*"The learner should work on his own. However, the role of the teacher is very important. The teacher helps learners with difficulties they face when learning the language."* (An eighth level female student)

*"I should work hard to learn the language, but I need the teacher who knows a lot about the language. The teacher can teach me a lot of things and can also teach me how to proceed in learning."* (A seventh level male student)

*"I have to work hard inside and outside the classroom to achieve a good command of the FL. The teacher is not available all the time to guide me, but what we learn in the classroom guides us when we study alone."* (A six level male student)

### 5.3.3 Goal setting and organization of study time

Seventy percent of the students mentioned that with the shift to OE they began to keep a to-do list to allocate time to various courses. These lists included their plans for studying courses on a daily basis. They also included their plans for doing assignments. What follows are some excerpts from this theme:

*"With OE I felt that I would stray unless I set goals for myself and allocate time to my study courses. So, I decided to keep a to-do list with study goals and timed assignments and activities. This way, I can organize my study time and do my assignments before deadlines. Before OE I did not always manage to finish assignments before deadlines. The*



*to-do list also helps me a lot when studying for exams. I find it a very effective practice and I will keep using it when traditional education is assumed.” (A six level male student)*

*“I have become more organized after the shift to OE. Now I set myself daily goals and study plans. I write down difficult areas in courses and suggestions to deal with them. These mostly include searching the difficult areas on the Internet, seeking the help of the teacher via WhatsApp, and collaborating with colleagues. I can say that I now know how to overcome challenges that I used to stumble about before the shift to OE.” (A seventh level female student)*

#### **5.3.4 Use of the internet and social media**

Ninety percent of the students asserted that they became better at using the Internet and social media as learning resources. They reported using the Internet and social media for further explanation, grammar and translation exercises, term papers, and critical reviews and videos of literary works. They also reported using WhatsApp to interact with teachers and colleagues about study matters. They all asserted that they had become more confident and cognizant of how to use the Internet and social media as learning resources. What they reported on that point suggested that they found themselves obliged to use the Internet. At first, they faced difficulties, but with time they became better at using it. Example comments on this theme are:

*“Before the shift to OE, I was not good at using the Internet as a learning resource, so I used to seek the help of others (e.g., an elder sibling, a professional) whenever I needed to use the Internet for term papers. Now after some stumbling, I became good at using the internet. I can find material that suits my purposes. Now I can do my term papers without asking others for help.” (A seventh level female student)*

*“Before the shift to OE, I could not use the Internet for the simplest tasks. I also used to have the feeling that I would not be successful at using it. But now I readily and enthusiastically surf the Internet whenever I need further clarification or material for term papers. In the past, I only used WhatsApp and YouTube for socialization and entertainment, but now I began to use them for study purposes.” (A fifth level male student)*

#### **5.3.5 Use of performance feedback**

Seventy-five percent of the students reported using feedback on test performance. The reason they reported for this is that the testing system on the university's e-learning platform provided students with feedback on their answers immediately after they submitted answers. Being interested in the scores they obtained, students carefully checked their answers using the feedback provided by the system. They maintained that procedure was more systematic and stimulating than its counterpart with traditional paper and pencil exams. A fourth level female student maintained:

*“Once we finish exams, we are provided with immediate feedback on our answers. I check my answers to know my mistakes and avoid them in coming exams.”*

They also mentioned that they carefully read teacher feedback on assignments. What made them more interested in teacher feedback is that comments were given in MS word or PDF documents using the Add Comment capability. Students reported that comments in the document were easy to read and that this way of providing feedback was more stimulating than handwritten comments in traditional handwritten assignments. A fifth level male student said:

*“Now we write assignments in word documents. Teachers write comments in the document. Thus, it is easy for us to read comments.”*

### **5.3.6 Self-assessment**

Half of the students mentioned that they self-assessed themselves more frequently after the shift to OE. They attributed this to the experiences they accumulated regarding the use of the internet. A third level male student and a fifth level female student respectively commented:

*“A new learning practice that I now do regularly is studying the grammatical structure in the grammar textbook (Eng 116) and assessing my grasp of the structure by doing exercises on the internet. I use the score I get to identify how well I have grasped the target structure. In many cases, this leads me to re-study certain aspects of the structure using both the textbook and Internet sites.”*

*“To see if my ability to translate into Arabic or English improves, I translate short texts from the Internet and then use translation sites to get an idea about the quality of my translation. I also translate texts and email them to my translation teacher to comment on how good my translation is.”*

Five students (25%) mentioned using Internet applications to check their writing for mistakes. A seventh level female student, reported using the Grammarly application for this purpose:

*“I asked my teacher about applications that I can use to check my essays for mistakes and he provided me with several applications. Since then, I have regularly used Grammarly. I paste sentences or paragraphs to the text box and press check. The application highlights mistakes and offers corrections. With time my mistakes began to be fewer.”*

Seven students (35%) mentioned using Internet applications and dictionaries (e.g. DICTIONARY.Com) to check their pronunciation and their ability to transcribe English words. They reported that they uttered/ transcribed words and then pasted them to the

Transcribe Box on the application to see how accurate their pronunciation or transcription was. They used such applications with courses dealing with English phonetics and phonology. Finally, nearly all students reported that they answered tests on Internet sites to test themselves in the various study courses. They asserted that this practice was of great value to them and that they would never stop it.

### 5.3.7 Reflection on learning

Five students (25%) mentioned that they kept a diary for every course (the author read a sample of some students' diaries). They wrote in dairies the goals they achieved on a daily basis, the material they studied, the resources they used besides the textbook, and the difficult areas of the content and the way they handled them. A student wrote:

*"Today I planned to study the present perfect tense in the Grammar Course (Eng 116). I began by studying the part about the present perfect in the textbook. I read the information about the form of the tense and its usage. I restudied the exercises the teacher did with us in the online class and I answered the sentences and the exercises that the teacher left, as the class time does not allow the teacher to do all the exercises with us. I faced a problem with the difference between the present perfect and the past simple. So I read the information about the difference between them in the textbook, did exercises dealing with that point and checked my answers against the answer key at the end of the textbook. I also searched the point on the Internet. I found good sites where I did further exercises on the point. I think I now understand the present perfect and know how it differs from the past simple."* (A second level male student)

### 5.3.8 Computer skills

All students reported that their computer skills improved a lot after the shift to OE. This included electronic writing and the use of word processing applications. They mentioned two reasons for this improvement. First, they answered exams electronically and thus needed to use the keyboard to answer production questions. Second, they were required to submit assignments and term papers in the MS word format. They also described how their ability to search for information on the Internet and locate required material improved since the shift to OE. Example excerpts from this theme are:

*"In the past I wrote homework by hand and when teachers asked for typed homework, I got it typed by others. Now that I got used to electronic writing, I have come to write my assignments and term papers electronically with increased ease."* (A seventh level female student)

*"Before the shift to OE, I was not good at surfing the Internet and I used to get others to do it for me. Now I do it myself with ease."* (A fifth level male student)

*"Now I can search for information on the Internet and distinguish between good and bad sites."* (A fourth level female student)

In brief, what students mentioned regarding computer skills indicated that they improved these skills because they found themselves obliged to use the Internet as a learning resource and use word processing applications as the only viable alternative to the conventional manual writing of assignments and term papers.

## 6. Discussion

In the present study, Saudi college EFL learners reported a high level of LA. The total mean of their LA was 4.02, which is much higher than its counterpart in studies conducted in the Saudi context before the shift to OE (Alarabi, 2017; Alzubi, Singh & Pandian, 2017; Tamer, 2013). The mean reported for a comparable sample of students was 2.35 (Alarabi, 2017), which led the author to conclude that students were *"non-autonomous"* (p. 226). He further argued that the results emphasized a *"vast lack of awareness of the vital role of LA in the Saudi EFL setting"* (p. 226). In another study conducted by Alzubi, Singh and Pandian (2017) on 208 Saudi Preparatory Year students at Najran University, students reported a low level of LA concerning linguistic confidence (M=1.64 out of 5), social comparison (M=2.03 out of 5) and locus of control (M=1.84 out of 5). Based on the results, the authors called for pedagogical treatments to develop learning autonomy dimensions in students. In an earlier study, Tamer (2013), explored the perceptions of 121 students from King Abdulaziz University about autonomous learning. Students showed reluctance to take up responsibility for their learning. Forty-two percent of the students reported teachers as responsible for 13 aspects of learning pertaining to autonomy. Thirty-eight percent reported joint responsibility and 20% claimed that the responsibility was theirs alone. The author concluded that students believed that *"whatever is happening inside the classroom is primarily teachers' and secondarily both teachers' and theirs"*.

All the items of the LA questionnaire achieved high means but for the item reading 'The English teacher is responsible for my learning'. That item got a medium rating. When asked in the interview about whether their language learning was their own responsibility or their teachers', 80% of the students maintained that it was a shared responsibility. This seems logical as students were beginning to reduce their over-reliance on their teachers. It is not possible for students to transition from one extreme to another abruptly. Teachers may need to assume a greater role in their students' language learning in FL settings than in L1 and L2 settings because the FL setting is input-poorer than the L1 and L2 settings where students practice the language everywhere and on a daily basis. The FL teacher will ever remain a significant learning resource for students. Furthermore, when students say that the teacher is partly responsible for their learning, this does not mean that they are dependent. Researchers maintain that LA does not mean learning without a teacher (Aoki & Tanaka, 2011; Ozeki, 2010; Little, 1991). This was asserted by

the high ratings the students gave to the items 'My success in learning English mainly depends on my own efforts' (M=4.38) and 'The role of the English teacher is to help me learn by myself' (M=4.11).

As to gender differences, female participants outperformed male participants in just one dimension, autonomous learning enjoyment. No gender differences were found in the other three dimensions of LA or in total LA. This finding is inconsistent with other studies (Üstünlüoğlu, 2009; Alrabai, 2017; Orawiwatnakul & Wichadee, 2017) where significant differences were found in favor of females. The effect of gender on LA may still need to be further investigated. That female participants in the current study outperformed male participants in autonomous learning enjoyment can be explained in the light of the social roles of males and females in the Saudi society. By the very nature of the Saudi society, females, unlike males, spend most of their time indoors. This way they may be spending much more time with autonomous learning practices, which may result in their enjoying autonomous learning more than males do.

In the interviews, students repeatedly attributed gains in their LA to the shift to OE. The aspects of autonomous learning in which the students made significant improvements included goal setting and organization of study time, the use of the Internet and social media, the use of performance feedback, self-assessment and computer skills. Seventy percent of the students reported that they began to set goals for their study and to keep a to-do list to organize their learning and make sure they attained their goals. The rationale they mentioned for that new practice was to keep focused with the spatial separation from the teachers and other students. Ninety percent of the students reported that they became better users of the Internet and social media. They reported using the Internet and social media for learning and interacting with teachers and other students. They established WhatsApp groups and online communities to communicate with each other and with teachers. What they mentioned in this respect also indicated that with time and accumulative experience, they became critical users of Internet sites as learning resources. Seventy-five percent of the students reported using performance feedback to improve their learning. What supported that practice was the university's e-learning platform that provided them with feedback on their answers immediately after they submitted answers. Being interested in the scores they obtained, they carefully checked their answers using the feedback provided by the system to know their mistakes and avoid them in future exams. Of course, they were provided with feedback about their performance in the traditional classroom setting. What was different, as reported by students, in the new experience was that feedback was immediate, systematic and more organized.

As to self-assessment, half of the interviewed students mentioned that they self-assessed themselves more frequently after the shift to OE. They reported using the Internet for the first time to know about their grasp of grammatical structures, the quality of their writing and translation, and their pronunciation and transcription skills. Surprisingly, five students mentioned using online applications to check their compositions for mistakes. This indicates that with sustained use of the internet, students

find new pathways to practice advanced behaviors of autonomous learning. No students are dependent by nature. Once they put their feet on the autonomous learning route, they take further steps and enhance their ability to learn autonomously. Finally, all students reported that their computer skills improved a lot after the shift to OE. This included electronic writing and the use of word processing applications. The reason they gave for that improvement was that they had to answer exams electronically and submit assignments in the MS word format. They also reported that with time and practice, their ability to search for information on the Internet and locate required material improved. They used to get those tasks done by others, but after the shift to OE, they had to do them themselves. An aspect of LA that has room for much improvement is a reflection on learning. Just five of the 20 students (25%) mentioned keeping a diary where they reflected on their daily learning. Maybe this practice needs to be taught directly to the students. Teachers should teach students how to keep logs, diaries or portfolios to reflect on their learning. This is a skill that needs to be taught and supervised.

What the students reported in the interview reflected Murphy's description of the OE environment (2011, p. 18) as "*environments of necessity require learners to make choices and decisions, exercising their capacity for autonomy*". Students found themselves in a distance learning environment that required them to be autonomous in order to pursue their learning. In the same time engagement with the distance learning environment increasingly enhanced students' autonomy. Such environments have the inherent potential to promote autonomous behavior in learners because they facilitate self-access learning and give learners numerous opportunities to self-direct their learning (Benson, 2001). A point that is noteworthy here is that OE should not be totally discarded once conventional classroom-based education is assumed. It was an emergent shift as a solution to the blockage during the pandemic and it proved beneficial as maintained by several scholars and empirical research. When asked about how they found the OE experience, the students reported that it was beneficial and wished it would not end completely after the conventional education was assumed. They, therefore, recommended that blended education would be used when normal life would be assumed.

That OE enhances students' LA has been both theoretically and empirically supported. Furnborough (2012) and Santos and Camara (2010) maintain that OE by its very nature enhances learners' autonomy. Spatial separation and the multiplicity of learning resources entail that students make informed decisions about their learning and manage their time well. OE also makes it possible that learners practice what scholars call collective autonomy through synchronous online meetings or asynchronous discussion forums. Online applications that allow for synchronous interaction provide FL learners with opportunities to get involved in authentic interaction. Such theoretical contentions have been empirically supported. The findings of the current study are in line with all previous studies, especially the study conducted by Zhong (2018) that used a similar method, i.e., qualitative data analysis. In that study, a learner engaged with a technology-

mediated environment was reported to become a critical user of multiple online resources, a collaborative online learner and a more capable manager and organizer.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings of the current study support the positive impact of OE on the LA of Saudi EFL learners who have been traditionally described as non-autonomous. Thus, OE should not be totally discarded when traditional classroom-based education is assumed. Blended education is therefore recommended where the two modes of OE and classroom-based education are used side by side. Since only 25% of the interviewed students reported gains in reflection on learning as one of the aspects of LA, teachers are advised to teach students to reflect on their learning by using such tools as learning portfolios and diaries.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## About the Author

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