English as a foreign language learner autonomy in vocabulary development

Variation in student autonomy levels and teacher support

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Abstract

Purpose – An examination of the research literature suggests that no attempt has been made to examine learner autonomy development within female university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Given that English has become the world's predominant lingua franca for academia, business, and politics, the purpose of this paper, therefore, is to fill this gap in the literature.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a qualitative case study that aims to explore learner autonomy in vocabulary development.

Findings – The results showed that teachers are cognizant of the concept of learner autonomy. However, they are not all certain of the benefits of autonomous vocabulary learning. This study reveals how six adult learners' levels of autonomy are highly influenced by their teachers' practices. This study draws out suggestions for English language teachers who promote learner autonomy theory and practice. It also offers specific guidance, models, and adapted learning approaches of how to promote autonomy inside the classroom.

Research limitations/implications – This study encountered several limitations. The first is time: the study took place over the course of two months in the Summer of 2016, when students were fully encumbered with schoolwork and social duties. The recruitment of participants during that time was a challenge. Some of the students who agreed to participate in the study were not fully engaged in the research. Additionally, the study faced difficulties with faculty commitment – one of the professors delayed the interview session multiple times and perceived some of the interview questions negatively. In addition, Dickinson's (1993) characteristics of learner autonomy are largely related to the opportunities that are presented to the students by the teacher. It appears that Dickinson's scale was meant to be used to identify students' level of autonomy, particularly inside the classroom. However, because of some of the examples of activities pertaining to how they learned vocabulary outside the classroom, they were not related to classroom teaching. Also, the number of the participants is limited in this study.

Practical implications – A future study could be undertaken to measure and quantitatively analyze learners' vocabulary development on a larger scale. Research could also be conducted using a pretest, an intervention, and a posttest to measure the effectiveness of learning vocabulary autonomously. In addition, other pedagogical approaches could be utilized to measure EFL students' intrinsic motivation and autonomy, which play critical roles in learning. Allowing learners to self-select their preferred method of learning can help them to develop their vocabulary knowledge. The findings from this study reveal that learner autonomy plays a significant role in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary development.

Originality/value – When students learn vocabulary autonomously, they are better able to source the lingua franca's core pronunciation of a word and its spelling without the influence of the teacher's cultural background. Given the magnitude of teachers' workloads, they may lack the time for designing lessons that adequately meet the needs of diverse learners. Therefore, the practical way to ameliorate the problem of inadequate time is to

provide them with methods (e.g. using strategies such as inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and project-based learning) that they can use to more readily foster learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is defined as a learner's willingness to take taking responsibility for participating, applying, monitoring, and evaluating his/her learning, which is usually developed with the support of a teacher. Research has shown that learner autonomy is the key for vocabulary development (Dogan and Mirici, 2017; Hu and Zhang, 2017; Kameli *et al.*, 2012; Kristmanson *et al.*, 2013; Li, 2015; Phan and Hamid, 2017; Tuan, 2011). The idea of fostering autonomy in vocabulary development for English as a foreign language (EFL) students has not been widely implemented in the field of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (Almusharraf, 2018). It is important that students become autonomous language learners, and become therefore able to contribute to their learning development, without relying too much on the teacher's input, and to continue their learning independently outside of the classroom. Therefore, teachers need to assist their EFL students in developing autonomy in vocabulary learning so that these students can make more effective use of the English language.

An examination of the research literature suggests that no attempt has been made to examine learner autonomy development within female university-level EFL students in the KSA. Given that English has become the world's predominant lingua franca for academia, business, and politics, this study, therefore, intends to fill this gap in the literature. To examine how teachers can foster autonomous learning, it is important to explore different methods that can support teachers in enhancing student autonomy for university EFL students. Yan (2012) urged teachers to play a role in the development of their students' learner autonomy, especially given their role as knowledge-giver within the classroom. When students learn vocabulary autonomously, they are better able to source the lingua franca core pronunciation of a word and its spelling without the influence of the teacher's cultural background. Given the magnitude of teachers' workloads, they may lack the time for designing lessons that adequately meet the needs of diverse learners. Therefore, the practical way to ameliorate the problem of inadequate time is to provide them with methods (e.g. using strategies such as inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and project-based learning) that they can use to more readily foster learner autonomy.

2. Literature review

There are many theoretical frameworks that have shaped the idea of students' learner autonomy. John Dewey (1916) established the foundation for the development of learner autonomy in his book *Democracy and Education*. He highlighted the importance of generating a supportive teaching environment that promotes students' persistence in learning rather than the pure acquisition of knowledge and subject matter (Benson, 2001). However, the idea of learner autonomy was not fully developed until the 1970s when Rubin (1975) attempted to identify the characteristics of successful language learners. Educational theorists believed that such characteristics, skills, and strategies could be taught to less successful learners (Rubin, 1975). Later, Holec (1981) coined the term "learner autonomy," which he defined as "taking control over one's learning" (p. 3). Moreover, Dickinson (1993) defined a learner in the condition of total control over the learning process as an autonomous learner. Dickinson's classifications of learner autonomy are as follows:

(1) autonomous learners understand what is being taught;

(2) autonomous learners can formulate their learning objectives;

(3) autonomous learners select and make use of appropriate learning strategies;

(4) autonomous learners identify strategies that are not working for them; and

(5) autonomous learners self-assess or monitor their learning (pp. 330–331).

Theoretical frameworks and approach
The theoretical framework that underpins this study is constructivism. In the constructivist approach, teachers do not give sets of directions and structures; instead, each learner brings his/her own understanding and relates it to the target language or task at hand. Consequently, constructivist approaches support self-directed learning as an essential condition for learner autonomy.

Gray (1997) asserted that constructivism is a student-based learning method rather than a teacher-based one. According to Gray, the teacher's role should be to enable the students' learning process by allowing them to visualize, create, guess, explore, and construct knowledge. Regarding social constructivist viewpoints in education, Dickinson's (1993) five autonomous learner characteristics are fully centered on learning, not on teaching. This emphasis encourages the use of autonomous learning and the individual's contribution to his/her own learning. Nevertheless, while learners are reinforced to practice autonomy through interdependence and teamwork, their practice should happen within a social context (Little, 2007). An example of autonomous learning classroom is a classroom that encourages using approaches such as real-life-based problems for students to negotiate and offer solutions. Such a classroom learning environment can also foster the development of competencies for articulating one's thoughts, either through speaking or writing.

Po-ying (2007) used a strategy, which she named exploratory practice (EP), for helping her Chinese college students learn English. She developed this strategy in accordance with Dickinson's (1993) five-framework model and found that her students had mostly positive reactions to the opportunity to learn through EP.

Fostering autonomy in vocabulary development
Vocabulary development is an essential aspect of gaining facility with understanding, speaking, reading, and writing any new language, and learner autonomy is an important factor in maximizing the development of an enhanced lexicon. The following studies provide some evidence supporting these two claims.

Focusing on a distinctive aspect of autonomous learning research within a formal postsecondary setting, Kameli *et al.* (2012) examined the impact of several factors on Malaysian university EFL students' vocabulary learning strategies. Among the most significant of these factors were the degree to which the teacher encouraged student learning, the amount of peer-review support, and the method of teaching. Participants also reported that working on assignments within the classroom and using textbooks are valuable strategies for learning new vocabulary. Finally, the participants noted that their peers can have an impact, positive or negative, on their learning of new vocabulary. Support from other students within the classroom was seen to foster positive attitudes toward learning new vocabulary within the study participants, while negative comments from classmates limited the participants' willingness to persevere in their vocabulary development.

In addition, the data yielded from studies by Kristmanson *et al.* (2013), Li (2015), and Schuster (2012) provide convincing evidence of the need for autonomous learning in schools. These studies were designed to explore how some tools, such as portfolios, diaries, and private learning sessions could support learner autonomy. These researchers conceptualized learner autonomy in both theory and practice, suggesting that there are

significant differences in the implementation of learner autonomy in secondary schools within Canada, China, and Australia, respectively. The findings also showed that teachers should have intercultural awareness and revealed an understanding of how EFL students develop their learning process through the creation of portfolios and through class participation, two strategies that advance autonomous learning. By portraying teachers as facilitators, assistants, and counselors, these studies expand the understanding of the teacher's role in developing learner autonomy. Taken together, these studies accentuate teachers' responsibility for fostering student accountability and responsible learning. Also, the students' standpoints in these studies are very significant because they perceive the teachers as central supporters of their learning autonomy.

Students' role in autonomous vocabulary learning
English language learners must be autonomous and self-determined, working diligently to learn vocabulary beyond the school environment, because exposure to the target language may be limited in the classroom. Therefore, as Tuan (2011) argued, teachers should encourage their students to self-govern their vocabulary development by taking notes and using new words in a variety of real-life contexts.

Butler and Lee (2010) sought to explore the effectiveness of self-assessment as a way to promote autonomous learning among 254 learners studying EFL in South Korea. A quantitative investigation in the classroom showed some positive effects of autonomous learning and self-assessment among students, including an improvement in their English performance. Another outcome of this research was an improvement in students' ability to self-assess, thereby improving their vocabulary learning and performance over time as these students attempted to notice language errors and self-edit them. Butler and Lee concluded that autonomous learning supports the enhancement of English vocabulary learning.

Tseng and Schmitt (2008) explored the significance of motivation in the vocabulary learning development by examining a structural model that significantly integrates the students' motivation and level of vocabulary with six latent variables. These variables include first assessment of vocabulary learning experience, self-regulating ability of vocabulary learning, strategic vocabulary learning participation, mastery of vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary knowledge, and postassessment of the efficiency of vocabulary learning strategies. The participants in this study were 49 students from a Taiwanese university and 210 students from a Chinese university (130 males, 129 females). Tseng and Schmitt gathered quantitative data from questionnaires and vocabulary tests that were controlled by psychometric scales. A key finding from this study was that self-regulation, which often characterizes autonomous learning, plays a vital role in the development of a lexicon. This finding suggests that motivation may be the force behind the increased rate of learning behavior, where a student will understand the importance of carrying out autonomous learning and research in the library. It can thus be argued that the integration of motivation and self-regulation in the learning process is essential for the enhancement of autonomous learning and should, therefore, be introduced into schools.

To support the claim regarding the importance of self-assessment in vocabulary development, Chang (2012) conducted a quantitative study to examine ways for students to become autonomous learners while learning some aspects of writing development. Chang explored how online feedback, along with allowing students to select their own topic and rewrite their works independently, could promote learner autonomy. The participants of this study were 3 male and 11 female freshmen students at a public university in northern Taiwan. These students were chosen carefully by considering their choice of English as a major and their English language readiness. Data collection consisted of participants'

writing samples, learning surveys, and interviews. The results indicated that students are able to be fully responsible for their own writing, and they are interested in choosing a topic and revising their work. Consequently, Chang suggested that students' autonomy and teachers' feedback are essential to the success of a writing course. However, she indicated that there might be some concerns about the validity of the conclusions drawn from her study due to its limitations, including the small number of target students, an inaccurate description of learner autonomy, and lack of details regarding the impact of the teacher-student relationships in the interview questions.

The gap in the literature

Educational research has examined the necessity for the development of learner autonomy, especially in academic fields. However, little consideration has been given to address the ways in which teachers can foster autonomy in vocabulary development for EFL students (Alrabai, 2017; Alzubi *et al.*, 2017). This study seeks to understand university students' levels of autonomy in learning the English language in KSA. Furthermore, it seeks to better understand teachers' roles in promoting autonomous learning in vocabulary development. This study examined the following research questions:

RQ1. What are EFL learners' autonomy levels in terms of vocabulary development at a university in the KSA?

RQ2. To what extent, if any, do teachers promote learner autonomy for vocabulary development in the university English language classrooms?

3. Method

Study design

This study served as a qualitative exploration of KSA female university-level EFL students' levels of autonomy in English language learning along with their teachers' efforts to promote autonomous learning. Specifically, this study employed a cross-sectional collective case study research design (Stake, 1995), which means that data were collected within the most naturalistic setting possible with little to no manipulation at any specific point in time. The two observed classes were selected from the same grade level and English program within the same university, with the intention of reducing the variance of contextual impacts at the institutional level. This study also employed maximum variation sampling: one class was fully controlled by the teacher and the other class was more student-centered. Data collection included semi-structured interviews of students and teachers and classroom observations that took place from June 2016 to August 2016.

Study site

The university within which this study was conducted is one of the three public universities in the capital city of KSA, Riyadh. This university is structured into 11 colleges, and language and translation is one of them. Faculty are hired from different countries, including the USA, the UK, India, Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria.

Participants

Participants were selected from Level 4 undergraduate classrooms (English poetry) in the Department of English Language and Literature. The two classrooms from which the students were selected each had 39 students. The first six students (three from one classroom that embodied a teacher-centered approach and three from a classroom that embodied a student-centered approach) and the first four teachers (out of a pool of 14)

who responded to an invitational e-mail were selected as the participants for this study. The rationale behind such a method of selection was to ensure the participants' willingness to participate in this study and openly share their thoughts.

Teachers' profile. All of the participating teachers were female English professors teaching Level 4. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their privacy. Table I provides profile information about these teachers.

Students' profile. All participating students were Saudi students from different regions (central, north, south, east, and west) of the KSA. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their privacy. Even though some of the students had repeated levels several times, they were all placed in Level 4 poetry classes. Similar to many university policies in the KSA, students who specialize in the same major are expected to take certain courses in sequence in the same field of specialization. Therefore, all participating students were English students who shared the same major. Students' ages ranged from 22 to 30 years old. All students had passed the English requirement test, which prepares them to move from English basic to English literature and linguistics. This test is the school-based version of basic English language, which was designed by the university English professors. The six student participants were able to speak and write at the intermediate English level and above. Only study-related terms were explained to the students in simple English, and no further Arabic translation was needed.

Wafa. Riyadh, KSA, was her home city. She was 26 years old. She had changed her major from mathematics to English because she was not accepted as an English major in the first place, as English admission requirements are much higher than for some other majors. Thus, she had to transfer to English later in order to pursue her educational goal. Because Wafa started learning English in middle school, data collected from her classroom interaction and three interview sessions demonstrated that her overall English level was advanced.

Atheer. Riyadh, KSA, was her home city. She was 22 years old. Atheer had specialized in English so that she could become a translator, a choice she had made in high school. Data collected from her classroom interaction and three interview sessions demonstrated that her overall English level was intermediate.

Sara. Qassim, KSA, was her home city. She was 24 years old. She had changed her major from computer science to English because she failed in her first semester. Sara's choice of English major was an alternative to her first desired major in computer science. Data collected from her classroom interaction and three interview sessions demonstrated that her overall English level was intermediate.

Reem. Abha, KSA, was her home city. She was 25 years old. Reem had specialized in English because she wanted to be with her friends in the same major, so her choice of a major was not carefully planned. She repeated poetry class (Level 4) two times. Data collected from her classroom interaction and three interview sessions demonstrated that her overall English level was intermediate.

Rana. Dammam, KSA, was her home city. She was 30 years old. Rana had specialized in English to become a Linguistics Teacher, but she had to move to a different city,

Teachers	Age	Degree	Number of years teaching experience	Teaching assignment
Salwa	46	PhD (India)	15	Poetry
Manal	37	PhD (Egypt)	10	Drama
Nouf	39	PhD (Egypt)	9	Novel
Hana	40	PhD (KSA)	5	Poetry

Table I.
Teachers' profiles

Dammam, for a while and then came back to finish the courses requirements. She took English courses in Dammam. Data collected from her classroom interaction and three interview sessions demonstrated that her overall English level was advanced.

Sumaya. Jeddah, KSA, was her home city. She was 27 years old. Sumaya had changed her major from history to English because she found herself more interested in learning a new language. Her reason for choosing English was that she had to travel to a foreign country with her family twice a year and the need for the English language became essential. She hired a private tutor to teach her English after high school. Data collected from her classroom interaction and three interview sessions demonstrated that her overall English level was advanced.

Data collection

Classroom observations. Two English literature classes were observed twice a week for eight weeks. Each observation period lasted 45 min during which students' participation in class, teachers' involvement with students, and the instructional method implemented were recorded for transcription and analysis. During each observation period, a classroom observation protocol based on guidelines and task analysis borrowed from Wajnryb (1992) was completed. These guidelines were used to explore the practice of teaching and learning in these classrooms, especially regarding students' participation and seating arrangement, in order to understand the role of learner autonomy inside the classroom environment. The researcher's personal thoughts and comments were also documented in each session.

Semi-structured interviews

Students. The six student participants were interviewed and audiotaped three times throughout the study: prior to the Summer term (June, 2016) to gather general information about their preferred method of learning and their perception of learner autonomy, after four weeks of the Summer term (July, 2016) to ascertain their attitude about the current instructional method they were receiving and their perception about the effectiveness of this method, and at the end of the term (August, 2016) for any final opinions and ideas they had that may have differed from their initial answers given during the first interview. Each interview lasted approximately 45 min.

Teachers. The four teacher participants were interviewed individually and audiotaped (June, 2016) in order to ask them for their perceptions of learner autonomy, its relation to vocabulary development, and information about their current teaching method along with their perception of its effectiveness. Each interview lasted approximately 45 min.

Data analysis

The audiotapes of the interview sessions of the teachers and learners were transcribed, and all observation records were coded manually. Data analysis was guided by Dickinson's (1993) five features of learner autonomy and Benson's (2007) explanation of the features of independent learners. A doctoral student, who was an EFL major and who was not involved in this study, served as a second coder and checked the researcher's initial themes in order to increase the validity of the inferences drawn from the data (Saldaña, 2015). Next, thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used as an analytic technique for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79) by systematizing and designating the data "in (rich) detail" (p. 79). The central themes derived from this analysis were the students' level of variation in learner autonomy and the extent to which teachers promoted autonomous learning.

4. Results

From this study of the interaction among teachers and their EFL students with respect to the development of learner autonomy in vocabulary development, three findings emerged. The first finding is that there were varying levels of autonomy among the students, which can be identified as low, moderate, and high. The students did not appear to know how to define learner autonomy, and, therefore, the definition of such concept was presented to them during the interview. The second finding is that the teachers were aware of the benefits of learner autonomy with regard to vocabulary development, but they did not necessarily approve of or practice an approach that would encourage the development of learner autonomy. Finally, while the teachers' method of instruction influenced their students' learner autonomy development, this development may have been influenced by other social and psychological factors that varied in their degree of influence from one student to another (Benson, 2013). These findings are described below as they relate to the two research questions posed for this study:

RQ1. What are EFL learners' autonomy levels in terms of vocabulary development at a university in the KSA?

To answer this research question, Dickinson's (1993) features of autonomy were used in order to obtain a closer analysis of each student's use of learner autonomy. Next, each student was placed on a continuum from a high to a low level of autonomous learning on the basis of data collected from her interviews and participation in class. "High" autonomy defines a student who perceives a great deal of learning control of classroom autonomy and meets four or five out of five of the learner's autonomy features as described by Dickinson. "Moderate" autonomy defines a student who perceives less than "a great deal of learning control" and meets three of the learner's autonomy features. "Low" autonomy defines a student who has less than "moderate control" and meets less than three of the learner autonomy features. A summary of the findings for each student, in relation to her level of autonomy based on Dickinson's features, is presented in Table II:

(1) Wafa's high level of autonomy
    Wafa can be classified as a very independent Student with a high degree of self-esteem that affected her way of learning. For example, the interview was initiated by asking Wafa to talk about herself. She started the interview by looking the researcher in the eye and said: "I am so smart and I do not need an IQ test to prove that." When asked about the importance of learning English vocabulary and the difficulties she faced during learning English vocabulary, Wafa said, "Although I think learning English is important, but in my daily life, I don't use it […] only while traveling." When asked about the purpose she had for choosing English as a major, Wafa mentioned, "I chose to major in English because I wanted to prove to my

Students	Specific features exemplified	Learner autonomy level
Wafa	2, 3, 4, and 5	High autonomy level
Sumaya	1, 2, 3, 4, and 5	High autonomy level
Atheer	1, 3, and 4	Moderate autonomy level
Sara	4	Low autonomy level
Reem	3 and 4	Low autonomy level
Rana	1, 2, 3, and 4	High autonomy level

Notes: Feature 1: can self-assess or monitor her own learning; Feature 2: understands what is being taught; Feature 3: can formulate her own learning objectives; Feature 4: is able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies; Feature 5: is able to identify strategies that are not working for her

Table II.
Students' levels of learner autonomy

husband that I can speak English as he does, and I can learn by myself at home!" In addition, when asked about her preferred method of learning English vocabulary, Wafa said, "I like to keep a journal of the most important vocabulary with different usages […] and I practice it with my husband." Also, she indicated that she had started to learn English vocabulary on her own by reading translated books from Arabic to English until she moved to the stage of reading English-only books. Wafa also mentioned that "speaking with others is the most challenging part of my learning experience because I face difficulties in expressing my ideas and feelings." Wafa was enrolled in Ms Hana's class. She mentioned that "I only prepare for my poetry class because Ms Hana always encourages our interpretations of the poem lines. Even if I am incorrect or do not make any sense, Ms. Hana always finds a way to agree with me!"

While Wafa's ideas are related to an issue with her learning process, it is a sign of autonomous learning to be able to self-identify weaknesses and strengths and to find possible solutions. Her determination of self-learning English vocabulary and expression as well as changing from a mathematics major to English after two years of studying suggests a high level of autonomy.

(2) Sumaya's high level of autonomy

Sumaya was a very ambitious Student who volunteered to be a class leader and note organizer. When asked about the importance of learning English vocabulary and the difficulties faced during learning English vocabulary, Sumaya said, "It is very important, of course, especially nowadays […] The most challenging part of my learning experience was the vocabulary […] it is very demanding in my learning I think […] I don't know why!" When asked about the reason why she chose English as a major, Sumaya mentioned, "My family travels to a different English-speaking country twice a year, and they rely on me to be their translator." When asked about her preferred method for learning English vocabulary, she mentioned, "I am a member at BBC Learning English website, where I learn different stories every day, and I like to listen and write the new vocabulary in note organizers."

Sumaya was enrolled in Ms Salwa's class, and although Ms Salwa did not allow much opportunity for student participation and interpretation of the given poems, Sumaya mostly understood what was being taught, as evidenced by her comment that, "before every lecture I have to read the poem analysis online and translate many difficult words in Arabic to facilitate my understanding." From Sumaya's character and choice of words, it appears that she falls into the description of all five of Dickinson's (1993) autonomous features and may be considered as a student with a high level of autonomy as well as an advanced English vocabulary knowledge.

(3) Atheer's moderate level of autonomy

Atheer was a very social person with a sense of humor. When asked about the importance of learning English vocabulary and the difficulties that she faced during learning English vocabulary, Atheer said, "I need English because it is the world language […] The most challenging part of my learning experience is writing because it needs high skills like deep knowledge of vocabularies, grammar usage, style […]." When asked about her reason for choosing English as a major, she mentioned, "I always dream to be an English to Arabic translator." Moreover, when asked about her preferred method for learning English vocabulary, Atheer stated, "I like to see an American Arabic-translated movies. It is helpful to learn new vocabulary and understand the movie's story."

Atheer was enrolled in Ms Hana's class. She mentioned that "I like the way that Ms Hana teaches. I like hearing different stories every lecture." From this quote,

it appeared that Atheer mostly understood what was being taught or explained in the classroom. However, Atheer mentioned that "I do not like to prepare before class since the teacher is not scary!" From such expression, Atheer appears to have chosen a path of learning that is dependent on other students' contributions in class as part of her learning process. Although she seemed to like others helping her out in class, Atheer understood what was being taught and she argued with different opinions, which suggests a moderate level of autonomy as well as an intermediate English level.

(4) Sara's low level of autonomy

Sara was a very shy person. When asked about the importance of learning English vocabulary and the difficulties that she faced while learning English vocabulary, Sara said, "I feel English is very important, but I do not know how to learn the language so fast. It is a very difficult language, especially vocabulary." When asked about her reason for choosing English as a major, she mentioned, "I wanted to major in computer science, but it was very difficult and I do not think I am smart enough, so I changed my major to English." Also, when asked about her preferred method for learning English vocabulary, Sara said, "I think teachers have to provide list of common words in English and translate them for us […]." Although she had a point that learning common words in English would help in developing English vocabulary, learning this vocabulary requires a student to take the initiative for her own learning.

Sara was enrolled in Ms Hana's class, and she was a quiet Student. She said, "I like Ms Hana's class because she does not make me participate." Sara further explained that while Ms Hana does not force her to participate, she encourages her involvement in learning by having her collaborate with other students and by guiding her to self-explore vocabulary in context. Sara appeared to be very submissive to every task that she or the whole class was asked to do. She rarely expressed her opinion or initiated a conversation. During observations of Ms Hana's class, Sara had a minimal number of responses and short answers to any questions, which suggests that her autonomy level was low.

(5) Reem's low level of autonomy

Reem was a very active person who kept moving from her chair to other places within the classroom throughout the class period. When asked about the importance of learning English vocabulary and the difficulties that she faced during learning English vocabulary, Reem said, "English vocabulary is very important. I want to speak English even with Arabic speakers. It is just fun!" In addition, she said, "School does not provide me with good ways to learn English. English vocabulary needs a lot of work from me and good teaching strategies." When asked about the reason she chose English as a major, Reem mentioned, "I want to be honest with you […] Um […] I majored in English because I wanted to be with my best high school friends in the same college." When asked her about her preferred method for learning English vocabulary, Reem said, "I don't know. Can you tell the best way?" When it was suggested by the researcher that in order to develop her vocabulary learning, she needed to use English in everyday contexts, such as listening to the news, reading stories, and watching movies, Reem replied, "I feel it is boring to do these things in my free time. I like to watch Arabic shows."

Reem was enrolled in Ms Salwa's class, where she had to repeat the course with the same teacher two times. Ms Salwa's class was set as a teacher-centered environment, so Reem was not paying attention in class and she was using her phone all the time. She said, "I do not care if I understand what Ms Salwa's saying in class. At the end, I will get my friend's notes and memorize it before the test." From this statement,

it appears that although Reem's English level was intermediate, she possessed a low autonomy level. These statements reflect Reem's interest in and motivation to learn English.

(6) Rana's high level of autonomy

Rana was a very passionate and caring student. When asked about the importance of learning English vocabulary and the difficulties that she faced with learning English vocabulary, Rana said, "English is an essential language to learn these days as in this country people are not only speaking one language, Arabic. Many foreign in KSA people, they only speak English." She also added, "To me, I believe that writing using academic vocabulary is the difficult part in learning English, especially as I faced many challenging moments where I had to stop going to school and move to different city." Moreover, when asked about her preferred method of learning English vocabulary, Rana stated, "I am trying my best to play the spelling game (hanger game) with my sisters. I like to learn not only the meaning of new words but also their correct spelling."

Rana was enrolled in Ms Salwa's class. She was designated as having a high level of autonomy due to her self-exploration of topics related to curiosity and her continuous self-driven inquiries about different topics. Although Ms Salwa did not pay attention to the students' way of interpreting the poems, Rana was highly motivated to stop the teacher and interject whenever she needed an explanation or wanted to offer her opinion.

After unpacking the students' three levels of learner autonomy in English language learning, the next section is concerned with examining teachers' behaviors and attitudes toward supporting learner autonomy for the purpose of vocabulary development:

RQ2. To what extent, if any, do teachers promote learner autonomy for vocabulary development in the university English language classrooms?

The main subject of the classes under observation was poetry. The two teachers shared the same curriculum on British poetry from the nineteenth century. Data were collected from the same number of Ms Hana's and Ms Salwa's EFL classes. Ms Salwa was a believer in teacher-focused classrooms, while Ms Hana was a supporter of a student-centered classroom. In Ms Salwa's class, the classroom activities and events were limited to exchanging questions that were mostly asked by the teacher. For example, while teaching *The Solitary Reaper* by William Wordsworth, Ms Salwa kept asking students short questions and waiting for rapid responses. The following extract recorded on June 9, 2016 is an example of one such exchange between Ms Salwa and her students:

Ms Salwa: What do we mean by decade?

Student: 10 years.

Ms Salwa: In these 10 years, he came up with the *Lyrical Ballads*. Now *The Solitary Reaper*. Look at the title, *The Solitary Reaper*. Solitary, what is the solitary?

Student: Alone. Alone.

Ms Salwa: Alone. From the word solitude, remember? We did go to solitude last term. What is solitude? What is solitude? That experience of being alone, but certainly not being lonely. You are alone and you are very happy with your being alone. That is solitude. Solitary, one all alone. Reaper. What do you mean by reaper? Who is a reaper?

Student: One who cuts the trees?

Ms Salwa: The plants, the crops. They are reaping it. They are reaping whatever they have sown. Whatever they have sown, they're reaping it. Even in your life, as you sow, so shall you reap.

Whatever you sow in your life, you'll reap it tomorrow. If you sow good seeds, you reap good harvest. If you sow bad seeds, you reap a bad harv–you get a bad harvest, isn't it? As you sow, so shall you reap, *The Solitary Reaper*. Now, I have to tell you these romantic poets, they used to go on walking tours. Do you know what is walking tours?

Student: Yes.

Ms Salwa: Vales, valleys. O' listen, the vale is saying listen to her singing. *O' listen for the vale profound, is overflowing with the sound.* There's so much of quietness and she's singing from her heart. The whole valley is echoing her song. Imagine the whole scene–etc […] What's a nightingale?

Student: Birds.

In Ms Salwa's class, it appeared that the teacher was following the traditional way of teaching (i.e. a teacher-centered classroom). There were very few signs of autonomous learning as students were fed answers instead of exploring knowledge by themselves. Only a few students led the class by answering all Ms Salwa's short-answer questions. Students were sleeping, using their phones, distracted, or nodding their heads waiting for the class to be over. When Ms Salwa was asked in her interview session about her understanding of learner autonomy, she replied that students could not control their own learning and she had to lead the class from start to end to successfully deliver the lesson. She was also asked about some of the instructional strategies that she found effective, and she said, "I am an old professor and I like to follow the teaching traditions." Her understanding of learner autonomy was limited to only allowing the students to ask for clarification when needed and only participating when they were asked to reply to certain tasks. Ms Salwa believed that "students cannot learn by themselves. The teacher should explain and teach." She appeared to discourage learner autonomy in this particular setting.

Another example of Ms Salwa's unwillingness to support learner autonomy may be seen in the following excerpt from a classroom observation conducted on June 30, 2016:

Ms Salwa: Now today's poem is *Ode to Autumn* by John Keats. This is the last of Keats's odes. He died after this. This is the last of Keats's odes. When some people die, you feel very sad they died. When some people die, you don't feel sad. Who is bad, people or you?

Student: The people.

Ms Salwa: When some people die, you feel very, very sad. And there are some people, when they die, you don't feel sad. Who is bad?

Student: Me.

Ms Salwa: -People or you?

Student: Me.

Ms Salwa: You.

Students: crosstalk

Ms Salwa: Who are bad? Who is bad? Both of you. Both. He was bad? Perhaps he died, he is bad. You're still very much alive, and you have still not forgiven him; you're bad also. Both. It's not just you. But it is so sad, you know, when somebody dies and you don't feel bad for that person or sad for that person. It's very sad.

Student: Sometimes you feel sad that we are not sad for them. We feel that we lost our […].

Ms Salwa: How come I'm not feeling bad or sad for the dead person? I'm judging both.

From this excerpt above, it appears that Ms Salwa was just imposing her opinion or what she believed about the poet's opinion. She did not give a space for the students to express

what they felt and thought. Ms Salwa did not welcome any comment that did not match what she thought as if there was always one and only one right answer. These responses between Ms Salwa and her student indicated that she was not satisfied with the student's answer and she only wanted the student to say what she believed. This approach appears to ignore the students' personal feelings, potentially limiting their ability to interpret poems and requiring them to focus their attention on only one figure: Ms Salwa herself.

Two other teacher participants, whose classroom instruction was not observed, were also interviewed about their beliefs about student learning autonomy development. Ms Manal, an English Drama Teacher of Level 5, responded to one of the interview questions about how she usually starts a lesson and whether there are clear objectives for the students. She said:

> I start my lesson by asking them about the previous one. Then I ask someone to read the text. Then I start my explanation. Students read, then I explain. My objectives are written in the syllabus guide that I provided to them at the beginning of the semester.

From this interview with Ms Manal, it appeared that she puts forward little effort to promote learner autonomy in the classroom because she follows the traditional way of teaching, similar to that of Ms Salwa. Similarly, Ms. Nouf, an English Novel Level 4 Teacher, responded to the question regarding her effort in promoting learner autonomy as follows, "We get paid to teach and not to be taught by students!" She mentioned that "it is the students' responsibility to be autonomous learners at home and good listeners at school!" Ms Nouf kept saying that teaching the novel course requires a more in-depth analysis and meaning construction that only can be taught by the expert – the teacher. From a one-time interview with Ms Nouf, it appeared that she had no intention of changing her teaching method to encourage applying some strategies that advocate for learner autonomy.

When compared with the instruction provided by Ms Salwa, Ms Hana's class was an example of an environment that advocated learner autonomy. She started her lesson by telling an unrelated short story to capture the students' attention and introduce them to the new vocabulary that they would be learning in the ensuing lecture. She encouraged her students to participate even if they were not sure of the answers, and she appreciated all of the students' input and praised them frequently. During the interview, Ms Hana was asked about some of the instructional strategies that she found effective, and she said, "I promote self-learning and encourage research, group activities, classification maps, games, and self-evaluation." Ms Hana was aware of the benefits of learner autonomy and she made great efforts for its promotion inside and outside the classroom. She believed that by trusting in the students' abilities, they would find a way toward an explanation, solve a problem, interpret a quotation, and control a situation. Moreover, she allowed the students to use their native language (Arabic) to scaffold the meaning of some difficult English vocabulary. An example of this opportunity for developing learner autonomy may be seen in the following excerpt from a classroom observation on June 22, 2016:

> Ms Hana: Who wants to read the following lines and tell what she thinks?
>
> Student: *Welcome notes top weary bands. Of travellers and some shady haunt among Arabian sands*…In the deserts of Arabia, in the deserts of Arabia we usually have *Waha*. In deserts, we have Waha. What do we call Waha in English?
>
> Student: Oasis I think.
>
> Wafa: Wait! I have a question. Did the poet mean to symbolize the girl's singing to the sounds of birds?
>
> Ms Hana: What do you think?
>
> Student: Yes, he likes the girl's singing to that of a nightingale and a cuckoo bird.
>
> Ms Hana: Sweet. That is so romantic.

This excerpt captures the investigative talk and meaningful communication of students who display self-confidence when asking questions. Wafa consistently asked the teacher exploratory questions about the poem in order to interpret it, and the teacher kept motivating her by asking her to self-reflect. Ms Hana also tried to get her students to decode the poem by giving one reflective question, "What do you think?" that requires self-inquiry and thinking. When students asked questions, they directed inquiries to each other to derive the poem's meaning.

As seen in this previous example, Ms Hana tried very hard to minimize her participation in class discussion and maximize student critical thinking and self-exploration of different ways to interpret the poem. Instead of reading the poem and locating difficult words, she asked the students whether they were willing to read and explain their understanding. This friendly learning environment helped students become eager to learn and willing to participate without fear of being judged for their wrong answers.

The following excerpt demonstrates another example of Ms Hana's classroom atmosphere that was based in self-imagination, which she purposefully permitted:

Ms Hana: What can you see in this picture?

Student 1: A tiger.

Ms Hana: How do you feel about it?

Student 2: Scared.

Student 3: Beautiful.

Student 4: Serious.

Ms Hana: Great! Okay, look at the first stanza and give me your thoughts.

Student 4: Why did Blake repeated tiger two times?

Ms Hana: Good notice. What do you think?

Student: Umm [...] to take us way with imagery?

Student 3: Tigers don't burn? What imagery?

Student 4: It is a message of power and authority.

Student: Wait. I translated immortal. It means living forever. Is he comparing tiger with God?

Ms Hana: Maybe.

Student: Maybe his strength.

Student: Maybe he is wondering how God created a frightening creature who is walking freely in the jungle.

Student: Wow!

Ms Hana: Wow! Good! Any thoughts girls?

This extract started with an open question that aimed to trigger the students' attention. As a result, students answered Ms Hana's question without fear of being mistaken and they kept imagining the "tiger" and relating it with their emergent thoughts. The students were engaged in the open discussion while the teacher had three comments and short replies to stimulate student thinking by giving them positive notes to construct their understanding. Ms Hana did not act as the knowledge-giver in the classroom, but instead she tried to give the students information to help them construct their knowledge of the text. Although the students may have been confused about the meaning of the poem, as evidenced by the

questions they asked, Ms Hana tried to help make meaning of the text by taking the students' responses and repeating them back to the students for elaboration or explanation. The students' questioning and responses were evidence of self-regulation of poem analysis and class participation.

Going through the transcripts as a whole and this excerpt in detail, it appears that Ms Hana achieved a significant goal within her instruction because she encouraged active involvement and created an environment that made the students self-critical, self-inquiring, and independent in making meaning.

5. Discussion

The present study attempted to address students' levels of autonomy in regards to vocabulary development, teachers' efforts in encouraging autonomous vocabulary learning among university students, application of learner autonomy inside the university's EFL classrooms, and possible benefits of developing vocabulary knowledge. This section provides a comparison and a contrast among the results of each case and an examination of the importance of these results with reference to the two research questions. This section also presents a discussion of the findings developed from the in-depth thematic analysis of the interviews and classroom observation notes and, as a result, traces some characteristics of learner autonomy.

With respect to the first research question, the results from this study demonstrate how the six adult learners' levels of autonomy were strongly influenced by their teachers' practices inside the classroom as well as their own practice outside the English classes. Although some students are naturally autonomous in their social life activity, the study shows that students' autonomy in vocabulary learning might be reinforced with the teacher's support of learner autonomy and implementation of such learning strategies.

This study provides a profile of autonomous language learners' characteristics:

(1) They are social and academic leaders of their own learning, as characterized by Wafa, Sumaya, and Rana.

(2) They are self-motivated to learn the English language, as characterized by Rana and Sumaya.

(3) They are self-reflective concerning their English language learning, as characterized by Wafa and Atheer.

(4) They self-designed learning goals for their English learning, as characterized by Wafa, Sumaya, and Atheer.

(5) They are attentive in applying whatever they learn in authentic target language-using situations, as characterized by Atheer.

(6) They believe in the influence of self-determination, as characterized by Wafa and Atheer.

(7) They regularly evaluate their language learning, as characterized by Sumaya.

(8) They constantly examine and apply accessible resources within their learning/living boundaries, as characterized by Atheer, Sumaya, and Rana.

All of these characteristics match well with Dickinson's (1993) five autonomous learner characteristics, the theoretical tenets of constructivism, and the students' various levels of autonomy. Participating students actively showed involvement in their own learning by exploring and reconstructing new ideas and notions. They also reflected on their own experiences, created a curriculum for themselves, and assessed their contextual understanding of vocabulary words through real-world activities. However, we have to

keep in mind that students might be independent in one aspect of learning, yet dependent on others in another aspect, depending on their social, cultural, or emotional status.

With reference to the second research question, it appears that most of the student participants were aware and appreciative of learner autonomy, when it was defined to them, and its potential for vocabulary development. In addition, participating teachers appeared cognizant of the concept of learner autonomy, but most were not sure of the benefits of autonomous vocabulary learning. For example, Ms Salwa was not supportive of promoting autonomous learners, and Ms Mana and Ms Nouf interpreted learner autonomy as a waste of time. These three teachers only believed in the traditional way of teaching and, thus, they limited the degree of students' interactions in class. The reasons that these teachers gave for following this approach was their concern for time constraints within a lecture period and their own lack of expertise in promoting learner autonomy. On the other hand, Ms. Hana was fully aware of the benefits of fostering learner autonomy and she applied that approach inside and outside of her classroom. The data confirm findings from the literature (Hu and Zhang, 2017; Kristmanson *et al.*, 2013; Li, 2015; Schuster, 2012) that when learners are given the opportunity to conceive their own educational and social goals, they will not only develop their vocabulary knowledge but also utilize it meaningfully in real-life events. These findings also align with Reeve's (2009) conclusions that better teaching practice will improve learner autonomy. He stated that, "doing so requires that teachers work through the steps of becoming less controlling, wanting to support autonomy, and learning the practical 'how-to' of classroom autonomy support" (p. 172). He further recommended teachers to "(a) take the students' perspective; (b) welcome students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and (c) support students' motivational development and capacity for autonomous self-regulation" (p. 168).

Students' experiences of autonomous learning strategies are significant for their agency in language learning inside and outside the school context. Also, an unsatisfactory level of vocabulary knowledge may be strongly related to the existence of a teacher-dominant classroom, students as passive listeners, and the absence of students' self-exportation and decision making in regard to vocabulary learning. A closer look at this problem suggests that the development of learner autonomy must include some effective strategies in learning vocabulary autonomously. It can be argued that the learner's input in the academic context plays a vital role in learning vocabulary independently. Dickinson (1993) argued that academic learning achievement requires students' self-regulation of their learning. Based on the constructivist framework, students are encouraged to work individually in developing their vocabulary learning and follow some effective strategies to help enhance their vocabulary learning. Educators, on the other hand, could step down from the an authoritative position chair and allow their students to be self-reflective, self-directed, and self-reliant learners. Allowing learners to self-select their best method of learning can help them to develop their vocabulary knowledge. From the research undertaken here, the findings revealed that learner autonomy can play a significant role in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary development.

This study encountered several limitations. The first is time: the study took place over the course of two months in the Summer of 2016, when students were fully encumbered with schoolwork and social duties. The recruitment of participants during that time was a challenge. Some of the students who agreed to participate in the study were not fully engaged in the research. Additionally, the study faced difficulties with faculty commitment – one of the professors delayed the interview session multiple times and perceived some of the interview questions negatively. In addition, Dickinson's (1993) characteristics of learner autonomy are largely related to the opportunities that are presented to the students by the teacher. It appears that Dickinson's scale was meant to be

used to identify students' level of autonomy, particularly inside the classroom. However, because some of the examples of activities pertaining to how they learned vocabulary outside the classroom, they were not related to classroom teaching. Also, the number of the participants is limited in this study. A future study could be undertaken to measure and quantitatively analyze learners' vocabulary development on a larger scale. Research could also be conducted using a pretest, an intervention, and a posttest to measure the effectiveness of learning vocabulary autonomously. In addition, other pedagogical approaches could be utilized to measure EFL students' intrinsic motivation and autonomy, which play critical roles in learning. Allowing learners to self-select their preferred method of learning can help them to develop their vocabulary knowledge. The findings from this study reveal that learner autonomy plays a significant role in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary development.

In conclusion, it appears that an intriguing finding is that, despite the fact that Ms Hana made a great attempt to help students self-regulate their own learning, it is still very fundamental for her and other educators to implement instructional strategies that are more inclusive and encourage all students to participate, regardless of their language skill level. There are several reasons to emphasize the significance of learner autonomy encouragement for English learning at KSA's universities (Alrabai, 2017; Alzubi *et al.*, 2017). First, as research results have revealed, autonomous learning leads to higher motivation to learn a language (Li, 2015; Tseng and Schmitt, 2008). Second, studies (Dogan and Mirici, 2017; Hu and Zhang, 2017; Kameli *et al.*, 2012; Kristmanson *et al.*, 2013; Phan and Hamid, 2017; Tuan, 2011) have shown that teachers' implementation of autonomous learning strategies supports the development of EFL learners' language proficiency. Thus, English teachers ought to prioritize the deployment of autonomous learning approaches that advance students' learning development.

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