

## Original Research

# Autonomous Learning in Higher Education: An Iraqi EFL Students' Perceptions

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of Iraqi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students regarding autonomous learning (AL) and its impact on their academic development. With the increasing importance of English for communication, education, and career prospects in a globalized world, understanding students' views on AL is critical, especially in Iraq, where traditional, teacher-centered pedagogies dominate. The research employs a survey method, gathering data from 359 EFL students across six universities in Iraq. The questionnaire addresses various aspects of AL, including perceptions, benefits, challenges, independence in learning management, and the role of the teacher. The findings indicate that Iraqi students generally view AL positively, with high scores for motivation, goal-setting, and critical thinking, underscoring the value of learner autonomy. Benefits such as improved problem-solving skills and deeper engagement with course material were frequently mentioned. However, challenges such as difficulty in self-motivation and the lack of social support were also highlighted. Additionally, students expressed a desire for more structured teacher involvement in guiding their autonomous learning efforts. This study concludes that while AL significantly enhances student independence and learning outcomes, the success of AL initiatives in Iraqi higher education depends on providing sufficient support, motivation, and resources for students. The research also emphasizes the need for teachers to play a facilitative role in the AL process. The findings contribute valuable insights into how AL can be adapted to meet the specific needs and challenges of Iraqi EFL learners, offering a foundation for future educational reforms in the region.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iraq has grown significantly, as English plays a crucial role in global communication, economic growth, and academic progress. English is widely recognized as the global language, facilitating the exchange of ideas and strengthening cross-cultural relationships (Ahmad & Ahmad, 2015; Mohammed, 2018). Proficiency in English provides individuals with

greater opportunities for education and professional growth, both domestically and internationally, which is essential for addressing the competitive challenges of globalization (Starke-Meyerring, 2005; Zhang, 2024). In higher education, mastering English is vital for Iraqi students to excel academically and expand their career prospects. Historically, language learning in Iraq has been teacher-centered, with the instructor playing a central role in transferring knowledge to students (Abdulhameed & Louber, 2024; Alqahtani & Alhamami, 2024). While this approach has its merits, it also has significant limitations, including a lack of student engagement, minimal development of learner autonomy, and insufficient adaptation to students' individual goals. As a result, there has been growing attention towards alternative pedagogical methods that promote student autonomy and active participation in the learning process.

Constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes student-centered learning, offers a more active approach to learning, where students build their knowledge through experiences and interactions with their environment (Boulkrooun, 2020; Wertsch, 1984). This theory supports the idea that optimal learning occurs when students are given the freedom to explore and discover knowledge independently. In recent decades, autonomous learning (AL) has emerged as a leading methodology in language acquisition, allowing students greater control over their learning process. AL encourages self-directed learning, helping students set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning experiences. This approach has shown positive impacts on student engagement, critical thinking, and lifelong learning skills (Yurdakul, 2017). Despite its benefits, challenges such as resistance from students and the need for instructors to transition to facilitative roles remain. Furthermore, factors such as motivation, metacognitive skills, and social support are key to the success of AL. Technological advancements have also facilitated AL, offering flexible learning opportunities and fostering collaboration.

Given this context, exploring students' perceptions of AL in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is crucial to understanding how well this method is accepted and implemented by students, particularly in Iraq, where traditional learning models still prevail (Abdulhassan et al., 2024; Mahmood & Mohammadzadeh, 2022; Sadiq, 2022). This research aims to provide in-depth insights into how Iraqi EFL students perceive autonomous learning, the benefits they experience, and the challenges they face in managing their own learning. By examining these perceptions, the study seeks to identify the factors that influence the success or failure of AL, such as motivation, metacognitive readiness, and the support systems available to students. This research is particularly novel in its focus on Iraqi EFL learners, providing valuable insights into how AL can be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of this population. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective teaching approaches, helping to create adaptive and learner-centered methodologies that align with the needs of Iraqi students in the context of EFL education.

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a survey method to collect data from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in their 4th, 6th, and 8th semesters at six universities in Iraq, with a total of 359 respondents. The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire consisting of 28 statements, which are divided into five main sections: perceptions of autonomous learning (8 statements), benefits of autonomous learning (5 statements), challenges in autonomous learning (5 statements), independence in learning management (5 statements), and the role of the teacher in autonomous learning (5 statements). The questionnaire uses a Likert scale to measure respondents' agreement with each statement, with five scale options available: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

The questionnaire used in this study has been validated by five EFL instructors from universities, each with a minimum of 20 years of teaching experience. These experienced educators reviewed the instrument to ensure its content validity, assessing whether the questions effectively measure the intended constructs of autonomous learning, its benefits, challenges, learner independence, and the role of the teacher in the context of EFL education. Their feedback and suggestions were incorporated to refine the questionnaire, ensuring its relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. This validation process enhances the reliability and credibility of the instrument, making it well-suited for assessing the perceptions of Iraqi EFL students regarding autonomous learning.

The data collected from the questionnaire are then analyzed using descriptive statistics, aiming to provide an overview of students' perceptions of autonomous learning in the context of EFL education. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation calculations for each section of the questionnaire, are used to illustrate students' general views on autonomous learning, its benefits, challenges, independence in learning management, and the role of the teacher.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Research subject information

The demographic distribution of the research subjects is presented in Table 1. A total of 359 EFL students from six universities in Iraq participated in the study, with a majority of participants from the 4th semester (166 students, 46%), followed by the 6th semester (98 students, 27%) and the 8th semester (95 students, 26%). In terms of university representation, the students were distributed across six institutions, with the highest number of respondents from University E (78 students, 22%), followed by University C (75 students, 21%), and University A (68 students, 19%). University D had the fewest respondents, with only 36 students (10%). Regarding gender, the sample was predominantly female, with 223 female students (62%) and 136 male students (38%). This distribution reflects a diverse cross-section of EFL students across various academic levels, universities, and gender groups.

**Table 1.** Research Subject Information

Category	N	%
<b>Semester:</b>		
4	166	46
6	98	27
8	95	26
<b>University:</b>		
A	68	19
B	47	13
C	75	21
D	36	10
E	78	22
F	55	15
<b>Sex:</b>		
Male	136	38
Female	223	62

### 3.2. Students' perception of autonomous learning in higher education

The results of the survey on students' perceptions of autonomous learning in higher education are summarized in Table 2. The students' responses were categorized into five aspects: Perceptions of Autonomous Learning, Benefits of Autonomous Learning, Challenges in Autonomous Learning, Independence in Learning Management, and The Role of the Teacher in Autonomous Learning. The data is based on a Likert scale, where the mean (*M*) represents the average score and the standard deviation (*SD*) indicates the variability of responses.

**Table 2.** The Results of The Survey on Students' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning in Higher Education

Aspect	Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceptions of autonomous learning	1	4.05	0.22
	2	4.09	0.29
	3	4.20	0.40
	4	4.15	0.36
	5	4.13	0.34
	6	4.14	0.35
	7	4.16	0.36
	8	4.14	0.35
Benefits of autonomous learning	9	4.10	0.30
	10	4.11	0.31
	11	4.14	0.34
	12	4.13	0.33
	13	4.16	0.37
Challenges in autonomous learning	14	2.00	0.78
	15	3.96	0.73
	16	4.03	1.18
	17	3.89	0.77
	18	3.97	0.68
Independence in learning management	19	4.16	0.37
	20	4.34	1.71
	21	4.22	0.41
	22	4.48	1.81
	23	4.16	0.37
The role of the teacher in autonomous learning	24	4.16	0.37
	25	4.14	0.35
	26	4.15	0.36
	27	4.06	0.25
	28	4.07	0.26

The responses regarding students' perceptions of autonomous learning were highly positive, with all items scoring above 4.0. The highest mean score was recorded for item 3, "I feel more motivated to learn when I have full control over the learning process" ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ), indicating that students are highly motivated by the autonomy in their learning. Other items, such as "I can clearly identify my own learning goals in self-directed learning" ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) and "Self-directed learning allows me to explore course material more deeply than what is taught in class" ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ), also received favorable ratings, suggesting that students feel empowered to manage their study schedules, set goals, and delve deeper into the material.

Students also recognized the significant benefits of autonomous learning. Items in this category received consistently high scores, with the highest being "Independent learning helps me understand the learning material better" ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ). Other benefits included improving problem-solving skills ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ) and developing critical thinking ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ). These results highlight that students see autonomous learning as an effective method for enhancing their academic skills and comprehension.

The challenges associated with autonomous learning received more varied responses. The most significant challenge was "I find it difficult to motivate myself when learning independently without direct guidance from a teacher" ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ), indicating that motivation can be a considerable barrier when students are left to manage their learning independently. While some students expressed confusion about how to organize their learning ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) or felt a lack of social support ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ), these challenges did not overshadow the perceived benefits of autonomous learning.

The data on students' independence in managing their learning showed strong support for the idea that independent learning fosters autonomy. The highest mean score was for "I feel more able to manage my own study time using an independent learning approach" ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ), indicating that students felt more capable of managing their schedules independently. Other items, such as "Independent learning helps me develop better learning habits" ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) and "I feel more independent in deciding what to learn" ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ) also highlighted the positive impact of autonomous learning on students' organizational and planning skills.

The role of the teacher in supporting autonomous learning was also evaluated, with students generally expressing favorable opinions. The mean scores for most items in this category were above 4.0, with "I feel that my teachers give me the freedom to choose how I want to learn" ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ) and "My teacher helps me understand the importance of independent learning in achieving my academic goals" ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ) being particularly high. However, students expressed some desire for greater involvement from their teachers in the planning of independent learning ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ), reflecting a call for more structured support in this area.

In summary, Iraqi EFL students generally perceive autonomous learning as a valuable and motivating approach, with notable benefits in skill development and learning independence. However, challenges related to motivation, lack of guidance, and resource availability were also recognized. Teachers' roles in fostering and guiding independent learning remain essential for students' success in this approach.

The findings from this study indicate that autonomous learning (AL) has a significant positive impact on Iraqi EFL students. The majority of students reported feeling more motivated and engaged when they had control over their learning process. The results of this study are supported by several studies showing that AL has a positive effect on student motivation (e.g., Chalupa & ter Haseborg, 2014; Macaskill & Denovan, 2013; Pan & Gauvain, 2012). This autonomy allowed them to set their own goals, explore course materials more deeply, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Aldosari & Alsager, 2023; Stefanou et al., 2013). These benefits align with the principles of constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active, student-centered learning (Abualhaja, 2019). Furthermore, students expressed a heightened sense of independence in managing their learning, demonstrating the development of self-regulation and time-management skills, which are crucial for lifelong learning.

However, while the benefits of AL are clear, the study also highlighted several challenges that hinder its full effectiveness. One of the primary challenges is the difficulty some students face in motivating themselves when learning independently, particularly in the absence of direct teacher guidance (Ponomariovienė & Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė, 2024; Siziba et al., 2025; Wendimu & Gebremariam, 2024). Additionally, students expressed concerns about the lack of social support and difficulty accessing relevant learning resources. These findings suggest that while AL promotes independence, it also requires a supportive learning environment, including access to quality materials and opportunities for collaboration.

Moreover, students acknowledged the important role that teachers play in facilitating AL, but also expressed a desire for more involvement from their instructors in planning and guiding independent learning. While students value the freedom to choose their learning methods, they indicated that more structured

support would help them manage their learning more effectively (Chen et al., 2026; Liu & Wang, 2024; Ng et al., 2024). This suggests that the transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches should be gradual, with teachers playing a key role in guiding and facilitating the AL process (Ali et al., 2023; Lin, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Wong & Kan, 2022; Yu, 2024).

Future research should focus on several areas to address these challenges and enhance the effectiveness of AL. First, understanding the motivational factors that influence student engagement in AL is crucial, as these factors can determine the success or failure of autonomous learning initiatives. Additionally, exploring how technology can be integrated into AL practices could provide valuable insights into creating more flexible and engaging learning environments. Finally, longitudinal studies could track the long-term impact of AL on students' academic success and professional readiness, providing a deeper understanding of its lasting benefits. Addressing these issues will ensure that AL can reach its full potential in Iraqi higher education.

### 3.3. Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample of 359 students from six universities may not fully represent the diversity of EFL students across all Iraqi institutions, particularly those from smaller or less represented universities. Additionally, the use of self-reported survey data may introduce response bias, as students may provide socially desirable responses or be influenced by their own perceptions of what is expected in autonomous learning. The cross-sectional design of the study also limits its ability to capture the long-term effects of autonomous learning on students' academic and career outcomes. Furthermore, the absence of qualitative data means that the underlying reasons behind students' views on autonomous learning were not fully explored, and the study did not assess specific teaching strategies or institutional support systems that might influence the success of AL. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal studies, qualitative methods, and a broader sample to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing autonomous learning in higher education.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant positive impact of autonomous learning (AL) on Iraqi EFL students, particularly in enhancing their motivation, critical thinking, and independence in managing their learning. While students generally view AL as a valuable and motivating approach, challenges such as self-motivation, lack of guidance, and limited access to resources were also identified. The role of teachers remains crucial in facilitating AL, with students expressing a need for more structured support in planning and guiding their learning. To optimize AL's effectiveness, future research should focus on understanding the motivational factors driving student engagement, exploring technological integration into AL practices, and conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term benefits of AL in higher education. These findings provide valuable insights for developing learner-centered teaching approaches that can better support Iraqi students in their academic journeys.

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There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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## ETHICAL STATEMENT

This research has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC), University of Karbala.

## AI USE STATEMENT

N/A.

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#### Appendix: Questionnaire to Explore Students' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning in Higher Education

##### Part I: Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

1. I feel that autonomous learning helps me manage my own study schedule.
2. Self-directed learning makes me more responsible for my academic progress.
3. I feel more motivated to learn when I have full control over the learning process.
4. I can clearly identify my own learning goals in self-directed learning.
5. Self-directed learning allows me to explore course material more deeply than what is taught in class.
6. I feel confident in making decisions about the learning methods that best suit my learning style.
7. Self-directed learning encourages me to take the initiative in seeking additional learning resources.
8. I monitor my progress in learning more frequently when given the opportunity to learn independently.

##### Part II: Benefits of Independent Learning

9. Independent learning helps me develop critical thinking skills.
10. Independent learning improves my ability to solve problems independently.
11. Independent learning gives me the opportunity to learn at my own pace.
12. Independent learning improves my ability to use technology to support learning.
13. Independent learning helps me understand the learning material better.

##### Part III: Challenges in Independent Learning

14. I find it difficult to motivate myself when learning independently without direct guidance from a teacher.
15. Sometimes I feel confused about how to start or organize my own learning.
16. I feel a lack of social support (from friends or teachers) when learning independently.
17. I find it difficult to find relevant and quality learning resources when learning independently.
18. I feel less confident in making decisions in independent learning without the help of a teacher.

##### Part IV: Independence in Learning Management

19. I feel more independent in deciding what to learn after participating in independent learning.
20. I believe that independent learning will be more effective if I have access to various supporting learning resources.
21. Independent learning helps me develop better learning habits, such as time management and planning.
22. I feel more able to manage my own study time using an independent learning approach.
23. I feel that independent learning allows me to develop my potential better than traditional learning.

##### Part V: The Role of Teachers in Independent Learning

24. I feel that my teachers give me the freedom to choose how I want to learn.
25. My teacher helps me understand the importance of independent learning in achieving my academic goals.
26. My teacher provides resources or materials that support my independent learning.
27. I feel that my teacher provides sufficient guidance to support my independent learning.
28. I feel that my teacher needs to involve me more in the process of planning independent learning.