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# Perceptions of Afghan EFL undergraduate learners towards autonomous learning

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## Abstract

Autonomous learning is extensively acknowledged as a desirable goal in undergraduate education as it is found to comply with learner-centered approaches and enable learners to pursue life-long learning. However, very few empirical researchers have closely examined the actual practices of autonomous learning in the Afghan context. Therefore, the main purpose of the current research project was to investigate EFL undergraduates' perceptions of autonomous learning, strategies used for improving language proficiency, and the extent to which these strategies are deployed. With regard to achieving these objectives, a mixed-method approach was adopted. The quantitative data were analyzed through SPSS v24 by conducting descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that EFL learners had positive perspectives on autonomous learning and were ready to take the initiative in autonomous learning. Qualitative analysis of nine EFL students' interviews revealed that they have to create learning goals for their learning, assess themselves for controlling their learning, and take part in inside and outside classroom activities to improve their language proficiency. This case study concludes that the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts, and the study makes an original contribution to understanding the promotion of autonomous learning at Kandahar University. In addition, this study offers practical implications for policymakers and lecturers who are interested in adopting autonomous learning as a worthwhile educational goal.

**Keywords:** Autonomous learning, EFL learners, Activities, Strategies

## Introduction

In today's world, one aim of any education program is to enable students to use whatever they learn in their own lives (Arshiyan & Pishkar, 2015). If they used whatever they learned in real-life situations, they would actively participate in the process of learning. Teachers may interchangeably act as instructors or facilitators in the classroom (Pham et al., 2023). This scenario might give the impression that students need to take responsibility for their own learning. With this in mind, "Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish, and he eats for a lifetime" is a famous ancient Chinese proverb by Lao Tzu (Nguyen, 2014, p. 1). In fact, at the university framework, the lecturer no longer has to catch the fish for learners but show them how to catch it (Bae & Han, 2019). To be more precise, lecturers transfer knowledge rather than convince EFL learners to become

autonomous learners. Since the introduction of autonomous learning almost 30 years ago, the roles of lecturers and learners have transformed in that lecturers are no longer the sole provider of knowledge and learners are no longer passive learners (Tamer, 2013). In addition, the concept of autonomous learning has had a vital role in foreign language education for several years (Sifakis et al., 2006). In addition to that, the communicative language teaching movement in the 1970s and constructivism and social constructivism theories paved the way for various teaching and learning approaches, focusing mainly on learners as language users interacting with peers. Constructivism sustains versions of autonomy based on individual decisions concerning what and how to learn (Benson, 2001).

Although there are various definitions and descriptions of autonomous learning in the literature (Benson, 2001; Holec, 1979; Little, 1996; Nguyen, 2014), it can be, according to Nguyen (2014), defined as a “learner’s willingness and ability to take responsibility to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate his or her learning in tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the lecturer” (p.1). Additionally, autonomous learning which was initially used in the context of second language education means taking control of one’s own learning (Holec, 1979, p.3). The shift in foreign language education has been inspired by the different ways in which language teaching and learning are conducted and conceived. Precisely, language teaching trends have recently moved to make learners more autonomous and more accountable (Saeheng, 2017). Most importantly, there has been a steady change from traditional approaches to communicative language teaching approaches and learner-centered approaches (Alonazi, 2017). With this in mind, Nunan (2003) connected the concept of autonomous learning with the communicative approach; that is, to learn a language effectively, learners have to be allowed to improve and practice their autonomy. Learner autonomy is today considered a desirable goal in language education (Alonazi, 2017). Generally, autonomous learning is the capacity to take responsibility for one’s learning (Shakeri, 2012).

### **Problem statement**

The education system is experiencing rapid changes today by integrating skills such as communication, collaboration, and creativity. With this in mind, the learners have accepted more responsibility for their learning, which means they are involved in their learning activities. In today’s classrooms, the learners portray a different group of students with a diversity of experiences, ages, and abilities (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). According to the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan (2017), Afghan universities are mostly traditional, with teacher-centered pedagogy and passive student learning, whereas international trends at universities are increasingly moving toward student-centered learning. This is a big challenge at public universities in Afghanistan. To be more precise, Afghan universities urgently need to modernize teaching and learning to reflect and keep pace with international trends. In addition, when Afghan learners come into the universities, they mostly bear the characteristics of dependent learners and are overly dependent on lecturers. Students entering universities seem to be incapable of learning autonomously because they are not sufficiently prepared before secondary education for the challenge of autonomous learning at the university level. Specifically,

autonomous learning is not common for EFL learners in learning the English language (Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2019; Singh Negi & Laudari, 2022).

As a result, it is a frustrating experience for lecturers and learners because universities demand academic achievement. When students are low autonomous learners, they are low achievers (Alrabai, 2021; Henri et al., 2018). This necessitates a great deal of independent study, unlike the secondary and high schools where they come from. The situation stems from learners' over-reliance on lecturers, and they must learn how to survive on their own because the current situation as it stands is unsustainable (Yu, 2020). In autonomous learning, the sooner learners achieve self-confidence, the better for them and their lecturers. Because autonomous learning allows learners to gain self-confidence by mastering all the skills taught to them (Okumus Ceylan, 2021). In addition to that, there are insufficient studies conducted regarding autonomous learning in the Afghan context, particularly at Kandahar University. Similarly, there have not been many studies on autonomous learning in Bangladesh, particularly in the area of EFL teaching and learning (Ali & Alam, 2023). To promote a community of student-centered interaction, there is a need to further investigate autonomous learning because studies in the EFL context deserve much investigation. The aim of this study was to highlight the importance of autonomous learning for EFL learners in general and EFL learners at Kandahar University in particular. It also explored the differences between EFL learners' perceptions of one variable: class level. This study aimed to add to the body of knowledge. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Afghan EFL undergraduate learners perceive autonomous learning?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between participants' responses by their class level?
3. To what extent, if any, do Afghan EFL undergraduate learners deploy autonomous learning strategies while learning?
4. What types of autonomous learning activities do Afghan EFL undergraduate learners use to increase their foreign language proficiency level?

### **Literature review**

Little (1996) asserted that "all genuinely successful learning is, in the end, autonomous," which reflects the key idea that autonomy in language learning is borrowed from constructivism. Constructivism is a view of learning based on the belief that knowledge is not something that can be simply given by the lecturer at the front of the room to learners at their desks. Rather, knowledge is created by learners through an active, mental process of development; learners are the builders and creators of meaning and knowledge. Dang (2010) stated that "the highest level of learner autonomy should still be described via dialogic negotiations and interactions with the immediate situation." This occurs normally in social situations where learners engage in several different situations that enable them to construct linguistic knowledge. Feryok (2013) indicated that social mediation through classroom activities could contribute to the development of autonomous learning. Moreover, classroom activities emphasize cognition that is institutionally, historically, and culturally situated and distributed (Panhwar et al., 2016).

### Related studies on autonomous learning

Tuan (2021) carried out a study in the Vietnamese context where EFL students considered out-of-class activities appropriate learning methods besides inside learning activities. Considering learners' beliefs, Ba (2018) found that the majority of the learners knew their goals, and plans, but were unable to practice and implement them because they were not autonomous learners and depended totally on lecturers, and they were incapable of using the English language autonomously outside the classroom. With regard to autonomous learning, Al-Khawlani (2018) conducted a comparative study and embodied that EFL learners who were goal-oriented appeared to have higher beliefs towards autonomous learning and demonstrated better planning and autonomy. The author further stated that EFL learners perceive autonomous learning as very important and that it assists them in achieving their learning goals. Regarding EFL learners' overall perceptions related to autonomous learning, Abdel Razeq (2014) revealed that Palestinian lecturers were accountable for most areas of students learning and preferred spoon-feeding instructional practices. Similarly, Almusharraf (2018) revealed EFL learners' attitudes, who showed a strong inclination toward autonomous learning activities inside and outside the classroom only when lecturers supported learning autonomy. Moreover, Chang's (2020) results highly value the importance of autonomous learning to cultivate an important ability for language learners in the context of Taiwanese universities from the perspective of EFL teachers.

In a study by Wejira (2019), Ethiopian EFL learners disclosed that they were not keen to participate in cooperative learning activities because they lacked the readiness to take responsibility for their learning. However, Chan (2001) also revealed learners' perceptions of high-level readiness for autonomous learning in Hong Kong, whereas their self-confidence to execute activities autonomously was moderate. Alzubi et al.'s (2017) study on Saudi EFL learners' readiness indicated satisfaction with taking charge of their learning as learners lacked sensibility in terms of cognitive aspects to take responsibility for learning English inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, Bozkurt and Arslan (2018) investigated Syrian refugee EFL learners' opinions about autonomy and readiness for autonomous learning and that learners needed to be reinforced with the required skills and knowledge to eliminate negative thoughts regarding autonomy which would probably increase their perceptions of they are correlated with readiness. To be precise, EFL learners' readiness for autonomous learning would likely increase only when their positive perceptions about autonomous learning increased. Asiri and Shukri (2020) found in their study that Saudi female EFL learners showed readiness for autonomous language learning; however, these learners had issues understanding the concept. This means that learners were not quite ready to perform as autonomous learners because of too much dependency on lecturers. Tuan (2021) examines learner autonomy by looking at how learners take control over their own learning by using a set of tactics. It includes identifying goals, selecting materials and tasks, planning practice opportunities, and monitoring and evaluating learning progress. Wiriyakarun (2003) found in a carried out study that Thai EFL learners need sufficient training to choose well-prepared materials before attending the class. This will indeed assist EFL learners to become autonomous learners.

The primary components of learning engagement are behavioral and cognitive inputs (Zhang, 2022). Progressive pedagogy emphasizes the active role of students

and outside-classroom learning as cognitive and behavioral aspects of learning (Horváth, 2007). The above-mentioned factors, such as creating learning goals, inside and outside classroom activities foster certain behavioral and cognitive components of learning management. There have been numerous researches on learner autonomy. For example, Tuan (2021) examined private university fifty sophomores' beliefs and practices in Vietnam. Similarly, Scheb-Buennner (2018) studied fifty-seven students' understanding of autonomous learning in Thailand. Another study was also conducted by Ali and Alam (2023) in Bangladesh on a private university's sixty students. Compared to the prior two studies, this study examined the factors affecting students' autonomous learning. Asiri and Shukri (2020) carried out a study in Saudi Arabia context. This study only examined one hundred fifty preparatory female learners' perceptions. Finally, Yang et al. (2022) carried out a study in China by collecting data from senior high school students in Jilin and Liaoning provinces located in northeast China. This study examined the influence of the classroom environment on students' autonomy. Notwithstanding, while the above studies have examined students' perceptions, beliefs, and practices at schools and private universities in various Asian contexts, the current study on this topic, particularly in the Afghan setting, is still relatively small. To address this gap in the literature, this study utilizes a mixed-method approach with a sample of 244 (male & female) participants and nine respondents for interview. In this regard, the focal case in the current study is EFL learners (male & female) at a public university by examining their beliefs about autonomous learning.

### Research design

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The use of mixed-methods research in studies may well play a key role in the improvement of our field because outcomes attained from different methods have the potential to enhance our understanding of problems and questions (Molina-Azorín, 2016). Mixed method research, in this regard, may increase its worth and contribute to advancing our research topics in the field. The researcher selected a mixed-methods approach because of the belief that relying merely on quantitative data is not sufficient to explore why and how learners develop autonomous learning. With regard to a qualitative study, the selection of participants intends to locate information-rich individuals and sites for the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Thus, the quantitative and qualitative data sets for the current research were collected separately in a sequential mixed-method design before concluding the comparison process of the results. Since this is a case study, it enables the researcher to gain great insight into a case where the focus is on a specific context (Yin, 2013). In this vein, the case study approach was used to build up a rich picture of autonomous learning in the research context of this study by "using different kinds of data collection and gathering the views, perceptions, experiences, and/or ideas of diverse individuals relating to the case" (Hamilton, 2011). This study, in particular, employs a survey and interviews to explore how autonomous learning is perceived and practiced in Afghan EFL language learning classrooms.

**Population and sampling**

The respondents and participants of this case study were all EFL learners from the Education Faculty and Languages and Literature Faculty at Kandahar University, where their perspectives were discovered. Participants for this study consisted of EFL learners from freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classrooms. A random sample of 244 EFL learners (male & female) participated in this study from a total population of 693. According to Krejcie and Morgan’s list (1970), for a population of 693 subjects, a sample size of 244 subjects is required to represent the whole population. The members of the random sample are nominated randomly and purely by chance (Bhardwaj, 2019). Meanwhile, the researcher intended to purposefully select and invite nine EFL learners (4 males & 5 females) for individual interviews who learn in English departments in these two faculties at Kandahar University. These respondents were enrolled in junior and senior classes. They were chosen on the basis of their willingness. Their identities were anonymized using pseudonyms. Therefore, an appropriate sampling technique should be purposeful and based on the assumption that a researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight (Etikan et al., 2016). Table 1 presents an overview of respondents’ profiles.

**Instruments**

In this study, data were collected through two instruments, namely a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview instrument for EFL learners. The closed-ended questionnaire is composed of three parts. The first part aimed to collect the participants’ demographic information (e.g., gender, class, age, shift, and faculty). The entire research was based on the understanding that autonomous learning has two levels, a behavioral and a cognitive one. The second part is composed of two parts namely the cognitive component (8 items) and the behavioral component (4 items) adapted from Tran (2020) with minor modifications to explore learners’ perceptions. Initially, Tran utilized this questionnaire to assess the significance of and interest in autonomous English vocabulary learning. Also, Tran used this questionnaire for first and second-year students who were majoring in English language. Whereas the researchers utilized it with minor changes for investigating EFL learners’ beliefs about how EFL learners perceive autonomous learning in general. It consists of two key domains: a cognitive component containing 8 items (e.g., “Autonomous learning plays an important role in

**Table 1** Respondents’ profile

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Class	Faculty
R1	Female	22	Senior	Languages & Literature
R2	Male	26	Senior	Education
R3	Male	26	Senior	Languages & Literature
R4	Female	21	Senior	Education
R5	Female	18	Junior	Languages & Literature
R6	Female	18	Junior	Languages & Literature
R7	Female	19	Junior	Education
R8	Male	21	Junior	Languages & Literature
R9	Male	22	Junior	Languages & Literature

English language learning” & “Autonomous learning is necessary for English language learning”) and a behavioral component containing 4 items (e.g., “I find it interesting to learn English autonomously” & “I find it enjoyable to learn English autonomously”). All aspects had a four-point Likert-type scale for response (i.e. 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, and 4 = strongly disagree). The researchers used these two measures (cognitive component & behavioral component) developed for first and second-year EFL learners. Additionally, the learners’ interview instrument adapted from Almusharraf (2021) consisting of 4 items for obtaining more insight was used to measure the strategies employed for implementing autonomous learning. This instrument Almusharraf used primarily investigated respondents’ insight into autonomous learning strategies in vocabulary development.

**Validity of the instruments**

The instruments were presented to an expert in the field of education for constructive feedback to establish the validity of the instrument and they were properly improved in light of the suggestions of the expert. The expert was consulted regarding the context, content, structure, and to ensure that the questions included in the instruments covered all features of the research and their research questions (Collis & Hussey, 2009). It was also done to ensure that correct wording was used and that grammatical errors that can influence the result of the study were addressed.

**Questionnaire reliability**

To examine the internal reliability, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated, which indicates that two of the categories reported above have 0.70 alpha levels. Overall, the questionnaire seemed reliable for the research purpose. Questionnaire category alpha levels are as follows (Table 2):

**Data collection procedure and ethical issues**

According to Lutabingwa and Nethonzhe (2006), important ethical issues are involved in any social research, including that in education, which deals with the beliefs, values, and lives of people. Since this study involves EFL learners, it was a requirement to seek approval from the university, dean of the faculty, and heads of the departments before data collection. Prior to the questionnaire distribution, lecturers were notified upon consent, and a brief introduction was made to the learners about the survey. The data was collected through a questionnaire from 244 EFL learners during classes. Similarly, before the interview, the respondents were informed in advance about the purpose, the nature of the study, the issues, and the procedures of the interview. Data collection was confidential, and only the researcher was authorized and had access. Data was collected from individual EFL learners using semi-structured interviews to gather their beliefs and

**Table 2** Reliability of the questionnaire

Categories	Number of items	Items deleted	Alpha
Cognitive Component	8	–	0.75
Behavioral Component	4	–	0.70

learning experiences for this study. The length of the discussion with each interviewee varied from thirty to forty-five minutes, and each interview was recorded using a cell-phone. The researchers conducted the interviews with the respondents in the English language. The procedure for data collection was arranged over 2 months (September & October of 2022).

### **Method of data analysis**

The data were analyzed in several stages after being collected through student questionnaires and student interviews. Precisely, quantitative data included closed items in the student questionnaire and was analyzed by Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 using descriptive statistics to show the frequency, percentage, and mean of the data. Furthermore, inferential statistics (One-Way ANOVA) were used to explore the differences among EFL learners' grade levels. The qualitative data analysis, on the other hand, contained identifying, coding, and categorizing emerging themes found in the data (Woods, 2011). The researcher first transcribed the audio-recorded interview collected through open-ended items in the student questionnaire and then manually categorized the central themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview transcriptions. The researcher referred to the theories of Miles and Huberman in analyzing the data. This consists of three steps: data reduction (by summarizing, coding, and unraveling themes), data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 10–11).

### **Reliability of the qualitative results**

To validate the authenticity of the qualitative analysis, the researcher referred to an outside peer perspective who has published several qualitative research papers on teacher education to examine the perceptions and opinions of learners and double-check the coding structure. In addition to that, all respondents were informally invited for member checks to review the accuracy, make changes to their insights to avoid any misinterpretation, and share further information to increase the reliability of the results (Bashir et al. 2008).

## **Findings**

This section is dedicated to presenting the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Quantitative analysis**

In the following table, the analysis of participants' gender illustrated that 221 (90.6%) were male, and 23 (9.4%) were female. The majority of the participants 131 (53.7%) were 22–26 years old, 104 (42.6%) of them were between 18 and 21, 7 (2.9%) of them were 27–30 years old, and there were only 2 (0.8%) participants who were above 30 years old. As for year of study, 56 (23%) of the participants were freshmen, 38 (15.6%) were sophomores. Juniors and seniors constituted 85 (34.8%), and 65 (26.6%) of the participants respectively. In terms of shift, 223 (91.4%) participants were from day shift and only 21 (8.6%) of them were from night shift. Regarding the faculty, 152 (62.3%) participants

were studying in the Languages and Literature Faculty, followed by 92 (37.7) students from Education Faculty (Table 3).

#### Findings related to the first research question.

The following table shows Afghan EFL learners' perceptions of autonomous learning in relation to the cognitive components and behavioral components.

Table 4 indicates that 93% of the EFL learners strongly agreed that autonomous learning improves their reading skills. Also, 92.3% of the learners strongly agreed that, for learning a language, autonomous learning is very necessary. 91.4% agreed to learn autonomously to develop their language proficiency. Additionally, 89.7% of the learners agreed that autonomous learning plays an important role in learning the English language. The table further clarified that 82.7% of the learners find autonomous learning interesting for learning a language, especially the English language.

#### Findings related to the second research question

Table 5 shows one-way ANOVA results for autonomous learning among EFL learners' levels of education to determine if there is any significant difference. The one-way ANOVA analysis indicates that there is no significant difference among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior EFL learners in autonomous learning in terms of the two components: cognitive component ( $f(3, 240) = 0.926$  &  $p = 0.429$ ) and behavioral component ( $f(3, 240) = 1.309$  &  $p = 0.272$ ) (Table 6).

Similarly, the post-hoc LSD multiple comparison analysis also indicates that there is no significant difference between educational levels and autonomous learning.

**Table 3** The participants' demographic profile

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	221	90.6
Female	23	9.4
<i>Age</i>		
18–21	104	42.6
22–26	131	53.7
27–30	7	2.9
Above 30	2	0.8
<i>Level of education</i>		
Freshman	56	23.0
Sophomore	38	15.6
Junior	85	34.8
Senior	65	26.6
<i>Shift</i>		
Day	223	91.4
Night	21	8.6
<i>Faculty</i>		
Education	92	37.7
Languages & Literature	152	62.3
Total	244	100.0

**Table 4** EFL learners' perceptions of autonomous learning

No items frequency and percentage%			
		Strongly agree and agree	Mean
<i>Cognitive components</i>			
1	Autonomous learning plays an important role in English language learning	219 (89.7%)	1.63
2	Autonomous learning is necessary for English language learning	225 (92.3%)	1.66
3	Autonomous learning helps me to develop my English language proficiency	223 (91.4%)	1.63
4	Autonomous learning helps me to improve my speaking skills	204 (83.6%)	1.80
5	Autonomous learning helps me to improve my listening skills	194 (80.3%)	1.93
6	Autonomous learning helps me to improve my reading skill	227 (93%)	1.63
7	Autonomous learning helps me to improve my writing skills	206 (84.4%)	1.81
8	Autonomous learning helps me to understand English grammar	163 (66.8%)	2.16
<i>The overall mean score of cognitive components</i>			1.78
<i>Behavioral components</i>			
9	I find it interesting to learn English autonomously	202 (82.7%)	1.97
10	I find it enjoyable to learn English autonomously	200 (81.9%)	1.95
11	I set the goals for autonomous English learning	174 (71.3%)	2.11
12	I often prepare classroom materials for myself before class	193 (79.1%)	1.93

*The overall mean score of behavioral components is 1.99*

**Table 5** One-Way ANOVA: autonomous learning among different Levels of Education

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<i>Cognitive component</i>					
Between groups	0.642	3	0.214	0.926	0.429
Within groups	55.417	240	0.231		
Total	56.059	243			
<i>Behavioral component</i>					
Between groups	1.092	3	0.364	1.309	0.272
Within GROUPS	66.746	240	0.278		
Total	67.838	243			

## Qualitative analysis

### Findings related to the third research question

Table 7 demonstrates the emerging themes of the autonomous learning strategies EFL learners deploy while learning. A common theme perceived by them is that these learners create learning goals and strategies while learning. One subtheme was discovered under the main theme. The following answers were given by the respondents.

### Theme 1: creating learning goals

*Respondent 1 "In creating learning goals, one can take responsibility for one's learning. It easily clarifies the objectives, progress, method, and techniques in the learning process". Respondent 2 mentioned, "I prefer to be more included in creating learning goals. Because if you want to learn something and you don't*

**Table 6** Post-hoc LSD test results for different educational levels on autonomous learning

Dependent variable	(I) Year	(J) Year	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig	95% Confidence interval	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
Cognitive component	Freshman	Sophomore	0.05815	0.10099	0.565	−0.1408	0.2571
		Junior	0.09267	0.08270	0.264	−0.0702	0.2556
		Senior	−0.02950	0.08761	0.737	−0.2021	0.1431
	Sophomore	Freshman	−0.05815	0.10099	0.565	−0.2571	0.1408
		Junior	0.03452	0.09377	0.713	−0.1502	0.2192
		Senior	−0.08765	0.09813	0.373	−0.2810	0.1056
	Junior	Freshman	−0.09267	0.08270	0.264	−0.2556	0.0702
		Sophomore	−0.03452	0.09377	0.713	−0.2192	0.1502
		Senior	−0.12217	0.07918	0.124	−0.2781	0.0338
	Senior	Freshman	0.02950	0.08761	0.737	−0.1431	0.2021
		Sophomore	0.08765	0.09813	0.373	−0.1056	0.2810
		Junior	0.12217	0.07918	0.124	−0.0338	0.2781
Behavioral Component	Freshman	Sophomore	−0.10973	0.11084	0.323	−0.3281	0.1086
		Junior	−0.15593	0.09076	0.087	−0.3347	0.0229
		Senior	−0.17177	0.09615	0.075	−0.3612	0.0176
	Sophomore	Freshman	0.10973	0.11084	0.323	−0.1086	0.3281
		Junior	−0.04621	0.10291	0.654	−0.2489	0.1565
		Senior	−0.06204	0.10769	0.565	−0.2742	0.1501
	Junior	Freshman	0.15593	0.09076	0.087	−0.0229	0.3347
		Sophomore	0.04621	0.10291	0.654	−0.1565	0.2489
		Senior	−0.01584	0.08689	0.856	−0.1870	0.1553
	Senior	Freshman	0.17177	0.09615	0.075	−0.0176	0.3612
		Sophomore	0.06204	0.10769	0.565	−0.1501	0.2742
		Junior	0.01584	0.08689	0.856	−0.1553	0.1870

know what to learn or where to start, there will be no **achievements**, and the learners will not get anything because it will be **very hard** for them to cover a huge piece of information **without any specific goal**". Respondent 4 stated "Students **better know their needs** so they can set goals for their learning". Respondent 5 exemplified "For example, if I want to learn new words, practice listening tactics, or at least improve my speaking skills for learning, then I need to manage a plan and a specific goal as well as strategies". Respondent 6 cited "My priority is to set goals and concepts of the lesson in my way". Respondent 8 quoted "We can enjoy our learning more easily by creating goals for it."

#### Subtheme 1: self-assessment

For a similar question, the respondents also revealed that they deploy self-assessment strategies to become autonomous learners. The following are their quotes:

Respondent 1 "Self-assessment provides **flexible interaction** among learners and **increases interest in course materials**". Respondent 5 cited "Self-assessment forces me to **manage time** by working, **practicing, and noting mistakes**". Respondent 7 stated, "I have to assess myself to take **control of my learning**".

**Table 7** Strategies EFL learners deploy while learning

Research Question	Theme	Respondents	Codes
The extent of autonomous strategies learners deploy while learning	Creating learning goals	1, 2, 4, 5, 6 & 8	Taking responsibility I need to know where to begin Students better know their needs Allows me to learn Prioritizes my learning Allows me getting specialize in the field
	Self-assessment (subtheme)	1, 5 & 7	Increases my interest in course materials Provides new tactics for learning Controls my learning to improve

**Table 8** Findings on types of activities for increasing proficiency level

Research Question	Theme	Respondents	Codes
Types of autonomous learning activities for increasing proficiency level	Inside Classroom	1, 2, 3, 4, 7 & 9	Games are encouraging We can share our feelings Force us to learn A better way to learn the language More effective activity Increases our self-confidence
	Outside Classroom	2, 4, 5, 7 & 8	Improves speaking style Enhances our pronunciation Boosts our English vocabulary

### Findings related to the fourth research question

Table 8 elucidates the emerging themes of the activities Afghan EFL learners use to augment their language proficiency at the university level. Two main themes were discovered. These two themes explain that EFL learners use various learning activities that augment their English language proficiency level. The following answers were given by the respondents.

#### Theme 1: inside classroom activities

When the question was asked about the types of activities they deploy to enhance their learning, six of the respondents revealed that they use different autonomous learning activities. Specifically, they use role-play, games, and group work in the classrooms to improve their language proficiency level. Here are some of their opinions, as below:

*Respondent 1 stated, "In most classes, we do **games and group work**, and I prefer group work. Because this is somehow a "**student based**" learning activity". Respondent 2 cited "**Group work** can make us talk to each other without any **anxiety**". Respondent 3 revealed, "I prefer **role plays** because when I play a role, I feel like I am **involved** in a **real English environment**". Respondent 4 exposed that "**playing games** is the best way to learn a language because it is an **interesting way** and students are more **interested in being involved in the lesson**". Respondent 7 said "**Giving a presentation** in front of the class is a more **effective activity** because students talk in front of the others and try to organize their speeches correctly on the spot and transfer them to the audience". Respondent 9 identified that "**debates** can increase our **knowledge** and also our **self-confidence**".*

#### Theme 2: outside classroom activities

When the question was asked about the types of activities they deploy to enhance their learning, five of the respondents also revealed that they use different autonomous learning activities outside of the classroom. Explicitly, they watch English movies that assist them in improving their language proficiency level. Here are some of their opinions, as below:

*Respondent 1 stated, "Through **watching movies**, we can learn different accents and **speaking styles** of **native speakers**". Respondents 4 and 5 said "**Watching English movies**, especially when they have **English subtitles**, can improve our **pronunciation**, and second, those words that we have in our mind can be repeated, and we get an idea of how to use that word and where to use it." By **watching movies**, we can get **two benefits: learning language and knowing culture**". Respondent 8 stated, "By **watching movies**, we can **improve our listening**".*

### Discussion

This study discovered some noteworthy points. Cognitively and effectively, participants in this study had positive perceptions of autonomous learning in general. The participants strongly perceived that autonomous learning assisted them in learning

and improving their language skills. It implies that it is interesting and that they enjoy learning in autonomous learning. This means that Afghan EFL learners consider autonomous learning necessary for language learning. The results of this study are in alignment with previous studies (e.g., Tran, 2020; Tuan, 2021; Yang et al., 2022), in which English language learners favored autonomous learning and viewed it as a powerful motivating source of learning, especially learning vocabulary. The difference between the current study and Tran's (2020) study is that in the current study, the main focus is on autonomous learning in general, while the focus in the latter study is specifically on learning vocabulary. Next, the results of this study related to the second research question identified that there is no significant difference in terms of autonomous learning among different educational levels of EFL learners at Kandahar University. This means that freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and senior EFL learners had the same perceptions regarding autonomous learning. Notably, the current finding tells us that EFL learners do not develop autonomy throughout their education years. The result of the current study echoes the consensus in previous research, revealing that autonomous learning may not differ by EFL learners' educational level (Genc, 2015). Depending on students' grades, however, Yang et al. (2022) found that senior high students perceived autonomous learning differently. That is, their opinions were in favor of autonomous learning as compared to lower grades.

One of the major findings of the third research question is that EFL learners deploy autonomous learning strategies by creating their own learning goals. They have to independently set goals to decide the content, the development of their learning, and the learning techniques that will be used. It depicts their involvement in the learning process. This finding is in harmony with that of Gultom et al. (2022), who found that learners are expected to set their personal learning goals, identify strategies to accomplish such goals, and select relevant resources to become autonomous learners. On the other hand, this finding contradicts Pham et al. (2023) findings, in which the teachers were given a ready-made curriculum to teach. The students and even the teachers did not have the opportunity to make decisions in the process of selecting materials. As a result, students could not decide on setting their own goals for monitoring their learning progress. The current study also revealed that EFL learners assess themselves because self-assessment is an essential tool for personal self-monitoring. According to the learners, they have to control their learning by managing time through self-assessment. Given the significance of autonomous learning, it is obvious that self-assessment may enhance students' learning autonomy since they participate in the educational process (Widiartini & Sukerti, 2023). An essential characteristic, according to authors, of the self-assessment process for learners is simply knowing how they are doing in their learning.

The findings related to the fourth research question addressed a complete thematic analysis of the information. This precisely means that EFL learners engage in inside and outside classroom activities that augment their English language proficiency. The results obtained from the learner interview revealed that EFL learners perform different activities inside the classroom to become autonomous learners. For example, these learners were assigned to do games, role plays, group work, and deliver presentations and debates

that improve their self-confidence and also allow them to be autonomous learners. It is implied that they do not regard the lecturer as the only mediator between them and the activities; they have to make efforts to be independent in working on the classroom activities. This theme is strongly supported by Sulistiyo and Kamil (2022), who found a myriad of in-classroom learning activities that learners could engage in to enhance their English language proficiency. For example, these activities were asking the teacher questions when you do not understand, noting down new information, taking opportunities to speak in English, and discussing learning problems with classmates. These findings indicate that the students do take some initiative in most of the inside-the-class activities. In the analysis of the EFL learners' interview, the researcher found that learners are engaged in outside classroom activities besides performing activities inside the English language classroom. This can be implied by the fact that these learners consider themselves autonomous learners, and the activities they deploy outside the classroom are for the sake of becoming autonomous learners. Explicitly, their favorite outside classroom activity was watching English movies to improve their pronunciation, listening skills, and knowledge of other cultures. However, this finding contradicts Öztürk (2020) results. It was revealed that participants were engaged in out-of-class activities that contribute to the process of becoming autonomous learners, but they did not participate in activities that are associated with improving communication skills.

## Conclusion

This study was unique as it investigated how Afghan EFL learners' awareness of autonomous learning and their perceptions of their roles in learning language affect their beliefs and practices in promoting greater autonomy in the context of tertiary education at Kandahar University. This study has uncovered new, context-related information and contributed to knowledge in the field in several areas. For example, as its theoretical contribution, the study revealed that autonomous learners in the Afghan context have to take initiative in learning, especially in self-study. For EFL learners, autonomous learning means taking initiative in preparing for the lessons, creating opportunities to practice, and accepting this responsibility for learning. These manifestations of taking initiative in self-study as perceived by learners in the context of this research can be argued to represent the reactive type of autonomous learning.

Based on the findings of the present investigation, some implications are recommended. In the first place, designing environments that encourage autonomous learning can enhance foreign language learning. To foster autonomous learning, EFL lecturers should develop differentiated instructions and activities. For example, allowing EFL learners to record their portfolios and present oral presentations to enhance autonomous learning. To encourage student collaboration and participation, EFL lecturers could incorporate authentic and semi-authentic activities, as well as communicative activities such as discussions, games, and role-plays. By taking an active role in the classroom, students are likely to gradually develop their autonomous learning strategies on their own. Furthermore, the policymakers and the institutions must sustain the practice of autonomy consistently and progressively by designing and implementing a curriculum that has a significant impact on students' development of autonomous learning.

However, the researchers have recognized three limitations, along with recommendations for future research. First, this research is limited in scope in that it explores autonomous learning at a public university in Kandahar, so it cannot be generalized to other public universities in Afghanistan. In many ways, the findings may only apply to Kandahar University. Future research could be conducted with a larger sample size from other public universities to generate a more fine-grained understanding. Second, there might have been dishonest responses, which may have affected the findings due to the self-reporting nature of the questionnaire. The questionnaire should be short for future research to increase the honesty of participants' responses. Third, the data collection techniques are limited to students' questionnaires and interviews. Future research could determine triangulating data using classroom observation techniques.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Learner interview questions**

1. What skills do you have that allow you to be an autonomous learner? What skills do you need to improve to be an autonomous learner?
2. To what extent, if any, do you prefer to be more included in the learning process (creating learning goals, designing syllabi, self-assessing, choosing your preferred method of learning)?
3. What makes learning the English language memorable and pleasurable? (e.g., outside activities, seeing movies, playing games, etc.)?
4. What kinds of activities do you do in the English classes? Which ones do you prefer?

### **Abbreviations**

EFL English as a foreign language  
SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

### **Author contributions**

HT conducted the literature review, designed the research, and analyzed the data. TH wrote the introduction section, methodology section, and discussion section. They both read, reviewed and approved the entire paper. BHZ oversaw the whole process and provided feedback over the entire study.

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### **Declarations**

#### **Competing interests**

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