

Promoting Learner Autonomy in Blended Learning: Practices of English Language Educators in a Saudi University

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a widespread shift towards blended learning in education, impacting universities in Saudi Arabia as well. This study investigated how English language educators in a Saudi university foster learner autonomy within a blended learning environment. The analysis, considering teaching modalities and experience levels, revealed variations in autonomy support practices. These findings, contextualized within the specific Saudi Arabian educational landscape, offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers to promote learner autonomy in this evolving context.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; Blended learning; Autonomy-supportive practices; Teaching practices

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a widespread transformation in the educational landscape, forcing a rapid shift from traditional classroom instruction to online and blended learning modalities. This transition was particularly evident in Saudi higher education, necessitating swift adaptation for both educators and students. While initial challenges arose, the shift also opened doors to explore innovative pedagogical approaches, one of which is the growing adoption of blended learning.

Blended learning, integrating online and face-to-face teaching methods, offers unique potential to foster learner autonomy, allowing students to take greater ownership of their learning journey. This approach often involves leveraging the benefits of online platforms like Learning Management Systems (LMS) for self-paced learning and access to diverse resources, while retaining the value of in-person interaction and personalized feedback from instructors. For this potential to be realized, educators play a crucial role in creating autonomy-supportive environments where students can develop self-directed learning strategies. Teachers must actively employ instructional practices that guide and encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, both within and outside of formal classroom settings.

In Saudi higher education, General English courses frequently implement blended learning, with one instructor leading face-to-face sessions focusing on specific skill development, while another instructor guides online activities using the LMS platform. However, despite the increasing integration of blended learning, there remains limited research on how this instructional approach is being used to promote learner autonomy—particularly within English language courses, where developing independent learning strategies is crucial for language

acquisition. Investigating how educators foster learner autonomy within these blended learning environments is critical to understanding the effectiveness of such teaching methods and their impact on student outcomes.

The research questions for this study emerged from this gap in the literature and the growing recognition of the importance of learner autonomy in blended learning environments. Educators are often expected to foster self-directed learning in students, but the specific practices used to encourage autonomy, particularly in a Saudi context, remain underexplored. Understanding how educators facilitate this process is essential for enhancing blended learning experiences and improving learning outcomes.

In light of the growing emphasis on blended learning and student-centered approaches in Saudi Arabia's higher education reforms, this study seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. To what extent are educators implementing practices that support learner autonomy in blended learning environments at Saudi universities?
2. How do English language educators foster learner autonomy within blended learning courses in Saudi higher education institutions?

There remains a significant gap in understanding how autonomy-supportive practices are integrated within blended learning courses by educators in Saudi higher education. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the strategies employed by English language educators to promote learner autonomy, thus contributing to the broader conversation on effective teaching practices in blended learning environments.

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how blended learning can be utilized to promote learner autonomy in Saudi higher education.

The study adopts Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its theoretical framework. SDT, originally developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), posits that autonomy, alongside competence and relatedness, is a fundamental psychological need essential for optimal motivation, engagement, and self-directed learning. When these needs are met, learners are more intrinsically motivated, persist longer, and perform better academically (Deci et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2020). By analyzing educators' practices through the lens of SDT, this study aims to unveil how these practices contribute to or hinder the fulfillment of students' autonomy needs in blended learning environments. This theoretical grounding offers a robust framework to understand how autonomy-supportive teaching can enhance motivation and learner engagement within the unique cultural and educational context of Saudi Arabia.

Investigating learner autonomy in relation to blended learning in Saudi higher education is crucial for enhancing teaching practices and fostering student motivation and engagement in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Literature Review

The global shift towards blended learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has foregrounded the importance of learner autonomy in educational discourse. Learner autonomy, frequently defined as students' ability to take control of their own learning (Little, 1991; Nunan, 1995), encompasses goal-setting, strategic decision-making, and reflective practice. It is a multifaceted construct involving both cognitive and affective dimensions, requiring learners to manage their learning processes while maintaining motivation and engagement over time.

A growing number of studies has underscored the benefits of fostering learner autonomy in various educational contexts. For example, Al-Saadi (2011) found that students who assumed responsibility for their learning exhibited greater self-efficacy and a deeper understanding of

course content. Similarly, Haque et al. (2023) emphasized that autonomy-supportive learning environments enhance intrinsic motivation, a core concept in SDT, which in turn improves both academic performance and student satisfaction.

However, promoting learner autonomy within blended learning contexts introduces unique challenges. Research by Benson (2013) and Reinders and Balçıkanlı (2011) highlights that while online platforms offer opportunities for independent learning, not all students are equipped to fully exploit these advantages. More recent studies have echoed these concerns in light of widespread digital learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Wang and Derakhshan (2021) found that although online platforms provide greater access to resources and learning flexibility, students often lack the digital literacy and self-regulation skills needed for autonomous learning. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) emphasized that successful learner autonomy in online environments depends heavily on instructor guidance, clear learning structures, and students' prior experience with technology. In such contexts, educators play a pivotal role in guiding students towards autonomy by providing the necessary scaffolding and support, particularly in cultures where teacher-directed learning is the norm, as is often the case in Saudi higher education (Alrabai, 2016).

In the realm of English language learning, autonomy is especially critical, as it enables learners to practice language skills outside the classroom and develop individualized strategies for improvement (Murray, 2014). Littlewood (1996) discovered that autonomy in language learning promotes more effective utilization of resources, including online platforms, allowing students to engage in self-paced, need-specific learning. This observation is supported by more recent studies, such as Alzubi (2019), which affirm that learner autonomy enhances both language proficiency and overall student engagement.

Furthermore, a study by Khan and Shahbaz (2022) involving Pakistani English language learners and teachers in a blended learning English communication course revealed that both groups gradually shifted from traditional teacher-centered roles toward shared responsibility for learning. This transition facilitated a greater embrace of digital tools, indicating that even in cultures initially perceived as less conducive to learner autonomy, blended learning can create environments where autonomy-supportive practices thrive.

Despite these insights, there remains a significant gap in understanding how autonomy supportive practices are integrated within blended learning courses by educators in Saudi higher education. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the strategies employed by English language educators to promote learner autonomy, thus contributing to the broader conversation on effective teaching practices in blended learning environments.

Blended learning, which combines online and face-to-face instruction, is an ideal setting for promoting learner autonomy, as it offers flexible access to resources and encourages independent exploration (Lamb & Johnson, 2002; Ahn et al., 2013). However, challenges such as overreliance on technology and insufficient teacher guidance can hinder its effectiveness (Nguyen, 2019). To maximize its potential, educators must strike a balance between flexibility and structure, ensuring coherence between the online and in-person components of the course (Benson, 2001; Sung et al., 2013).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting autonomy in educational settings. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), SDT posits that students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be met to enhance motivation and academic performance. Numerous studies affirm that supporting students' autonomy leads to improved outcomes (Deci et al., 2001; Black & Deci, 2000). Nonetheless, applying SDT principles in practice can be challenging, particularly in traditional, teacher

centered educational environments (Oszwa & Knopik, 2023). In Saudi Arabia, where cultural norms emphasize respect for authority and hierarchical teacher-student relationships, promoting autonomy requires careful adaptation. Research suggests that SDT-aligned practices can be successfully tailored to fit the Saudi context, balancing cultural expectations with autonomy support (Al-Qudah & Jarrah, 2024; Al-Zahrani, 2022). Teachers equipped with appropriate tools and strategies can foster greater intrinsic motivation and student engagement, even in such environments (Lee & Hwang, 2022).

Various autonomy-supportive practices have been identified as effective in fostering learner autonomy, particularly in blended learning environments. Benson (2013) outlines three types of autonomy support: organizational, procedural, and cognitive. Organizational autonomy involves students in decision-making processes, such as setting classroom rules or choosing learning materials. Procedural autonomy gives students flexibility in learning methods, deadlines, and task formats, while cognitive autonomy focuses on developing critical thinking, self-reflection, and problem-solving skills. Implementing these practices in blended learning environments has been shown to increase student engagement and foster autonomous learning behaviors.

In the Saudi educational context, the hierarchical structure of teacher-student relationships presents unique challenges to the implementation of autonomy-supportive practices. Nevertheless, research indicates that educators who adapt these practices to local cultural norms can successfully promote greater learner autonomy (Al-Zahrani, 2022). Alghamdi (2020) highlights the significance of constructive feedback, encouraging exploration, and creating opportunities for student choice as key contributors to enhanced student autonomy. Conversely, rigid, teacher-centered approaches limit students' capacity to take ownership of their

learning. By carefully balancing structure and freedom, Saudi educators can support the development of independent, self-directed learners in blended learning settings.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design, appropriate for identifying trends in autonomy-supportive teaching practices without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2012). A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool, chosen for its effectiveness in gathering large-scale data on educators' practices and beliefs in applied linguistics and educational research (Dörnyei, 2007).

The questionnaire was distributed to a purposive sample of English language educators in Saudi higher education, specifically those teaching in blended learning contexts. A total of 32 complete responses were obtained.

The instrument included multiple-choice and Likert-scale items and covered four key areas:

1. Demographic information (teaching modality, experience, training),
2. Organizational autonomy support,
3. Procedural autonomy support, and
4. Cognitive autonomy support.

These categories are based on Reeve's (2006) framework for autonomy-supportive teaching.

- Organizational autonomy support was assessed through questions about involving students in decisions such as setting class rules and choosing learning materials.
- Procedural autonomy support focused on the flexibility students are given in learning methods, deadlines, and planning their work.

- Cognitive autonomy support captured how often educators promote critical thinking, self-reflection, and independent learning.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and means) to identify patterns and trends in autonomy support practices across participants.

A pilot test was conducted with a small group of lecturers to evaluate the clarity and relevance of items. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to ensure alignment with the study objectives. The research followed strict ethical guidelines: informed consent was obtained, participant anonymity was maintained, and withdrawal rights were respected (Babbie, 2010).

Findings and Discussion

The demographic profile of the study's participants offers critical insights into the context of learner autonomy in blended learning environments. Table 1 illustrates the key demographic data: the majority of educators (65.6%) are engaged in blended learning, underscoring the relevance of this study to current educational practices that integrate both online and face-to-face teaching modalities. This high prevalence aligns with the broader shift towards blended learning models, which aim to leverage the strengths of both inperson and digital instruction to enhance educational outcomes (Graham, 2013).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Teachers

Question	Response (Percentage)
1. Mode of Teaching	
Blended Learning	21 (65.6%)
Face-to-Face	10 (31%)

Online Only	1	(3.1%)
2. Gender		
Female	27	84.4%
Male	5	15.6%
3. Years of Teaching Experience		
More than 6 years	24	75.0%
3 to 5 years	6	18.8%
1 to 2 years	2	6.2%

The gender distribution, with a notable predominance of female educators (84.4%), reflects broader trends in the teaching profession, particularly in English language education within the Saudi context (Murray, 2014). This gender imbalance, however, was largely due to practical challenges in accessing the men's section, which is separate from the women's section. This separation made it more difficult to gather responses from male educators. As a result, the imbalance may have implications for understanding how gender dynamics influence the implementation and effectiveness of autonomy-supportive practices (Kane & Pullen, 2020), highlighting the need for future research to address this gap. Regarding teaching experience, a significant proportion of participants (75.0%) have more than six years of experience, indicating a deep familiarity with various teaching methods and challenges. This extensive experience is likely to contribute to a nuanced understanding of autonomy-supportive practices, as experienced educators are often better equipped to implement and adapt pedagogical strategies effectively (Borko & Putnam, 1996). The analysis of procedural autonomy support reveals a range of practices aimed at enhancing student engagement and autonomy. Table 2 shows the frequency of

various procedural autonomy support practices. A significant proportion of educators (37.5%) prioritize feedback and improvement over mere grading, reflecting a commitment to fostering students' intrinsic motivation and competence, consistent with Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory (SDT). This approach is corroborated by Haque et al. (2023), who emphasize the role of formative assessment in promoting student growth and engagement.

Table 2: Responses to Procedural Autonomy Support

Question	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I assess students focusing on feedback and improvement rather than just grades	37.5%	31.3%	18.8%	9.4%	3.1%
I offer students choices to choose tasks within the planned activities.	18.8%	18.8%	43.8%	15.6%	12.5%
I select the particular homework assignments.	46.9%	25.0%	21.9%	6.2%	0.0%
I choose particular activities that have to be done during the lesson and stick to these activities.	21.9%	46.9%	25.0%	6.2%	0.0%
During teaching, I ask students to make decisions about	15.6%	28.1%	34.3%	15.6%	6.3%

whether they want to work in a group or individually.					
I allow students to choose group members.	43.8%	25.0%	12.5%	18.8%	15.6%
I remind my students that we have limited time to do each task.	56.3%	31.3%	9.4%	3.1%	0.0%
I allow students to choose how they would like to present their ideas in their presentation (e.g., Role-Playing).	37.5%	31.3%	21.9%	3.1%	6.3%
I provide students with some autonomy in choosing the projects they work on.	43.8%	31.3%	15.6%	6.3%	3.1%

The variability in offering choices within planned activities, with only 18.8% of educators always providing such options, highlights the challenge of balancing structure with flexibility. Benson (2013) suggests that providing students with choices enhances their sense of autonomy and engagement, indicating that increasing the frequency of this practice could further support self-directed learning.

The practice of selecting specific homework assignments is common among educators (46.9% always), which contrasts with the goal of fostering procedural autonomy. Nguyen (2019) notes that over-structuring assignments can limit students' opportunities for autonomous

learning. Educators might benefit from exploring ways to incorporate more student choice in assignments to enhance autonomy. The choice of activities during lessons shows a moderate degree of flexibility, with 21.9% of educators always choosing activities and 46.9% often doing so. This reflects a balance between maintaining structure and allowing student input, aligning with Littlewood's (1996) emphasis on aligning activities with students' interests and learning preferences. Allowing students to choose their working modes (group or individual) is practiced by 15.6% of educators always, indicating a potential area for increased consistency. Reinders and Balçikanli (2011) highlight the importance of providing students with control over their learning processes, suggesting that more frequent implementation of this practice could enhance autonomy. Permitting students to choose group members is supported by 43.8% of educators always and 25.0% often, which aligns with Deci et al. (2001), who emphasize the benefits of allowing students to make decisions about their learning interactions. This practice promotes collaboration and engagement by fostering a sense of ownership. The practice of reminding students of time constraints is common (56.3% always), which helps in managing time effectively but may also impose external constraints on autonomy. Oszwa and Knopik (2023) suggest that while time reminders support organization, they should be balanced with opportunities for self-management. Allowing students to choose presentation methods is practiced by 37.5% always and 31.3% often, supporting cognitive autonomy by accommodating diverse learning styles (Al-Saadi, 2011). This flexibility enhances student motivation and engagement by enabling creative expression. Providing autonomy in project selection is practiced by 43.8% always and 31.3% often, aligning with Murray's (2014) emphasis on self-directed learning and personalized learning experiences.

In analyzing organizational autonomy support, Table 3 provides insights into practices such as maintaining an open-door policy and involving students in rule-setting. The majority of

educators (62.5%) maintain an open-door policy, which supports relatedness and student engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This approach reflects a supportive classroom environment that encourages student input.

Table 3: Responses to Organizational Autonomy Support

Question	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I maintain an open-door policy where students feel comfortable expressing concerns, providing feedback, or suggesting improvements.	62.5%	12.5%	18.8%	3.1%	3.1%
I involve students in setting classroom rules.	15.6%	18.8%	28.1%	21.9%	15.6%
I ask students to write or to say their goals, expectations of the course, and the rules they want to have during the course.	18.8%	31.3%	28.1%	15.6%	6.3%
I allow students to change the due time for online learning tasks or assignments.	12.5%	12.5%	43.8%	21.9%	9.4%

However, involving students in setting classroom rules is less common (15.6% always), indicating a more traditional approach to classroom management. Reinders and Balçikanli (2011)

highlight the benefits of collaborative rule-setting for enhancing student engagement and ownership.

Asking students to articulate their goals and expectations is practiced by 18.8% always and 31.3% often, aligning with Al-Saadi’s (2011) findings on the importance of clear learning goals for student engagement. This approach helps in aligning instructional practices with students' needs and preferences.

Flexibility in changing deadlines for online tasks is less prevalent, with 12.5% always allowing changes. Nguyen (2019) suggests that deadline flexibility can support student autonomy, indicating a potential area for increased implementation.

Table 4 outlines cognitive autonomy support practices, such as allowing students to explore personal interests and choose presentation methods. These practices show varied application, with some educators effectively fostering learner autonomy while others rely more on traditional methods. For instance, the practice of allowing students to explore personal interests (40.6% always) aligns with SDT principles and supports self-directed learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Table 4: Responses to Cognitive Autonomy Support

Question	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I let learners choose any activities they would like to do instead of textbook tasks.	21.9%	31.3%	31.3%	37.5%	15.6%
I provide a range of assignment options and allow students to	18.8%	25.0%	18.8%	21.9%	15.6%

choose topics within a broader theme.					
When teaching, I ask learners to look at the sentence and predict the rule.	34.4%	25.0%	31.3%	0.0%	9.4%
I give the learners the guidelines to do their presentation.	71.9%	12.5%	15.6%	0.0%	0.0%
When teaching, I raise a particular problem and ask students to find multiple solutions to that problem.	34.4%	28.1%	25.0%	9.4%	3.1%
When doing exercises, I ask learners to compare and contrast their ideas and choose the most effective method.	28.1%	31.3%	28.1%	9.4%	3.1%
I and the learners share responsibilities for teaching activities.	18.8%	28.1%	25.0%	21.9%	6.3%
I provide opportunities for students to explore topics of personal interest related to the	40.6%	28.1%	18.8%	9.4%	3.1%

textbook content, share resources they find relevant.					
I suggest additional learning resources (reference books, learning websites, etc.).	46.9%	25.0%	21.9%	3.1%	3.1%
I provide students with chances to correct their mistakes (e.g., reworking assignments, revisiting concepts).	37.5%	21.9%	31.3%	9.4%	0.0%
I provide learners with a new grammar rule and encourage them to think about grammatical rules in real-life contexts.	28.1%	15.6%	31.3%	18.8%	6.3%
I rely solely on textbook tasks.	12.5%	15.6%	34.4%	15.6%	21.9%

In summary, the analysis highlights a range of autonomy-supportive practices with varying degrees of implementation. While some practices are well-integrated, others could benefit from increased consistency and frequency. These findings are consistent with existing literature on the importance of providing students with opportunities for choice and self-direction to support their autonomy and engagement in learning (Graham, 2013; Benson, 2013).

Table 5: Summary of Key Findings on Autonomy-Supportive Practices

Category of Autonomy Support	Blended Learning	Face-to-Face Teaching	Online Teaching
Organizational Autonomy Support	Educators with more experience tend to integrate higher levels of support.	Potential "sweet spot" observed for educators with 3-5 years of experience exhibiting higher support.	Limited data, but educators reported high levels of support.
Procedural Autonomy Support	Educators demonstrated willingness to adapt methods and offer flexibility in assignments and deadlines.	Similar to blended learning, with emphasis on timely feedback and additional resources.	Limited data, but educators reported high levels of support.
Cognitive Autonomy Support	Educators frequently introduced new grammar rules and created opportunities for learner self-correction.	Similar to blended learning, but reliance on textbook tasks varied.	Limited data, but educators reported high levels of support.

Contextualizing the Findings in Saudi Arabia

Interpreting the findings of this study necessitates a careful consideration of the specific context of Saudi Arabian universities. Several key factors significantly influence the practices of educators in this region. First, national policies on blended learning and student autonomy play a

crucial role in shaping educators' approaches. By examining these policies, researchers and policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the operational framework within which educators work. This examination can also identify potential areas for adjustments that could further support and enhance learner autonomy in higher education settings.

Cultural norms also profoundly impact autonomy-supportive practices in Saudi Arabian universities. These norms dictate the nature of teacher-student interactions and the expectations placed on both parties. For instance, in cultures that emphasize a more hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, the implementation of autonomy-supportive strategies may differ significantly. Understanding these cultural values and how they interact with educational practices can provide valuable insights and guide future research. It highlights the importance of contextualizing educational strategies to align with local cultural expectations and norms.

Moreover, the rapid pace of technological advancements in Saudi Arabia influences the adoption of blended learning and the promotion of learner autonomy. Investigating how educators leverage these technological advancements, such as online collaboration tools, to foster learner autonomy is crucial. This understanding can offer valuable guidance for future practices and the development of educational technology. By exploring the intersection of technology and pedagogy, educators can identify innovative ways to support learner autonomy and enhance the overall learning experience in blended learning environments.

Limitations and Considerations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. One significant limitation is the use of convenience sampling, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of English language educators in Saudi Arabia. This sampling method, while practical, may not adequately represent the diverse experiences and practices of all educators in this context. Future research should consider employing more robust

sampling methods to ensure a wider and more representative sample. This approach would enhance the validity of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the practices supporting learner autonomy across different educational settings.

Another limitation of the study is its reliance on self-reported data, which can be susceptible to various biases. Self-reported data may not always accurately reflect actual practices and perspectives due to factors such as social desirability bias or inaccurate self assessment. To mitigate these biases, future research should consider employing triangulation methods. This could involve incorporating qualitative interviews or classroom observations alongside self-reported data to provide a more holistic and accurate picture of educators' practices and perspectives. By combining multiple data sources, researchers can achieve a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how autonomy-supportive practices are implemented and perceived in the educational context of Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion and Implications

This study enhances our understanding of how English language educators at a Saudi university facilitate learner autonomy within a blended learning framework. The analysis revealed notable variations in the support for autonomy across different categories, teaching modalities, and levels of teaching experience. These findings, when viewed through the lens of the Saudi Arabian educational and cultural context, provide significant insights for various stakeholders.

For educators, the study emphasizes the critical role of fostering learner autonomy and presents a framework to comprehend how diverse teaching modalities and levels of experience can influence these practices. Educators are encouraged to reflect on their pedagogical approaches and consider exploring various strategies to empower learners and promote self directed learning.

For policymakers, the study highlights the necessity of developing educational policies that support and incentivize autonomy-supportive practices within blended learning environments. It is essential that these policies take into account the cultural and technological context to ensure their effectiveness and alignment with local values and capabilities.

For researchers, the study suggests several avenues for further investigation. These include employing qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into educators' perspectives and motivations for promoting learner autonomy, examining the impact of specific autonomy supportive practices on student learning outcomes, particularly in online settings, and conducting comparative studies to understand how learner autonomy is cultivated in blended learning environments across different cultural contexts.

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