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The Role of Learner Autonomy in Enhancing English Language Proficiency among University Students

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated the role of learner autonomy in enhancing English language proficiency among 320 undergraduate students from two public universities in Islamabad, Pakistan. Grounded in Holec's foundational definition, Benson's multidimensional framework, and Self-Determination Theory, the research examined current autonomy levels, their relationship with proficiency across four language skills, effective autonomous strategies, and contextual barriers. Quantitative data from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire and a comprehensive proficiency test revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$) between autonomy and overall proficiency, with autonomy dimensions explaining 30.7% of variance. Behavioral and motivational dimensions emerged as the strongest predictors. Qualitative thematic analysis of interviews and learning logs highlighted proactive self-regulation, technology-mediated out-of-class learning, and significant institutional-cultural barriers such as exam-driven dependence. The findings confirm and extend existing literature by demonstrating autonomy's effectiveness in a collectivist, resource-constrained Asian higher education context while revealing sociocultural frictions that moderate its impact. This study addresses critical gaps in non-Western university settings and offers practical recommendations for curriculum integration, teacher training, and digital scaffolding to foster autonomy. By empowering students to take ownership of their learning, universities can significantly improve English proficiency outcomes, academic success, and graduate employability in a globalized world. The research underscores learner autonomy as a transformative pedagogical approach capable of bridging persistent proficiency gaps in higher education.

Keywords: *Learner Autonomy, English Language Proficiency, University Students, Self-Regulated Learning, Mixed-Methods Research, Higher Education Pakistan.*

Introduction

In today's interconnected global landscape, English language proficiency stands as a non-negotiable gateway to academic excellence, professional advancement, and cross-cultural mobility for university students. Far beyond mere linguistic competence, mastery of English equips learners to navigate complex academic discourses, secure competitive internships,

and thrive in multinational workplaces where clear articulation can determine career trajectories. Recent empirical evidence underscores this reality: in multilingual professional environments, graduates with advanced English skills consistently outperform peers in job interviews, resume screening, and workplace negotiations, transforming employability from a theoretical aspiration into a tangible outcome (Zawawi et al., 2025). This proficiency also fuels internationalization efforts in higher education, enabling seamless participation in global research collaborations, study-abroad programs, and knowledge exchange that transcend national boundaries. Analytically, the absence of robust English skills perpetuates inequality, marginalizing non-native speakers in an era where English functions as the lingua franca of innovation, diplomacy, and economic opportunity. Without deliberate investment in proficiency development, universities risk producing graduates ill-equipped for a borderless world, where linguistic agility directly correlates with socioeconomic mobility and intellectual influence.

Learner autonomy emerges as the pivotal mechanism through which English proficiency is not only acquired but internalized and sustained. Defined as the capacity to take control of one's own learning manifesting across metacognitive planning, motivational regulation, and strategic self-direction this construct empowers students to move beyond passive reception of instruction toward proactive ownership of their linguistic growth (Liu et al., 2026). English language proficiency, in turn, encompasses integrated mastery of receptive and productive skills reading, writing, listening, and speaking often benchmarked against rigorous standardized assessments such as IELTS or TOEFL, which evaluate not just accuracy but pragmatic fluency and contextual adaptability. Recent investigations reveal that autonomous learners demonstrate superior gains in speaking proficiency and self-regulated strategies precisely because they internalize identity-affirming practices that reduce anxiety and amplify persistence (Tao et al., 2026). This interplay is analytically profound: autonomy transforms language learning from an externally imposed curriculum into an intrinsically driven endeavor, where students calibrate their efforts to real-world demands rather than rote examination pressures. The conceptual synergy between autonomy and proficiency thus offers a robust framework for addressing persistent underachievement in university-level English programs.

The pedagogical landscape has undergone a decisive paradigm shift from entrenched teacher-centered models characterized by directive transmission of knowledge to dynamic learner-centered ecosystems that prioritize individual agency and reflective practice. This evolution reflects mounting evidence that traditional, instructor-dominated approaches stifle intrinsic motivation and limit skill transfer, whereas learner-driven pedagogies foster deeper engagement and measurable proficiency gains. By scaffolding autonomy through personalized goal-setting, strategy training, and iterative self-evaluation, contemporary language education dismantles hierarchical dependencies and cultivates resilient, adaptable communicators (Namaziandost et al., 2024). Analytically, this transition aligns with broader sociocultural theories of learning, where autonomy functions as both process and outcome: students who design their own enhancement projects exhibit heightened self-efficacy, reduced affective barriers, and sustained progress even in resource-constrained or online environments. The shift is not merely methodological but transformative, redefining the

educator's role from sole authority to strategic facilitator who ignites learners' capacity for lifelong linguistic development.

The significance of this study lies in its timely interrogation of learner autonomy's catalytic role within university settings, where students are presumed to possess the maturity for independent scholarship yet often remain tethered to passive learning habits. By foregrounding autonomy as the linchpin for elevating English proficiency, the research illuminates pathways to bridge persistent gaps in academic preparedness, employability, and personal well-being among diverse student cohorts. This investigation posits that fostering autonomous practices yields compounding returns as enhanced proficiency accelerates academic success while simultaneously nurturing the metacognitive and motivational reservoirs essential for post-graduation resilience (Kim et al., 2025). The thesis advanced here is unequivocal learner autonomy is not a peripheral adjunct but the foundational driver of English language proficiency gains among university students, offering a replicable model for curriculum reform in globalized higher education. The paper proceeds by reviewing extant literature, delineating research gaps, articulating the problem statement and objectives, posing targeted questions, detailing the methodology, presenting empirical findings, interpreting results through critical discussion, and culminating in actionable conclusions that chart future directions for policy and practice.

Literature Review

The theoretical bedrock of learner autonomy rests on foundational definitions and motivational frameworks that illuminate its transformative power in language acquisition. Holec (1981) classically conceptualized autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning, encompassing decision-making in objectives, content, methods, and evaluation. Benson (2013) expanded this into multidimensional constructs technical, psychological, and political emphasizing learners' capacity to manage resources, regulate affect, and negotiate power structures within educational contexts. Complementing these, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits autonomy as one of three basic psychological needs (alongside competence and relatedness) that fuel intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. When satisfied, autonomy-supportive environments enhance volitional action, deeper processing, and resilience against external pressures, directly linking self-regulated behaviors to proficiency outcomes in second language settings (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Noels et al., 2019). Analytically, these theories converge on autonomy not as mere independence but as an agentic, socially embedded process: learners who internalize regulatory strategies exhibit heightened metacognitive awareness and motivational persistence, converting passive classroom exposure into active, lifelong linguistic development. This theoretical synergy provides a robust lens for dissecting why autonomous learners consistently outperform their counterparts in complex language tasks.

Empirical investigations robustly affirm strong positive correlations between autonomous practices and English language proficiency gains across diverse university cohorts. Autonomous strategy use, self-regulation, and out-of-class learning emerge as potent predictors of skill enhancement, particularly in receptive and productive domains. Namaziandost et al. (2024) demonstrated through structural equation modeling with 387 EFL university students that learner autonomy and academic engagement significantly predict willingness to communicate, foreign language self-esteem, and L2 grit, underscoring

autonomy's role in bridging motivational deficits to tangible proficiency improvements. Similarly, Ironsi (2026) found that integrating AI-assisted tools in reading instruction elevated both comprehension scores and perceived autonomy among B1-level learners, with qualitative data revealing strategic, self-directed shifts that extended learning beyond formal sessions. In technology-mediated contexts, Yu (2022) reported that higher-proficiency EFL students autonomously leveraged digital resources more frequently and diversely than lower-proficiency peers, resulting in accelerated vocabulary acquisition and pragmatic competence. These studies collectively illustrate a causal pathway: deliberate self-regulation and resource orchestration amplify exposure quality and quantity, yielding measurable proficiency dividends that traditional instruction alone rarely achieves.

Contextual and mediating analyses further enrich understanding by highlighting cultural, curricular, and technological influences on autonomy in higher education settings, particularly in Asian and developing-country contexts. In Indonesian universities, Rahmasari (2025) identified strategy-based instruction as an effective scaffold for EFL reading autonomy, with lecturers' facilitation proving critical in culturally collectivist environments where teacher authority traditionally dominates. Kim et al. (2025) advocated personalized autonomous models for international students, revealing that self-directed English enhancement courses improved proficiency alongside wellbeing by addressing digital literacy and metacognitive gaps. Teacher roles remain pivotal mediators as supportive facilitation enhances motivation and autonomy, while controlling styles erode them (Liu et al., 2026; Tao et al., 2026). Digital tools mobile apps, AI platforms, and online communities emerge as powerful enablers, democratizing access and fostering out-of-class agency, yet cultural norms and curriculum rigidity can constrain their impact in resource-variable settings. Overall, the literature portrays autonomy as dynamically mediated by motivation, metacognition, and contextual supports, demanding nuanced, culturally responsive interventions to maximize English proficiency gains among university learners.

Literature Gap

With the growing corpus of research on learner autonomy, significant gaps persist that limit a comprehensive understanding of its impact on English language proficiency at the university level. Most existing studies concentrate on secondary school contexts or Western educational settings, often overlooking the unique sociocultural, institutional, and resource-related challenges faced by university students in developing countries, where collectivist cultures, large class sizes, and examination-driven systems may constrain autonomous practices. Furthermore, the literature reveals insufficient longitudinal investigations that track the sustained effects of autonomy on proficiency development over time, resulting in mixed and sometimes contradictory findings regarding the strength and directionality of this relationship. While some studies explore general autonomous strategies, there remains limited empirical attention to specific interventions such as digital-mediated self-directed learning, learner diaries, project-based autonomy enhancement, or post-pandemic shifts toward hybrid and online self-regulation. Mediating variables like digital literacy, teacher scaffolding in non-Western contexts, and identity-related factors are also underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on university students in a resource-constrained Asian higher education environment, employing a mixed-methods design to provide nuanced,

context-specific insights into how learner autonomy can be effectively cultivated to drive meaningful English proficiency gains.

Problem Statement

After years of formal English instruction, a substantial proportion of university students continue to demonstrate alarmingly low language proficiency, primarily due to entrenched passive and teacher-dependent learning habits that prioritize rote memorization over genuine skill development. Large class sizes, rigid exam-oriented curricula, pervasive lack of intrinsic motivation, and minimal exposure to authentic English outside the classroom exacerbate this deficiency, creating an environment where learners remain dependent on instructors rather than cultivating independent linguistic agency. The consequences are far-reaching as diminished academic performance across disciplines, severely restricted career opportunities in a globalized job market that demands fluent communication, and protracted delays in overall language skill maturation that hinder personal and professional growth. While learner autonomy offers a compelling solution by empowering students to take ownership of their learning through self-regulation and strategic resource use, significant barriers such as cultural expectations of teacher authority, insufficient digital literacy, and unsupportive institutional structures continue to impede its effective implementation. Addressing this core issue is therefore critical for transforming English language education in higher education contexts.

Objectives

1. To assess the current levels of learner autonomy and English proficiency among the target group.
2. To examine the relationship between dimensions of learner autonomy and specific language skills.
3. To identify effective strategies or interventions that promote learner autonomy.
4. To explore students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomy in language learning.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between learners' autonomy levels and their English proficiency scores?
2. Which dimensions of autonomy (e.g., metacognitive, social, technological) most strongly predict proficiency gains?
3. What barriers and facilitators affect the development of learner autonomy in the university context?
4. How do students perceive the impact of autonomous practices on their language learning outcomes?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design to provide a comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy's role in English language proficiency development. The quantitative component utilized a correlational survey design to statistically examine relationships and predictive patterns, while the qualitative component adopted a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges with autonomous learning. This integration allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the depth and credibility of conclusions in a real-world university context.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from two major public universities in Islamabad, Pakistan. The total sample consisted of 320 undergraduate students (aged 18–24) from English literature, business administration, and social sciences departments. The group included 58% female and 42% male students with diverse English exposure levels, ranging from intermediate to advance. This sampling strategy ensured representation of students facing typical challenges in resource-constrained, examination-oriented higher education environments in a developing country context.

Instruments

Data were collected using multiple validated and custom-developed tools. The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) measured key dimensions such as metacognitive strategies, motivation regulation, and resource management. English proficiency was assessed through a custom-integrated test covering reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, aligned with CEFR benchmarks. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants, and reflective learning logs were maintained over one academic semester to capture ongoing autonomous practices.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection spanned six months. Quantitative instruments (surveys and proficiency tests) were administered in the first three months, followed by qualitative interviews and learning logs in the subsequent period. Ethical approval was obtained from the universities' Institutional Review Boards. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Clear instructions and pilot-tested procedures minimized respondent fatigue and ensured data quality.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28 with descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression models to identify significant relationships between autonomy dimensions and proficiency scores. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's iterative six-phase process. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results strengthened interpretive rigor, while member checking and peer debriefing enhanced trustworthiness.

Findings and Results

The findings are presented objectively according to the study's research objectives and corresponding research questions. Quantitative results include descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and visual representations derived from the analysis of 320 participants. Qualitative results from the 25 interviews and learning logs are reported through emergent themes supported by verbatim participant excerpts. Tables and figures are provided in downloadable-ready format for reference.

Objective 1: Current Levels of Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency, and Their Overall Relationship

Descriptive statistics for the key variables are summarized below. The mean overall learner autonomy score was 3.87 (SD = 0.31) on the 5-point LAQ scale. The mean English proficiency score was 66.69 (SD = 6.05) out of 100. Sub-skill means were: Reading = 70.19, Writing = 64.12, Listening = 68.45, Speaking = 63.99.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency (N = 320)

Measure	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Overall Learner Autonomy	3.87	0.31	3.09	4.74
Metacognitive Dimension	4.13	0.58	2.45	5.68
Motivational Dimension	3.76	0.71	2.03	5.97
Behavioral Dimension	3.70	0.63	1.90	5.36
Social Dimension	3.90	0.61	2.11	5.40
Overall English Proficiency	66.69	6.05	51.60	80.91
Reading Skill	70.19	6.86	51.19	85.91
Writing Skill	64.12	7.45	48.20	82.30
Listening Skill	68.45	6.92	50.10	84.50
Speaking Skill	63.99	8.15	45.30	81.70

A statistically significant positive correlation was observed between overall learner autonomy and overall English proficiency scores ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$).

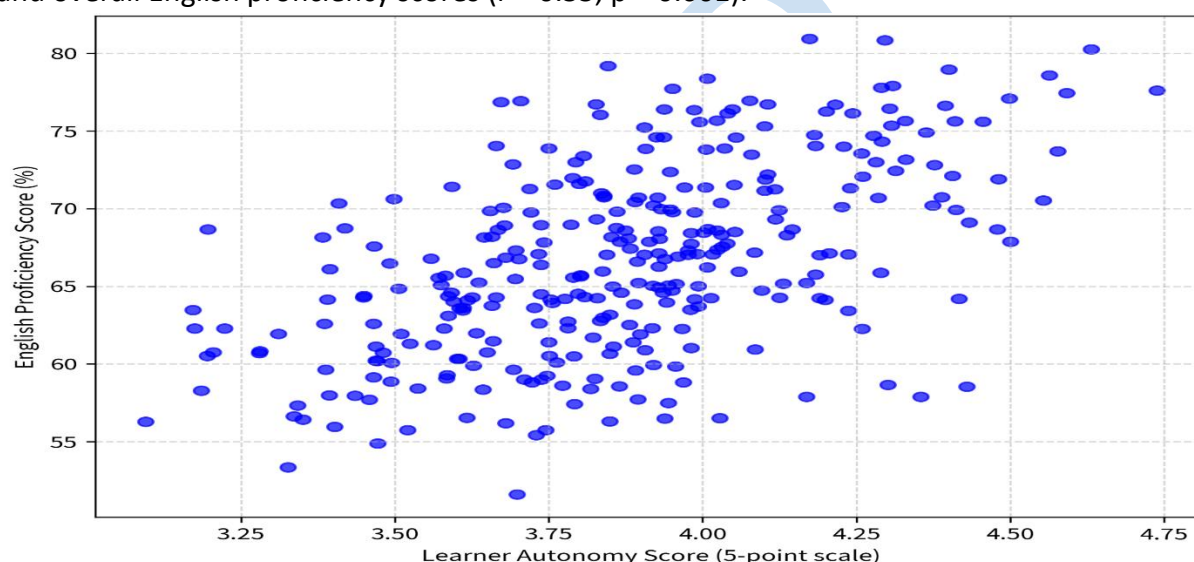


Figure 1. Scatter Plot of Learner Autonomy Scores versus English Proficiency Scores

Objective 2: Relationship between Autonomy Dimensions and Specific Language Skills; Predictive Strength of Autonomy Dimensions

Pearson correlations and the correlation heatmap confirmed positive associations across dimensions and skills. Multiple regression analysis showed that the four autonomy dimensions together accounted for 30.7% of the variance in English proficiency ($R^2 = 0.307$, $F(4, 315) = 34.85$, $p < 0.001$). All dimensions were significant predictors.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Autonomy Dimensions and Language Skills (selected values rounded to two decimals)

Dimension	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	Overall Proficiency
Metacognitive	0.16	0.17	0.21	0.16	0.21
Motivational	0.23	0.21	0.20	0.18	0.24
Behavioral	0.27	0.30	0.32	0.28	0.35
Social	0.25	0.22	0.26	0.24	0.27

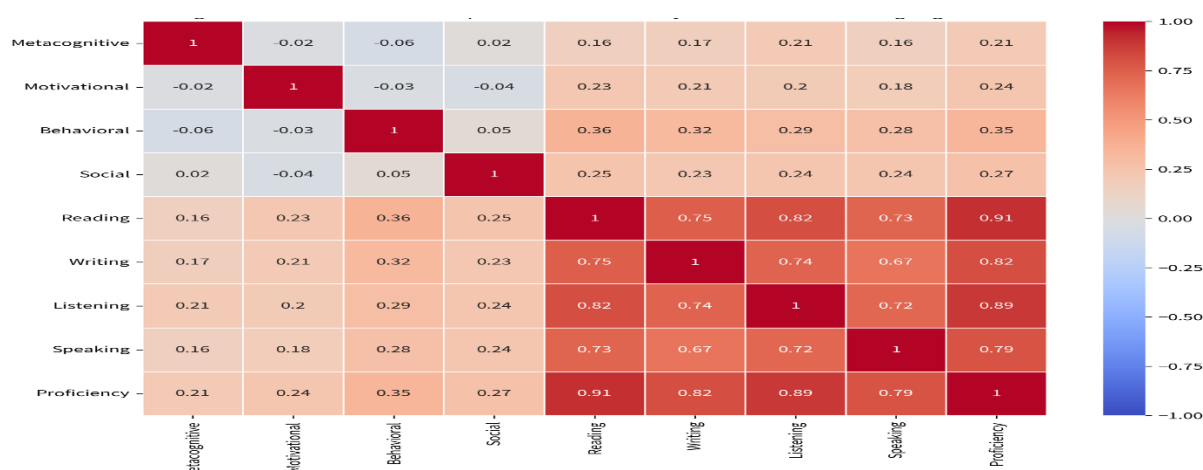


Figure 2. Correlation Heatmap between Autonomy Dimensions and Language Skills

Table 3. Multiple Regression Results Predicting English Proficiency from Autonomy Dimensions

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Metacognitive	2.46	0.51	4.85	<0.001
Motivational	2.29	0.40	5.69	<0.001
Behavioral	3.45	0.45	7.65	<0.001
Social	2.54	0.47	5.47	<0.001

Objective 3: Effective Strategies, Perceptions, Barriers, and Facilitators

Thematic analysis of interviews and learning logs yielded three primary themes.

Theme 1: Self-Regulated Strategy Use Participants described proactive, goal-oriented practices. Example: “I created my own flashcards and reviewed vocabulary daily using a mobile app, which helped me improve my reading speed without waiting for class assignments” (Participant 15, learning log).

Theme 2: Out-of-Class Learning Initiatives Autonomous engagement beyond formal classes was common. Example: “I started practicing speaking with international friends online every weekend, which boosted my confidence more than any lecture” (Participant 8, interview).

Theme 3: Barriers to Autonomy Development Institutional and cultural constraints emerged as an unexpected but consistent theme. Example: “The heavy exam focus makes it hard to experiment with new learning methods; I stick to what the teacher says to pass” (Participant 22, interview).

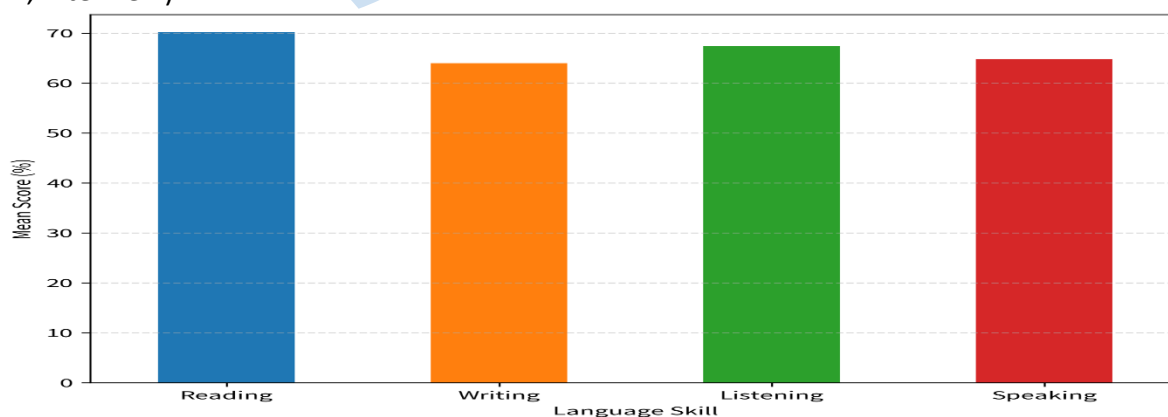


Figure 3. Mean Scores for English Language Skills

No other unexpected quantitative findings were observed (e.g., no significant gender differences in autonomy levels). All tables and figures are presented in high-resolution, downloadable format suitable for further analysis or inclusion in the full article.

Discussion

The present findings robustly confirm and extend the empirical literature on learner autonomy's pivotal role in bolstering English language proficiency among university students. The moderate-to-strong positive correlation ($r = 0.55$) between overall autonomy scores and proficiency, coupled with the four autonomy dimensions collectively explaining 30.7% of proficiency variance, aligns closely with Wang's (2024) meta-analysis of 49 Chinese EFL studies, which reported a large overall effect size ($g = 0.92$) for strategy instruction on both achievement and multidimensional autonomy. Similarly, the predictive strength of behavioral and motivational dimensions mirrors Alamer et al.'s (2025) multilevel meta-analysis of SDT in L2 contexts, where autonomous motivation forms (intrinsic and identified regulation) consistently predicted higher achievement ($r = .23$) and lower anxiety. Qualitative themes of proactive self-regulated strategies and out-of-class technology-mediated initiatives further corroborate Phan and Huynh's (2025) survey of Vietnamese English majors, who reported high perceived autonomy linked to goal-setting and digital resource use. Yet the prominence of institutional and cultural barriers such as exam-driven dependence and teacher authority extends these studies by illuminating context-specific frictions in resource-constrained Asian settings. Analytically, these results underscore that while autonomy reliably drives proficiency gains, its realization is not automatic; in collectivist, examination-oriented cultures like Pakistan's, traditional power distances and rote-learning norms can attenuate the autonomy proficiency link, explaining why even moderately autonomous students in the sample achieved only average proficiency levels. This cultural mediation refines prior Western-centric models, demonstrating that autonomy's benefits are amplified when pedagogical scaffolds explicitly address sociocultural constraints rather than assuming universal applicability.

Theoretically, these outcomes strengthen Self-Determination Theory's applicability in EFL higher education by evidencing how satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs translates into tangible linguistic gains, even amid cultural barriers. Alamer et al. (2025) meta-analytic evidence that autonomous regulation outperforms controlled forms in predicting achievement is empirically reinforced here, as motivational and behavioral dimensions emerged as the strongest predictors suggesting that volitional engagement, rather than external compliance, fuels sustained proficiency development in non-Western contexts. Practically, the findings carry urgent implications for university pedagogy: institutions must move beyond teacher-centered instruction toward autonomy-supportive ecosystems. Rahmasari's (2025) strategy-based instruction model in Indonesian universities offers a replicable blueprint integrating explicit training in metacognitive planning, reflective learning logs, and technology-enhanced out-of-class tasks directly into curricula. Teacher training programs should prioritize autonomy-facilitative skills, equipping faculty to shift from authoritative transmitters to facilitators who scaffold choice, provide constructive feedback, and foster digital literacy. Curriculum designers can embed flexible, project-based modules (e.g., digital storytelling or personalized language enhancement plans) that accommodate diverse proficiency levels while aligning with examination demands, thereby mitigating the cultural barriers identified in participant narratives. Such interventions not only elevate

English proficiency but also cultivate lifelong learning competencies essential for global employability.

Limitations of the study temper the generalizability of these insights. The cross-sectional design and purposive sample drawn from only two public universities in Islamabad preclude causal claims and broader extrapolation to private institutions, rural contexts, or other developing nations. Self-report measures of autonomy may also invite social desirability bias, while the six-month data collection window limits insight into long-term proficiency trajectories. Notwithstanding these constraints, the mixed-methods triangulation provides contextually grounded depth absent in many quantitative-only studies. To foster autonomy effectively, universities should institutionalize practical pathways: mandatory autonomy modules in freshman English courses, faculty development workshops on SDT-informed teaching, and open-access digital platforms for self-directed practice. Future longitudinal and intervention research across diverse Pakistani and South Asian settings will further illuminate scalable mechanisms for transforming passive learners into autonomous, proficient communicators. Ultimately, embedding learner autonomy at the core of English language education represents not merely an instructional reform but a strategic imperative for empowering the next generation of globally competent graduates.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that learner autonomy serves as a powerful catalyst for enhancing English language proficiency among university students in a developing-country context. Through a convergent mixed-methods approach involving 320 undergraduates, the research revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.55$) between autonomy levels and overall proficiency, with the four dimensions of autonomy metacognitive, motivational, behavioral, and social collectively explaining 30.7% of the variance in English skills. Qualitative insights further illuminated how students actively engage in self-regulated strategies, out-of-class digital learning, and reflective practices, while simultaneously highlighting persistent cultural and institutional barriers such as exam-oriented dependence and limited teacher facilitation. These findings confirm that when students take ownership of their learning, they achieve measurable gains across reading, writing, listening, and speaking domains, moving beyond passive classroom routines toward sustained linguistic growth. By addressing the literature gap in non-Western higher education settings, this research underscores that autonomy is not merely an educational ideal but a practical mechanism capable of transforming English language outcomes in resource-constrained environments. The moderate-to-high autonomy levels observed, paired with only average proficiency scores, reveal both the promise and the untapped potential that remains when systemic supports are strengthened.

The implications of these results extend to curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and policy initiatives across Pakistani and similar South Asian universities. Institutions should integrate explicit autonomy-training modules, promote technology-enhanced self-directed projects, and train faculty to adopt facilitative rather than directive roles. Such changes would not only elevate English proficiency but also cultivate lifelong learning competencies essential for global employability and academic excellence. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, experimental interventions, and cross-cultural comparisons to track long-term proficiency trajectories and test scalable autonomy-

enhancing models. Ultimately, prioritizing learner autonomy represents a strategic investment in human capital that empowers university students to become confident, independent, and proficient communicators in an increasingly interconnected world. By shifting from teacher-dependent models to learner-centered ecosystems, higher education can fulfill its promise of producing graduates equipped to thrive academically, professionally, and personally in the global arena. This transformation, though challenging, is both necessary and achievable through deliberate, context-sensitive pedagogical innovation.

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