

The Effect of Virtual Classes on Promoting Saudi EFL Students' Autonomous Learning

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Abstract—The current study aims to explore the effect of virtual classes on promoting autonomous learning of Saudi EFL students in the PYP Year Program (PYP). Data were collected through an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Two hundred eighty female undergraduate Saudi students in the PYP completed the questionnaire voluntarily. Fifteen English language instructors voluntarily agreed to be interviewed. The result of the study indicated that 64% of students demonstrated a high level of autonomous learning in virtual EFL classes. However, 36% of students showed an average level of autonomous learning in doing assignments, self-motivation, accelerating learning, and willingness to learn. Furthermore, the results show that students' level of autonomy in virtual classes depends on factors such as lack of motivation, constructive feedback, and students' educational culture. Additionally, the study provides some guidelines to help instructors implement autonomous learning in EFL virtual classes. Pedagogical implications and suggestions for further research are provided.

Index Terms—EFL University students, autonomous learning, virtual classes, English teachers, Saudi Arabia

I. INTRODUCTION

The global crisis of COVID-19 has affected the education process worldwide. It has forced all universities and schools to change their instruction from face-to-face learning to distance (online) classes in all subjects, including English. Consequently, students have attended their lectures online through virtual classes. These virtual classes include sharing applications, breakout rooms, a synchronised web-browsing whiteboard, and chat rooms (Cakyroglu, 2014). Yadav (2016) added that virtual classes allow students and instructors to share views and communicate via online platforms. Virtual learning is a dynamic alternative for self-motivated students who can constantly stay on task and monitor their learning goals (Dung, 2020, p.46).

However, this urgent shift contributes to the need for students to be more autonomous in their learning. As this era advances, the focus is more on learner-centred approaches than traditional classroom teaching, putting students as individuals at the core of the learning process (Begum, 2019). Therefore, autonomous learning of foreign languages has attracted attention and has been a favourite topic among researchers for many years (Dişlen, 2011; Tamer, 2013; Alrabai, 2017; Alzubi et al., 2017). This is because helping foreign language students to become autonomous has been considered one of the essential responsibilities of all foreign language instructors worldwide. Also, they commonly agree that taking responsibility for and demonstrating a willingness to undertake the learning tasks are the two essential components of autonomous learning.

The socio-cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978) has brought new perspectives to language learning and psychology. Autonomous learning emerged or was derived from the shift of focus from teaching to learning, which in recent years has increased the number of studies related to learners and the learning process itself. Therefore, autonomous learning has been studied comprehensively in the educational context since the 1980s.

Holec (1981) was the first to introduce the term "learner autonomy" into EFL teaching; he viewed autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3) and claimed that learners should assume responsibility for all aspects of their language learning: determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques; monitoring the procedure of acquisition; evaluating what has been acquired' (p. 3).

Different researchers offer a range of definitions of autonomous learning. For instance, Hedge (2000, p. 410) stated that "learner autonomy is the ability of the learner to take responsibility for his or her own learning and to plan, organise, and monitor the learning process independently of the teacher. Lengkanawati (2017) defined learner autonomy as learners' ability to be responsible for their learning, making decisions in choosing the learning objective, selecting appropriate learning techniques and methods, identifying their progress, observing L2 input, and assessing what has been produced. Moreover, according to Scharle and Szabó (2000, p. 4): In theory, we may define autonomy as the freedom and ability to manage one's affairs, which entails the right to make decisions. Responsibility may also be understood as being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one's actions. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement and are very much interrelated.

From the above definitions, it can be inferred that autonomous learning is linked to learners' freedom and is directed to make learners autonomous in their study. Also, it allows learners to study using their preferred learning strategies and styles. Additionally, it pushes learners to be independent in their learning by transferring responsibilities, providing

ideas, and presenting methods to learn independently.

Autonomous learning in the EFL context needs some requirements. First, Alzubi et al. (2017) illustrated that learners should learn to be self-disciplined and self-motivated in terms of learning materials, course objectives, and effort and time spent. Second, Birchley (2003) highlighted that in autonomous learning, instructors need to perform the roles of the language model, facilitator, motivator, counsellor, resource provider, and knowledge transmitter. Third, the learning environment should give the students a sense of overseeing their learning with practical lessons performed in-group work and communicative tasks in which it is easy to ask questions. In contrast, the lessons should be meaningful and exciting as students are not forced to memorise by rote (Zarei & Gahremani, 2010, p. 7).

A. Statement of the Problem

The teaching of the English language, like other subjects, has been affected by the lockdown period caused by COVID-19 with the need to switch instruction to virtual classes at short notice. Consequently, students were forced to engage with these virtual classes with different levels of autonomy. Some students felt lost and challenged by the new learning system, while others adapted quickly. Therefore, several studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness or identify the perceptions of autonomous learning and virtual classes in the EFL context. To date, no studies have focused explicitly on how practical virtual classes promote students' autonomous learning in the Saudi context. Therefore, the present study explores how effective virtual classes promote autonomous learning in the EFL classroom of Saudi female students studying in the PYP. Furthermore, the current study focuses on answering only one question in collecting and analysing its data:

How effective are the virtual classes in the EFL classroom in promoting the autonomous learning of Female Saudi undergraduate students in PYP at a Saudi university?

B. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to provide a comprehensive picture of how practical virtual classes are in promoting autonomous learning in the Saudi EFL context. This study can improve English instruction by providing guidelines for teachers to practice autonomous learning in their virtual classes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have conducted various studies on virtual classes and autonomous learning and their roles in teaching and learning. This part presents some of these related studies. Some studies are related to EFL and autonomous learning, while others are related to virtual classes in EFL learning. Yet others are related to studies on virtual classes and autonomous learning.

A. Previous Research on EFL and Autonomous Learning

Asiri and Shukri (2020) conducted a study to investigate PYP learners' perspectives of learner autonomy in the Saudi context. Furthermore, they examined if the learners have the knowledge and the competence to develop their learning. The study sample comprised 150 female EFL learners at the English Language Institute (ELI), King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU). A mixed-methods approach was applied to collect data. The study found that students had a negative attitude towards learner autonomy.

Another study was carried out by Alzubi et al. (2017) to explore the current practices of learner autonomy among Saudi undergraduates in the PYP, Najran University. In total, 208 male students in level one were randomly selected. A closed-statement questionnaire was used in this study, with the questions classified into six categories: linguistic confidence, information literacy, social comparison, locus of control, metacognition, and self-reliance. The results suggested that the overall level of autonomous learning was low.

Additionally, Tamer's (2013) study assessed Saudi university students' readiness for autonomous learning of EFL in the PYP. The participants were 121 students who were polled with questionnaires on their perceptions of responsibilities, abilities, motivation, and self-directed activities inside and outside the classroom for the independent learning of English. Also, ten teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of their students' autonomous learning of English. The results showed that the students had an adequate level of motivation but lacked any sense of being responsible for cognitive and metacognitive learning aspects of learning English inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, the teachers' interviews indicated that learner autonomy could be achieved if administrative restrictions were removed and students correctly trained.

Furthermore, Alrabai's (2017) study examined Saudi learners' autonomy in language learning at the university level; 360 students were asked to complete the questionnaire. The results showed that the students lacked autonomy in language learning. The study recommended that teachers have a significant role in promoting autonomous learning among students. Also, students should acquire skills that assist them in becoming autonomous, for instance, self-sufficiency-government and self-assessment.

Dişlen (2011) stated that first-year students from various departments of a Turkish university lack knowledge of applying autonomous learning in an EFL context due to the lack of English proficiency, effort, and time.

The above studies indicated that Saudi students have a negative perspective towards autonomous learning and a lack

of autonomous learning in learning languages; thus, students need proper training to become autonomous, while teachers require professional development to promote learner autonomy.

B. Previous Research on Virtual EFL Classes

Hamouda (2020) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of virtual classes on Saudi EFL students' speaking skills. Data of the study were collected using a questionnaire, speaking test, and semi-structured interviews. Seventy students participated in the study and were divided into control and experimental groups. The control group of 35 students were taught in the traditional face-to-face class, and the other 35 were in an experimental group and were taught English speaking in a virtual class. The findings showed that the experimental group improved their speaking performance more significantly in the post-speaking test than the control group.

Furthermore, Alhawiti (2017) conducted a study investigating the effect of virtual classes on students' English achievement at Tabuk Community College. The sample consisted of 224 learners from the PYP who were randomly divided into two equal groups: control and experimental. The study concluded that the experimental group of students who studied via virtual classes achieved higher English test scores than those who studied in traditional classes.

Another study, Mosquera (2017), aimed to identify the impact of implementing a virtual learning environment (VLE) in EFL courses at a public university in Colombia. The researcher concluded that students showed a positive attitude and were motivated and enthusiastic about implementing a VLE in the EFL classroom. The study recommended that English instructors be encouraged to keep up with advancements in educational technology to promote learning paths that better fit the interests and needs of digital-age students.

In addition, Khoshshima and Sayadi (2016) conducted a study with 20 students in Iran to examine the effect of virtual language learning methods on the writing ability of intermediate EFL learners. The findings indicated that the experimental group's post-test scores were much higher than those of their counterparts in the control group, so it can be concluded that the virtual learning method was very positive in this study.

Also, Al-Qahtani (2019) reported that language learners at King Khalid University in Saudi had positive attitudes toward teaching and learning through EFL virtual classes. They confirmed the vital role of virtual courses in enhancing their communication skills.

According to the above studies, it can be concluded that using virtual classes positively impacts improving students' level of language learning.

C. Previous Research on Virtual Classes and Autonomous Learning

Noviadayanti (2021) conducted a study to examine learner autonomy in online classes among fifteen Indonesian EFL students. A qualitative approach was used with semi-structured interviews and diaries as the instruments for data collection. The findings showed that most students showed learner autonomy characteristics and had participated in various learning activities outside classroom activities. Furthermore, the study suggested that teachers implement autonomous learning in their teaching practices, for instance, by giving students more freedom in choosing learning activities related to their interests and needs.

Similarly, Hidayati and Husna (2020) conducted a study investigating learners' experience with online and autonomous learning; 71 students were participants and asked to complete a questionnaire. The results showed that most of the students enjoyed their online English learning experience and displayed the actions of autonomous learners.

Another study by Güler and Esen (2021) explored the EFL teachers' perceptions of Turkish students' autonomy in online instruction during the lockdown period. The study followed a mixed-methods approach; 66 English teachers were selected randomly to participate. The findings revealed that learners were perceived to be autonomous by their teachers during the online instruction period. The study also highlighted the significance of factors that played an essential role in the degree, improvement, and insights of learners' autonomy in online classes.

Ghobain and Zughaibi (2021) examined Saudi EFL university students' readiness according to their autonomous behaviours and activities for online learning. According to the findings, the learners had made moderate progress towards achieving a high level of autonomy. However, they lacked a good level of actual activities.

Thus, the findings of this study support Denekamp's (2016) conclusion that the situation is changing in those contexts, as learners now exhibit significant qualities of the learner-centred approach. Hence, they are expected to improve their autonomous behaviours if not trained or scaffolded.

III. METHODOLOGY

The nature of the current study's research questions influenced the decision to employ an exploratory methodology. The present study utilises a sequential mixed-methods design in which the quantitative and qualitative phases were conducted in a sequence (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). With regard to the current study, the researcher employed two independent research methods, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. These methods complement each other, and mixed methods comprehensively describe and analyse the collected research data.

A. Sampling

The current study employed a non-probability or convenience sampling strategy for both the students and the English

instructors; this means the sample was selected because of their accessibility and availability at the time of the research (Cohen et al., 2011).

For the online questionnaire, the data were collected from students in various classes with the same language proficiency level. Students' level was equivalent to A2 based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) based on the university placement test held at the beginning of the academic year by the English Language Centre (ELC). The students shared some common characteristics, such as age and socio-cultural background. Two hundred eighty female undergraduate students participated in the research and completed the questionnaire.

For the semi-structured interviews, the data were collected from English language instructors at the ELC who were available and willing to be interviewed. They were from Saudi, the UK, Canada, Pakistan, and India and are holders of doctoral or master's degrees.

TABLE 1
TEACHERS' DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Number of Participants	Teacher's Gender	Nationality	Qualifications
1	Female	Saudi	PhD
1	Female	Pakistani	PhD
1	Female	Jordan	PhD
6	Female	Saudi	MA
3	Female	British	MA
1	Female	Canadian	MA
2	Female	Indian	MA

The sample for the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was restricted to females only due to the privacy of Saudi society, which prevents the mix of genders in the public and university stage.

B. Procedures

The researcher used a convenience sampling method where an online questionnaire was devised and circulated to the target group. Thirty days after the questionnaire had been distributed, 280 students responded to the questionnaire.

The procedures followed in the current study can be divided into two stages. First, students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire, which was then quantitatively analysed. After 30 days of distributing the questionnaire days, 280 students responded to the questionnaire.

Second, English language instructors were asked to volunteer to participate in semi-structured interviews in their free time. All interviews with teachers were conducted in English. Furthermore, these interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

C. Data Collection

In the current study, the first tool was a questionnaire, which was adapted from the relevant literature and pertinent previous studies related to the focus of the study (Halabb, 2018; Pichugova et al., 2015; Taamneh, 2021). However, the questionnaire items were developed and reworded. The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements, using a 5-point Likert scale, using the scale of agreement --strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

The second tool was semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen mainly because of the flexibility in allowing researchers to delete, include, and modify items and questions according to what information is relevant. The semi-structured interview items or questions were based on the research questions, the literature review of autonomous learning and virtual classes, and interview guides from previous studies. Then, questions in the semi-structured interview were administered to jury members to give feedback and comments. In this way, it was revised and refined many times. The semi-structured interview consisted of five questions.

(a). Instrument Validity

The researcher ensured that the questionnaire was valid through the following procedures:

1. Face validity

After the researcher prepared the initial version of the research instrument, she administered it to (5) experienced and competent faculty members in the Faculty of Education. The jury members gave feedback and comments that focused on addition, deletion, modification of questionnaire statements, and the clarity and simplicity of language to present statements free from punctuation and spelling mistakes. This feedback was addressed in the final version of the questionnaire.

2. Internal Consistency

The researcher piloted the questionnaire on 24 female students, and the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was calculated between the statements and the overall score of the instrument (see Table 2)

TABLE 2
PEARSON CORRELATION CO-EFFICIENT

No	Item	Pearson efficient	Correlation Co-	Statistical Significance
1.	Virtual classes encourage me to do assignments or projects outside class.	.469*		.021
2.	Virtual classes encourage me to take responsibility for my learning.	.610**		.002
3.	Virtual classes help me plan and follow up on learning tasks.	.644**		.001
4.	Virtual classes teach me to monitor my performance on an ongoing basis.	.693**		.000
5.	Virtual classes help me find solutions to problems encountered.	.674**		.000
6.	Virtual classes help me make independent choices about my learning.	.649**		.001
7.	Virtual classes encourage me to set my own goals according to my own needs.	.687**		.000
8.	Virtual classes encourage me to feel confident about my performance during the course.	.798**		.000
9.	Virtual classes encourage me to demonstrate a willingness to learn in general.	.819**		.000
10.	Virtual classes encourage me to learn English in particular willingly.	.563**		.004
11.	Virtual classes motivate me to learn (without external rewards).	.753**		.000
12.	Virtual classes help me express my ideas and opinions freely.	.604**		.002
13.	Virtual classes help me learn by taking part in classroom interactions and discussions.	.636**		.001
14.	Virtual classes encourage me to work with various audio and video materials and resources to enhance my learning.	.742**		.000
15.	Virtual classes encourage me to respect the formality of the teacher-student relationship.	.670**		.000
16.	Virtual classes help accelerate my learning compared with other traditional methods.	.423*		.039
17.	Virtual classes encourage me to learn with and from others.	.775**		.000
18.	I can motivate myself to learn English even if I am not supervised.	.822**		.000
19.	Virtual classes help me identify my strengths and weaknesses independently.	.804**		.000
20.	Virtual classes help me positively receive feedback and suggestions from my teachers and classmates.	.574**		.003

* Statistically significant at the level of 0.05

** Statistically significant at the level of 0.01

The above Table shows the Pearson correlation coefficient scores to indicate the effectiveness of virtual classes in EFL classrooms in promoting Saudi female students' autonomous learning, and the total score at the levels of 0.01 and 0.05. The scores ranged from *.0423 and **.0822

(b). Instrument Reliability

The researcher piloted the research instrument on the pilot sample and calculated the consistency factor using Cronbach's Alpha. Table 3 shows the reliability coefficients.

TABLE 3
CRONBACH ALPHA RELIABILITY ON THE INSTRUMENT TOTAL SCORE OF THE

	Number of Statements	Reliability Co-efficient
The overall reliability of the effectiveness of virtual classes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in promoting autonomous learning for Saudi female students	20	0.93

Table 3 above shows that Cronbach's alpha score reached 0.93, a high score showing that the research instrument suits the research aims and the questionnaire is reliable.

D. Data Analysis

The data from the semi-structured interviews were coded and labelled, and the interview was then read line by line to make an initial list of themes and sub-themes. That means the data were analysed thematically to identify the themes within the data. By the end of the process, a coding scheme was created that comprised the main themes and categories.

SPSS version 23 was used to analyse the data of the questionnaire and answer the questions:

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to verify the validity.

Cronbach's alpha was used to check the reliability of the study tool.

Mean scores, standard deviations, median, and Cronbach alpha ranks were used to answer the following research question: How effective are virtual classes in English as a foreign language in promoting autonomous learning for Saudi female students?

The following step-by-step procedures were adopted to achieve the dimensions of the study instrument to determine the degree of agreement based on the range equation as shown in Table 4 below:

TABLE 4
DEGREE OF AGREEMENT BASED ON THE RANGE EQUATION

Range Equation	Degree of Agreement
1.00 – 1.80	(Very low agreement)
More than 1.80 – 2.60	(Low Agreement)
More than 2.60 – 3.40	(Average Agreement)
More than 3.40 – 4.20	(High Agreement)
More than 4.20 – 5.00	(Very high agreement)

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section reviews the most important findings of the current study by answering the research questions.

The results of the first question: How effective are virtual classes in English as a foreign language in promoting autonomous learning for Saudi female students?

The researcher calculated the mean scores, standard deviations, and median of the responses of the study sample on the effectiveness of virtual classes in EFL classes in promoting the autonomous learning of Saudi female students, as shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5
MEAN SCORES, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, MEDIAN, AND RANKS FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VIRTUAL CLASSES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN PROMOTING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING FOR SAUDI FEMALE STUDENTS

No	Item	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Median	Cronbach Alpha
1.	Virtual classes encourage me to do assignments or projects outside class.	3.46	1.244	18	High
2.	Virtual classes encourage me to take responsibility for my own learning.	3.95	1.161	4	High
3.	Virtual classes help me plan and follow up on learning tasks.	.369	1.184	13	High
4.	Virtual classes teach me to monitor my performance on an ongoing basis.	3.74	1.190	9	High
5.	Virtual classes help me find solutions to problems encountered.	3.53	1.179	16	High
6.	Virtual classes help me make independent choices about my learning.	3.90	1.085	5	High
7.	Virtual classes encourage me to set my own goals according to my own needs.	3.70	1.179	12	High
8.	Virtual classes encourage me to feel confident about my performance during the course.	3.61	1.310	15	High
9.	Virtual classes encourage me to demonstrate a willingness to learn in general.	3.47	1.335	17	High
10.	Virtual classes encourage me to learn English willingly.	3.80	1.335	6	High
11.	Virtual classes motivate me to learn (without external rewards).	3.34	1.308	19	Average
12.	Virtual classes help me express my ideas and opinions freely.	3.73	1.230	10	High
13.	Virtual classes help me learn by taking part in classroom interactions and discussions.	3.65	1.263	14	High
14.	Virtual classes encourage me to work with various audio and video materials and resources to enhance learning.	3.99	1.084	3	High
15.	Virtual classes encourage me to respect the formality of the teacher-student relationship.	4.08	1.052	2	High
16.	Virtual classes help quicken my learning compared with other traditional methods.	3.32	1.492	20	Average
17.	Virtual classes encourage me to learn with and from others.	3.71	1.238	11	High
18.	I can motivate myself to learn English even if I am not supervised.	4.09	1.101	1	High
19.	Virtual classes help me identify my strengths and weaknesses independently.	3.78	1.156	8	High
20.	Virtual classes help me positively receive feedback and suggestions from my teachers and classmates.	3.79	1.145	7	High
21.		3.71	.902		High

Table 5 shows that the total mean scores of the effectiveness of virtual classes in EFL classes in promoting the autonomous learning of Saudi female students was (3.71), with a standard deviation (0.902) and a large effect. The mean scores on the questionnaire statements about the effectiveness of virtual classes in EFL in promoting the autonomous learning of Saudi female students ranged from 3.32 to 4.09. The effectiveness of virtual classes in EFL classes focused on promoting the autonomous learning of Saudi female students with the following points, from the most to the least important, respectively:

- I can motivate myself to learn English even if I am not supervised.
- Virtual classes encourage me to respect the formality of the teacher-student relationship.
- Virtual classes encourage me to work with various audio and video materials and resources to enhance my learning.
- Virtual classes encourage me to take responsibility for my learning.

- Virtual classes help me make independent choices about my learning.
- Virtual classes encourage me to learn English in particular willingly.
- Virtual classes help me positively receive feedback and suggestions from my teachers and classmates.

However, traditional classes are less effective in promoting Saudi female students' autonomous learning.

- Virtual classes help accelerate my learning compared with other traditional methods.
- Virtual classes motivate me to learn (without external rewards).
- Virtual classes encourage me to do assignments or projects outside class.
- Virtual classes encourage me to demonstrate a willingness to learn in general.

The responses from interviews with English language instructors indicated that promoting autonomous learning in EFL virtual classes depends mainly on both the instructor and the students. Mrs Nada gave an example of this issue:

If it's a student who wants to be there, who wants to be in the class, they can help a lot. The students can benefit a lot. If the student is active, and the student is getting the chance to be active in the classroom virtually and is given a chance to promote their credentials, like 'I'm a good student, I know how to speak, I know how to write, and it's done in the right way, it can be very effective. But again, it comes down, I think, to the teacher, to the student, and the context. In other words, it all comes down to the student, student planning, student organisation, students' willingness and then the teachers' planning, teachers' organisation, teachers' strategies etc.

Furthermore, Mrs Wafa had a similar view; she stated:

It depends on the learners and how much they work on themselves to learn. It also depends on the teacher and his awareness of her role. Also, the circumstances and the environment around the learners affect their learning.

Additionally, Mrs Lina mentioned that autonomous learning could be applied in virtual or face-to-face classes if the instructor is willing to apply it in EFL classes or any subject class. She commented:

To be honest, I can say that both virtual and face-to-face classes can promote the autonomous learning of EFL students. It depends mainly on the ideas of the instructors themselves. If she wants to apply, or if she wants to maximise her chances of autonomous learning, she will do this easily by assigning some parts of the curriculum to be discussed or to be said later on by the students themselves. I mean, if she's willing to apply autonomous learning, she would try to apply it in virtual or face-to-face classes.

The responses collected from the interviews with English language instructors revealed that factors hinder their promotion of autonomous learning in virtual classes. For example, Dr Amal stated that the learning environment is considered a primary factor that affects the advancement of promoting autonomous learning:

The learning environment is a huge factor. The instructor is a huge factor because so many instructors are unwilling to take on board the responsibility of promoting autonomy in their classrooms [...] because it depends on the environment they're teaching in. It depends on their workload, and the work assigned to them [...] depends on what kind of culture they belong to. Our students, I mean the educational culture. Here, there is no autonomy; I don't think. There's hardly any autonomy in the high schools. So, it's new when they come to us because they haven't got any learning strategy to cope with this so-called 'autonomy'. Many of them shy away from it, and many are anxious when presented with some autonomy. No, I think it's challenging. So, this is a big thing which plays against them. And they're like, oh, what is this? Where is the teacher? I need the teacher; I need the help. And when you don't give it, you can even get some hate from the students because they think you like working against them.

Another English instructor indicated that the context, providing the content, and students' lack of interaction in groups are other factors that might contribute to hindering autonomous learning. An example of this was given by Dr Mona, who said:

Yes. We will consider so many factors. Number one, the content needs to be at the right level and not very high because this is not going to be. I mean, once it is very high, it will not help them acquire or study something. So, the input needs to be comprehensible to study something and use what they are learning. This is the most important thing to me, number one. Number two: the chances of working together, whenever they have, for example, breakout rules or something like that, or studying by Zoom or by any other kind of application. This will promote the study because I think working in groups would increase the accountability of students. So it would just encourage them to do something because they are just like part of the group, and they will be held responsible for anything they do in the group. So, I think this would maximise the chances of studying something if they have a specific meeting time.

Additionally, two English instructors highlighted that not providing constructive and comprehensive feedback can be another factor that could obstruct autonomous learning. This view was described by Mrs Maha as follows:

I think that the proper feedback or providing students with the proper feedback can make or can maximise the chances of virtual learning being more successful. As a result, it will increase the achievement of autonomy. We need to introduce our feedback to students so they can know their performance, whether right or wrong. Whenever the teacher can provide such kind of feedback, I think it can make a big difference in autonomous learning through the virtual classes.

Similarly, three English instructors revealed other factors hindering autonomous learning: students' lack of

motivation, attitude, and enthusiasm.

I think students' attitude toward autonomous learning, lack of motivation, and lack of student skills to deal with online classes. Also, lack of enthusiasm for complex tasks, lack of guidance during the process, and the task not set at the correct level of ability for the students is an essential factor which obstructs students' autonomous learning in virtual classes.

The data analysis of the interviews with the English instructors revealed that various guidelines could be used to help the instructors implement autonomous learning in EFL virtual classes. For instance, Mrs Huda said:

Autonomous learning can be fostered by asking students to work on projects individually or in groups. They can also be asked to set targets for their learning. So, the student would identify an area that needs improvement and decide how they will work on improving the chosen area and a time frame for completing it.

Moreover, three English instructors asserted that students should force their students to work independently to implement autonomous learning. An example of this was given by Mrs Dina, who stated:

We can apply autonomous learning by just pinpointing the vital point of, for example, a reading passage. I would say that this passage is talking about so and so, and we will have some questions; you have to do it on your own, and you have to depend on yourself to read the passage and apply the skills that we have learnt correctly. Then answer the questions. Once we have introduced the concepts and the rules of the idea of the lesson, students, with a bit of guidance, can go and study later on if they have the will or are willing to do that by themselves.

Similarly, Mrs Maha emphasised the importance of doing research or projects for students from the undergraduate stage. Her views were expressed as follows:

I make exercises more interactive; writing, reading and speaking more research- and project-oriented; and ask students to design the work.

Dr Sarah, one of the instructors, highlighted the importance of planning as a guideline that can help implement autonomous learning, and she expressed this as follows:

The teacher can make plans to apply autonomous learning. She can learn about her students. You get to know their level, their preferred learning style, their robust learning, the strategies they've got, and what are the strong ones and the weak ones. She uses those, caters for them and plans autonomous learning for them. That's a good idea, I think.

Dr Amal drew attention to the importance of identifying the role of instructors and clarifying the concept of autonomous learning to students as follows:

I explain and clarify the meaning of autonomous learning to the learners and how to apply it correctly. Besides, the learners should be aware of the importance of knowledge and appreciate it. They don't have to focus on studying for the sake of the exams. More important, as a teacher, I should be aware of my role as a director, a monitor, and a facilitator who reinforces and supports learners.

The above results analysed the collected data from different views based on the research question. The quantitative and qualitative results were combined to present the finding in a unified style.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer one research question, which examined the effectiveness of virtual classes in EFL classrooms for promoting the autonomous learning of female Saudi undergraduate students at the PYP at a university in Saudi Arabia.

The current study confirmed direct and positive correlations between all phrases and the overall research focus of autonomous learning. This finding in the present study is in line with some previous studies (Noviadayanti, 2021) Hidayati and Husna (2020) found that most of the students in their research agreed with the important role of virtual classes in promoting their autonomous learning in the EFL classroom.

Furthermore, the study's findings pointed out the students' lack of motivation, positive attitude, or enthusiasm. These factors hinder the promotion of autonomous learning in virtual classes. Similar results were found in research conducted by Güler and Esen (2021), who revealed that lack of motivation was considered a barrier to learner autonomy in online instruction.

The current study's findings demonstrated that the educational culture students come from is an essential factor that hinders their autonomy in EFL virtual classes because they are deficient in the necessary training to cope with autonomous learning. Similar findings were also reported in Ghobain and Zughaibi's (2021) study, which indicated that rather than being non-autonomous learners, EFL learners in Arab contexts lack training in autonomous activities or behaviours.

Güler and Esen (2021) indicated that EFL teachers suggested that providing more support and feedback would make students more autonomous. The current study aligns with this finding of giving constructive and comprehensive feedback for more autonomous learning in virtual classes, as suggested by Saudi English language instructors.

Additionally, the results showed that the teacher plays a significant role as a director, mentor, and facilitator in increasing students' autonomous learning. This result agrees with the research study by Güler and Esen (2021). They pointed out that making students more independent can be done by avoiding spoon-feeding them and allowing students

to find information by themselves.

However, students in the current study were in average agreement regarding how virtual classes can help them accelerate their learning. Compared with other traditional methods, virtual classes can encourage them to complete assignments or projects outside of class and demonstrate a willingness to learn. These outcomes are supported by Ghobain and Zughaibi's (2021) results. They revealed that students showed moderate autonomy when taking responsibility for their English learning in online classes.

It can be observed from the above findings that autonomous learning is beneficial for students when they learn how to study independently in various ways and find the most effective method to support their learning. This is because 'the development of autonomy involves big, even fundamental, changes in learners' beliefs, identity, and affective realities in learning. These do not happen overnight, and they do not manifest themselves only in a limited range of contexts' (Chong & Reinders, 2022, p. 19).

One of the goals of Saudi VISION 2030 is to adopt strategies that encourage autonomous learning to assist students in being capable of thinking and innovating by themselves. Therefore, the current study is considered an attempt to contribute to learner autonomy in the Saudi EFL context. It aims to shed light on the effectiveness of the virtual classes in the EFL classroom in promoting the autonomous learning of Saudi undergraduate students in the PYP year.

The study concludes that with autonomous learning, students should relish the learning process, reflected in their desire to learn and their willingness to complete tasks readily with knowledge of the advantages that may support their future learning.

There is still much left for future researchers to investigate. A direction worth pursuing for future research is to see how virtual classes affect Saudi EFL students' autonomous learning, focusing on specific language skills, such as English reading or writing, at the undergraduate stage. A study with male Saudi participants could be conducted to generalise the results nationwide.

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