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Investigating Students' Levels and Challenges in Promoting Autonomous Learning: A University EFL Context in Indonesia

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Abstract
Over the past three decades, autonomous learning has emerged as a hot topic in language learning. This study investigates the learner autonomy levels and the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in an Indonesian university context. Using a qualitative method, data were collected through a structured survey with 30 participants and follow-up interviews with four graduate students. The survey is based on Bandaranaike & Willison's framework. The results were analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006). Results revealed that learners showed moderate autonomy, confidence in guided tasks, critical thinking, but faced challenges in initiating independent tasks, managing time, planning objectives, managing communication, and relying on teacher guidance. Future research could investigate more on the ICT application in enhancing students' autonomous learning.

Keywords: Autonomous learning challenges; EFL learners, Learner autonomy; Language learning

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INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has become one of the most influential concepts in language education over the past several decades. As language learning increasingly emphasizes lifelong learning and learner-centered approaches, learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning has gained considerable attention among researchers and practitioners. However, despite its growing prominence, learner autonomy continues to be misunderstood in many educational contexts. In Indonesia, for instance, autonomous learning is frequently perceived as learning without teacher supervision, leading both teachers and students to associate autonomy with complete independence rather than guided self-direction (Khotimah et al., 2019). Such misconceptions may hinder the effective implementation of learner autonomy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where learners often require support in developing the skills necessary to manage their own learning. Little (2007) argued that learner autonomy can be enhanced when students are gradually given greater control over the content and proc of learningesses. Yet such development largely depends on teachers' understanding of autonomy and their ability to facilitate it effectively (Little, 2022).

The concept of learner autonomy has evolved substantially since its introduction. Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning, while Dickinson (1987) described it as learners' freedom to make decisions concerning their learning process. Subsequent scholars expanded the concept beyond individual independence. Benson (2008), Lamb (2008), Murphy (2007), and Smith (2008) emphasized learners' capacity to reflect upon and assume responsibility for their educational experiences. Similarly, Little et al. (2017) argued that learner autonomy is not merely an organizational

arrangement but a pedagogical necessity that develops through social interaction between teachers and learners. Drawing upon Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural perspective, autonomy can be understood as a socially mediated capacity that emerges through interaction, collaboration, and guided participation. From this perspective, teachers play a crucial role in helping learners gradually develop autonomous behaviors by drawing on learners' existing knowledge and providing appropriate support (Little, 2017). Consequently, learner autonomy should not be interpreted as learning in isolation but rather as a dynamic process involving increasing learner responsibility within supportive learning environments. Jacobs and Shan (2015) further argued that autonomous learners actively engage in their learning rather than relying solely on teachers, while Harmer (2015) and Little (2017) highlighted that the ultimate objective of learner autonomy is to enable learners to continue developing their target-language proficiency independently throughout their lives.

Research has identified several characteristics associated with autonomous learning. According to Dang (2012), learner autonomy encompasses three interconnected dimensions: initiating, monitoring, and evaluating learning. Initiating involves understanding learning goals, setting personal objectives, planning activities, and seeking learning opportunities. Monitoring includes selecting appropriate strategies and materials, maintaining focus, collaborating with others, and implementing learning activities effectively. Evaluating involves assessing learning strategies, progress, and outcomes. These dimensions indicate that learner autonomy requires not only independence but also metacognitive awareness and self-regulation throughout the learning process. Similarly, Lee et al. (2017) argued that autonomous learning begins with learners' willingness to take initiative and make informed decisions regarding their learning. Lau (2017) further suggested that autonomous learning strategies foster learner independence while increasing accountability for learning outcomes. Although Morris (2019) proposed that autonomous learners can continue learning even in the absence of teachers, other scholars emphasize that teacher guidance remains an important element in facilitating successful autonomous learning (Khotimah et al., 2019; Jafari & Akbarzadeh, 2017). In this regard, learner autonomy should be viewed as a balance between learner responsibility and pedagogical support rather than the absence of teacher involvement.

The implementation of learner autonomy is strongly influenced by educational and cultural contexts. Benson and Huang (2008) noted that the concept originated largely within European educational traditions that emphasize learner-centered approaches. In contrast, many Asian educational systems have historically adopted teacher-centered practices in which teachers serve as primary sources of knowledge and students assume more passive roles (Rattray, 2013). In Indonesia, this educational tradition may hinder the development of learner autonomy because students are often accustomed to receiving explicit guidance from teachers. Nevertheless, autonomy remains an important educational objective. The Indonesian Ministry of Education (MoEC, 2011) identifies independence as one of the core character values that should be developed throughout students' educational experiences. Breen (1983) similarly argued that learner-centered approaches encourage learners to participate actively in constructing knowledge rather than merely receiving information, thereby creating conditions that support the development of autonomy.

Despite its importance, research on learner autonomy in Indonesia remains relatively limited. Earlier studies primarily investigated the role of Self-Access Centers in supporting autonomous learning and language development (Furaidah & Ruslan, 2008) and examined the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency (Myartawan, 2012; Suharmanto, 2003). More recent studies have focused on teachers' and students' perceptions of learner autonomy. Khotimah et al. (2019) found that both teachers and students frequently misunderstand autonomy as learning without teacher support. Likewise, Lengkanawati (2017) reported that although teachers generally value learner autonomy, many continue to equate it with complete learner independence. Consequently, students' autonomy levels often remain moderate because teachers provide limited support in facilitating autonomous learning (Firman et al., 2020).

Studies exploring students' perspectives further reveal the complexity of implementing autonomous learning. Khulaifiyah et al. (2021) found that many students associate autonomy with complete independence in determining objectives, methods, and learning strategies. However, subsequent research demonstrated that learners still require teacher assistance in deciding when and how to initiate, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Khulaifiyah et al., 2022). Similarly, Indah et al. (2021) identified teacher

involvement as a major external factor influencing autonomous learning, while Melviana et al. (2021) found that students often perceive themselves as autonomous because their teachers create supportive learning environments. These findings support Sinclair's (2000) argument that autonomy develops most effectively when learners are placed in environments that encourage autonomous behavior while still providing appropriate support.

Research conducted in higher education contexts has also produced important insights into learner autonomy. Studies have consistently shown that university students generally demonstrate moderate levels of learner autonomy while continuing to rely on teacher guidance in various aspects of learning (Chan et al., 2002; Zhou & Wang, 2012). Metacognitive strategies such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation have been identified as essential factors contributing to the development of autonomous learning and academic success (Cotterall, 1995; Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Moreover, technology-enhanced learning environments have been shown to facilitate learner autonomy by providing learners with greater access to resources and opportunities for self-directed learning (Nguyen & Gu, 2013). Nevertheless, challenges remain. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) found discrepancies between teachers' and students' expectations regarding learner autonomy, while Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) highlighted teachers' difficulties in balancing guidance and independence. Furthermore, Murphey and Jacobs (2000) argued that collaborative autonomy enables learners to benefit from both independence and interdependence, suggesting that learner autonomy need not preclude collaboration with peers.

Within Indonesian higher education, studies have highlighted both opportunities and challenges for promoting learner autonomy. Damayanti (2017) reported that university EFL learners recognized the importance of learner autonomy but encountered barriers such as limited resources and insufficient motivation. Similarly, Setyaningrum and Rukmini (2020) found that collaborative learning could facilitate the development of learner autonomy by encouraging peer interaction and shared responsibility. Although these studies have provided valuable insights into instructional approaches that support learner autonomy, they have primarily focused on learners' perceptions, classroom practices, and factors influencing autonomous learning, rather than on learners' actual autonomy levels and the challenges they experience in its implementation.

Although learner autonomy has been widely investigated in both international and Indonesian contexts, several important gaps remain. Existing studies in Indonesia have largely examined learners' and teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (Khotimah et al., 2019; Lengkanawati, 2017), autonomous learning activities (Khulaifiyah et al., 2021, 2022), factors influencing learner autonomy (Indah et al., 2021; Melviana et al., 2021), learning facilities (Furaidah & Ruslan, 2008), and the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency (Myartawan, 2012; Suharmanto, 2003). While these studies have significantly contributed to the understanding of learner autonomy, they have generally investigated its dimensions separately. Consequently, limited attention has been given to examining learners' autonomy levels alongside the challenges they encounter during the implementation of autonomous learning. Investigating these two dimensions simultaneously provides a more comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy because it not only identifies the extent to which learners demonstrate autonomous behaviors but also explains the contextual and instructional challenges that may constrain their development. Such an approach enables a richer interpretation of learner autonomy as a developmental process rather than simply describing learners as autonomous or non-autonomous.

Furthermore, empirical evidence regarding learner autonomy among graduate EFL learners remains limited in Indonesian higher education. Graduate students are generally expected to demonstrate greater independence in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning than undergraduate students. Therefore, examining learner autonomy within this context provides valuable insights into how autonomy is enacted when learners are expected to assume substantial responsibility for their own learning. Although this study was conducted at a single university in West Java, the institution represents a typical Indonesian EFL higher-education context in which learner autonomy is increasingly promoted through graduate-level academic practices. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aims to provide contextually grounded insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with developing learner autonomy among graduate EFL learners, thereby contributing to broader discussions of learner autonomy in similar higher education

contexts in Indonesia.

Therefore, this study investigates graduate EFL learners' levels of learner autonomy and the challenges they encounter in implementing autonomous learning within an Indonesian university context. By integrating descriptive quantitative evidence of learners' autonomy levels with qualitative insights into the challenges they experience, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy as a socially mediated and developmental process. In doing so, the study extends previous research by demonstrating not only how autonomous graduate EFL learners are but also why particular dimensions of learner autonomy remain challenging despite learners' advanced educational level. Furthermore, the study contributes to learner autonomy theory by providing empirical evidence that autonomy develops through guided participation, instructional scaffolding, and collaborative interaction rather than through complete independence.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are learners' levels of autonomous learning?
2. What challenges are perceived by learners in the implementation of autonomous learning?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, supported by descriptive quantitative data, to investigate learners' levels of autonomy and the challenges they encountered in implementing autonomous learning. The qualitative component was the primary approach, as the study sought an in-depth understanding of learners' experiences and perceptions of autonomous learning through semi-structured interviews. Meanwhile, the questionnaire generated descriptive quantitative data that were used to summarize participants' autonomy levels and perceived challenges rather than to test statistical relationships or hypotheses.

A qualitative descriptive design is appropriate when researchers aim to provide a comprehensive description of a phenomenon in its natural context while integrating multiple sources of evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The combination of questionnaire and interview data enabled methodological triangulation, allowing the quantitative findings to be explained and enriched by participants' qualitative accounts.

Research Target/Subject

The participants of this study were 30 graduate students enrolled in an English Education Master's program at a university in West Java, Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they had direct experience with autonomous learning practices in graduate-level coursework. Graduate students were considered appropriate participants since independent learning and self-regulation are expected learning characteristics at this educational level (Khotimah et al., 2019).

The sample size of 30 participants was considered adequate for the descriptive purpose of this study. Rather than aiming to generalize findings to a larger population, the study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of learner autonomy within a specific educational context. In qualitative descriptive research, relatively small purposive samples are appropriate when participants possess characteristics relevant to the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enrich the questionnaire findings, four participants voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews, providing more detailed explanations of their experiences with autonomous learning.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

Two instruments were employed in this study: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from the learner autonomy framework developed by Bandaranaike and Willison (2017), which has been widely used to assess learners' autonomy in higher education contexts. The framework was selected because it conceptualizes learner autonomy as a progressive process encompassing learners' ability to interpret guidance, initiate learning, make decisions, solve problems, collaborate with others, and regulate their own learning. These dimensions are closely aligned with the objectives of the present study.

The adapted questionnaire consisted of 15 items, divided into 2 sections. The first section comprised nine items measuring learners' autonomy levels, while the second section included six items examining the challenges learners encountered during autonomous learning. Participants responded using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). A four-point scale was selected to encourage respondents to express a clear tendency toward agreement or disagreement without choosing a neutral option (Joshi et al., 2015).

Since the questionnaire was adapted from an established and previously validated instrument developed by Bandaranaike and Willison (2017), the original construct structure was maintained. The wording of several items was slightly modified to suit the Indonesian EFL graduate context while preserving their original meanings. No additional statistical validity or reliability testing was conducted in the present study because the research adopted the validated instrument as its primary measurement framework.

Following the questionnaire administration, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four volunteer participants to obtain deeper insights into the questionnaire findings. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions of autonomous learning. All interviews were conducted online, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Data analysis technique

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to describe learners' levels of autonomy and the challenges they encountered during autonomous learning. The analysis was intended to provide a descriptive overview of participants' responses rather than to test statistical relationships or inferential hypotheses. Mean scores closer to four indicated stronger agreement with each statement, whereas lower mean scores indicated lower levels of agreement. Standard deviations were calculated to examine the consistency of participants' responses, with lower values indicating greater consistency.

Following the quantitative analysis, the interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring patterns related to learners' autonomy levels and the challenges they experienced during autonomous learning.

Finally, the findings from both data sources were integrated during the interpretation stage. The questionnaire results provided an overall description of learners' autonomy levels and perceived challenges, while the interview findings were used to explain, clarify, and enrich the quantitative results by illustrating participants' experiences and perceptions. Integrating the two data sources enabled methodological triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of learner autonomy in the Indonesian graduate EFL context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on two parts: (i) presenting and discussing results in relation to learners' autonomy levels and (ii) showcasing and discussing the results on learners' challenges in autonomous learning.

Students' autonomy levels

Data from the questionnaire generally shows learners' autonomous learning. As outlined above, the questionnaire was classified into two themes. The first one is students' autonomy levels. The first theme was elaborated into nine questions as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Learners' Autonomy Levels Distributions

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Total
Mean	3.2	3.3	3.4	2.4	3.0	2.7	2.7	2.9	3.0	2.9

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Total
Standard Deviation (SD)	0.8	0.4	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5

Learners' reliance on instructional guidance as a foundation for autonomy

The findings indicate that learners demonstrated higher confidence when clear instructional guidance was provided. Participants reported that they were able to interpret structured instructions (M = 3.3) and analyse problems using specific guidelines (M = 3.4), whereas their confidence decreased when they were expected to initiate learning independently (M = 2.4). Although these mean scores should not be interpreted as representing substantial differences, they consistently suggest that instructional support remained an important component of learners' autonomous learning.

The interview data further explain this pattern. As Learner A explained, "I consider having detailed instruction in doing the autonomous learning so that I will stay on track and do it properly as suggested in the rubrics." This statement suggests that detailed instructions were not perceived as limiting learners' independence; rather, they functioned as a framework that enabled learners to regulate their learning and complete tasks more confidently. Similarly, Learner B admitted, "Sometimes, I found it difficult to initiate myself in doing autonomous learning. I often got confused about the lecturer's instructions." This quotation indicates that learners' difficulty in initiating autonomous learning stemmed from uncertainty in interpreting task expectations rather than from a lack of motivation to learn independently.

These interview findings complement the questionnaire results by illustrating how teacher guidance supports the development of learner autonomy. Similar observations were reported by Khotimah et al. (2019) and Khulaifiyah et al. (2022), who found that Indonesian university students continued to rely on lecturers' explanations and feedback even as they engaged in autonomous learning. However, the present study extends previous research by demonstrating that this reliance remains evident even among graduate students, suggesting that advanced educational level alone does not automatically lead to greater learner autonomy.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings reinforce Little et al.'s (2017) argument that learner autonomy develops through guided participation rather than through the absence of teacher involvement. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1987) concept of mediation, teacher guidance appears to function as instructional scaffolding that gradually enables learners to internalize self-regulatory strategies and assume greater responsibility for their learning. Therefore, the findings suggest that instructional guidance should be viewed as a facilitator of learner autonomy rather than as an obstacle to its development.

Self-regulation remains a developing dimension of learner autonomy

The findings suggest that although the participants demonstrated moderate levels of learner autonomy, self-regulation remained one of the less-developed dimensions of their autonomous learning. Learners reported moderate confidence in adapting their learning strategies and applying critical thinking to solve problems (M = 2.9), yet they showed lower confidence in independently planning their learning, setting study objectives, and establishing learning schedules (M = 2.7). While the differences among these mean scores were relatively small, they consistently indicate that learners were more capable of regulating their learning during the learning process than of planning it independently before learning began.

The interview findings provide further insights into these quantitative results. Learner C admitted, “I do not have any specific guidelines, study plan, or objectives to do autonomous learning. I also do not set any deadlines for autonomous learning. I just want to learn the topic that I like and skip the topic that I do not like.” This statement illustrates that learners tended to approach autonomous learning based on personal interests rather than systematic planning and goal setting. Such behavior reflects learners' freedom to make learning choices, but it also indicates limited metacognitive regulation in organizing and directing their own learning.

However, the interview data also demonstrate that learners had begun to develop self-regulatory strategies during the learning process. For example, Learner C explained, “I usually write small notes on Microsoft Word or Google Documents, so I know what I should do next. I also create dump files where I write sentences or ideas to add to my tasks.” Likewise, Learner D stated, “I usually change and adapt my way in autonomous learning when I meet a problem. After the lecturer checks my work and finds things to improve, I use my knowledge to solve the problem critically.” These quotations suggest that although learners encountered difficulties in planning their learning independently, they were capable of monitoring, reflecting on feedback, and modifying their learning strategies once the learning process had begun. In other words, learners demonstrated emerging self-regulatory behaviors, particularly in monitoring and adapting their learning, while planning and goal setting remained comparatively underdeveloped.

These findings are consistent with previous studies, which identify planning, monitoring, and evaluation as interconnected components of learner autonomy (Dang, 2012). Previous research has also consistently reported that learners often experience greater difficulty in planning and regulating their own learning than in completing learning tasks (Cotterall, 1995; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Khotimah et al., 2019; Khulaifiyah et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, learners tend to rely on observation, imitation, and teacher guidance rather than independently organizing their learning (Rattray, 2013), partly because opportunities to develop planning skills are not consistently embedded in classroom practices (Khotimah et al., 2019). Furthermore, the increasing use of digital technology has been shown to facilitate learner autonomy by supporting learners in organizing, monitoring, and documenting their learning processes (Benson, 2011; Firman et al., 2020; Mehdiyev, 2020). The experiences shared by Learner C illustrate how simple digital tools, such as Microsoft Word and Google Docs, can function as practical supports for self-monitoring and learning organization.

Compared with previous studies, the present research provides a more nuanced understanding of self-regulation among graduate EFL learners. While earlier studies primarily reported that Indonesian learners encounter difficulties in planning autonomous learning (Khotimah et al., 2019; Khulaifiyah et al., 2022), the present findings demonstrate that graduate students have begun to develop adaptive learning strategies and reflective practices, although they continue to depend on external support when establishing learning objectives and planning their learning independently. This suggests that learner autonomy develops unevenly across its dimensions, with monitoring and adaptation emerging earlier than independent planning and goal-setting.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings reinforce the view that self-regulation develops gradually through mediated learning experiences rather than emerging automatically as learners progress through higher education. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1987) theory of mediated learning and Little et al.'s (2017) conceptualization of learner autonomy, participants' ability to modify their learning strategies after receiving feedback from the lecturer indicates that self-regulation is socially constructed through interaction and instructional scaffolding. Consequently, learner autonomy should not be interpreted solely as the ability to learn independently; rather, it also involves the gradual internalization of metacognitive skills, including planning, monitoring, evaluating, and adapting learning strategies through continuous interaction with teachers, peers, and learning resources.

Collaborations are both a support and a challenge for learner autonomy

The findings indicate that collaboration plays a dual role in the development of learner autonomy. Participants reported moderate confidence in applying critical thinking through collaborative activities and initiating improvements within their learning environment (both M = 3.0). Although these findings suggest that learners generally value collaborative learning experiences, the interview data reveal that collaboration also presents practical challenges, particularly regarding communication and unequal participation among group members. These results imply that collaboration functions not only as a learning strategy but also as an important social context in which learner autonomy is negotiated and developed.

The interview findings provide a deeper understanding of this pattern. Learner A explained, “I do not mind working independently because it is easier for me to make decisions. However, I am open to collaborative work, especially peer review, because it helps me find and fix the remaining problems.”

Likewise, Learner D stated, “I am fine with working in a group in autonomous learning since I can divide the workload and check each other’s work to find things to improve.” These comments indicate that learners did not perceive collaboration as reducing their autonomy. Instead, they viewed collaborative activities as opportunities to receive feedback, reflect on their work, and improve the quality of their learning. Rather than replacing independent learning, collaboration complements learners' autonomous learning by supporting reflection and critical evaluation.

Nevertheless, collaboration was not perceived as entirely unproblematic. Learner C observed, “One of the constraints of working collaboratively is pushing the inactive members to show up and work together. Having an equal burden in completing the task is such a difficult thing to happen in collaborative work.” This finding suggests that while collaborative learning can facilitate learner autonomy, its effectiveness depends on active participation, shared responsibility, and effective communication among group members. When these conditions are absent, collaboration may become an obstacle rather than a support for autonomous learning.

These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the complementary relationship between collaboration and learner autonomy. Murphey and Jacobs (2000) argue that learner autonomy develops through critical collaborative autonomy, whereby learners maintain individual responsibility while benefiting from interaction with others. Similarly, Murphey (1998) introduced the concept of respectful interdependence, emphasizing that autonomy and collaboration should not be viewed as opposing concepts. Sinclair (2000) further argues that autonomy develops most effectively when learners are placed in learning environments that encourage autonomous behavior while providing opportunities for interaction and mutual support. Likewise, Little et al. (2017) conceptualize learner autonomy as a socially mediated process that develops through dialogue, collaboration, and shared responsibility rather than through complete independence. These perspectives are further supported by Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory, which explains that higher-order cognitive processes emerge through social interaction before becoming internalized as individual competencies.

The present findings also correspond with previous studies conducted in Indonesian EFL contexts. Khulaifiyah et al. (2022) reported that many students preferred completing assignments individually because they perceived collaborative work as creating unequal workloads and making it difficult to achieve fair outcomes. Similar concerns were expressed by the participants in the present study, particularly regarding inactive group members and communication difficulties. However, the interview findings also demonstrate that graduate students recognize the value of peer feedback and collaborative reflection for improving their learning. This extends previous research by showing that although learners continue to experience challenges in collaborative learning, they increasingly perceive collaboration as a resource for strengthening rather than limiting their autonomy.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings suggest that learner autonomy should not be conceptualized as an individual attribute developed in isolation. Instead, autonomy appears to emerge through continuous interaction with teachers and peers, where dialogue, feedback, and shared problem-solving enable learners to refine their thinking and regulate their learning more effectively. In this study, collaborative activities such as peer review, discussion, and mutual feedback functioned as mediational processes that supported learner

s' development of critical thinking and self-reflection. Consequently, learner autonomy is better understood as a socially constructed competence that balances individual responsibility with collaborative engagement.

These findings contribute to the growing body of learner autonomy research by demonstrating that collaboration represents both an opportunity and a challenge for Indonesian graduate EFL learners. While learners continue to encounter practical barriers related to communication and unequal participation, they also recognize that meaningful collaboration enhances critical thinking, reflection, and learning improvement. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy in higher education should involve not only encouraging independent learning but also designing collaborative learning experiences that promote equitable participation, constructive feedback, and shared responsibility.

Students' Challenges in Autonomous Learning

As the first theme has been elaborated above, the data below provides insights into the challenges faced by learners in autonomous learning, as measured through six key indicators (Q10–Q15). The analysis considers both the mean scores (to identify the level of agreement with each challenge) and the standard deviations (to assess variability in responses).

Table 1. Learners' Autonomy Levels Distributions

	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Total
Mean	3.0	2.9	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.7
Standard Deviation (SD)	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.1

Challenges in initiating and managing autonomous learning

Although the participants demonstrated moderate levels of learner autonomy, the findings indicate that initiating and managing autonomous learning remained one of their greatest challenges. Learners reported the highest level of agreement with the difficulty of taking initiative without detailed instructions (M = 3.0), followed by challenges related to managing time during self-directed learning (M = 2.9) and uncertainty regarding learning expectations and task boundaries (M = 2.6). While the differences among these mean scores were relatively small, together they suggest that learners experienced greater difficulty during the initial stages of autonomous learning than during the implementation of learning activities.

The interview findings provide further insight into these challenges. Learner A explained, "I tend to need detailed instructions related to the scoring rubrics. It helps me know what to expect and keeps me on track." Similarly, Learner D admitted, "I never set a time limit when doing autonomous learning because I feel that autonomous learning is based on my preference." These statements suggest that learners were able to engage in autonomous learning once expectations were clarified, yet they struggled to independently set learning goals, manage their time, and define appropriate learning strategies. Thus, the challenge appears to lie not in learners' willingness to learn autonomously but in their limited confidence in structuring their own learning processes.

These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that initiating autonomous learning is often more challenging than completing learning tasks. Students in Indonesian higher education continue to rely on teacher guidance when beginning autonomous learning activities (Hidayat et al., 2020; Rokhani, 2013; Firman et al., 2020). Likewise, Khotimah et al. (2019), Khulaifiyah et al. (2022), and Jameelah (2020) reported that learners frequently require explicit instructions, clear examples, and well-defined assessment criteria before feeling confident enough to work independently. Time management has also been identified as a persistent challenge because learners must balance autonomous learning with other academic and personal responsibilities (Khulaifiyah et al., 2022; Jameelah, 2020). Collectively, these studies suggest that successful autonomous learning depends not only on learner motivation but also on learners' ability to organize, prioritize, and manage their learning effectively.

The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that such challenges remain evident even among graduate students. Despite their advanced educational level, participants continued to depend on structured guidance during the planning stage of learning, particularly when interpreting task expectations and establishing learning schedules. This finding suggests that academic maturity alone does not automatically lead to higher levels of learner autonomy. Rather, learners appear to develop different dimensions of autonomy at different rates, with planning and initiation requiring more sustained instructional support than task completion or problem solving.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings reinforce the argument that learner autonomy develops gradually through scaffolded participation rather than immediate independence. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1987) theory of mediated learning and Little et al.'s (2017) conceptualization of learner autonomy, learners initially depend on external guidance to interpret expectations and regulate their learning before gradually internalizing these processes as independent learning strategies. Consequently, the challenges identified in this study should not be interpreted as evidence of unsuccessful autonomous

learning. Instead, they represent transitional stages in the development of learner autonomy, where instructional scaffolding continues to play a crucial role in helping learners acquire metacognitive skills such as planning, time management, and goal setting.

Teacher guidance as continuing scaffolding for learner autonomy

The findings indicate that teacher guidance continues to play a significant role in supporting learners' autonomous learning, particularly when learners encounter complex tasks, uncertainty, or collaborative challenges. Participants reported moderate difficulty in applying critical thinking without lecturer support (M = 2.6), adapting their learning strategies to achieve innovative outcomes (M = 2.5), and overcoming communication barriers during collaborative learning (M = 2.6). Although these mean scores were relatively similar, they consistently suggest that learners continued to rely on interaction with lecturers and peers when regulating their learning in more demanding situations.

The interview findings further explain these challenges. Learner B stated, “I usually ask for confirmation when I get confused about the task because it helps me understand the instruction better.” Likewise, Learner D explained, “After I have done the task, I usually ask the lecturer to check my work and ask questions related to my mistakes.” Rather than reflecting an inability to learn independently, these statements indicate that learners actively sought feedback to evaluate and improve their learning. Similarly, when discussing collaborative learning, Learner D commented, “Sometimes it is difficult for me to communicate with others while doing collaborative work. When it happens, I usually lead the conversation.” This response demonstrates that learners not only experienced communication difficulties but also attempted to manage and resolve them through active participation.

These findings support previous studies suggesting that learner autonomy does not eliminate the need for teacher involvement. Instead, teachers continue to play an essential role in monitoring learning, providing feedback, and facilitating learners' gradual development of autonomy (Hafner & Miller, 2011; Lengkanawati, 2017; Khotimah et al., 2019; Khulaifiyah et al., 2022). Previous research has also highlighted the importance of clear feedback, examples, and monitoring activities in enabling learners to solve problems independently and improve their autonomous learning abilities (Jameelah, 2020; Khulaifiyah et al., 2022). Furthermore, technology has been identified as a valuable resource that enables learners to adapt learning strategies more effectively, although appropriate teacher guidance remains important in helping learners use these resources meaningfully (Khotimah et al., 2019; Benson, 2011; Mehdiyev, 2020).

The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that graduate students' dependence on lecturer feedback should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of low learner autonomy. Instead, learners appeared to use teacher feedback strategically as a resource for reflection, self-evaluation, and improvement. Likewise, communication challenges within collaborative learning did not prevent learners from engaging autonomously; rather, they encouraged learners to negotiate roles, seek clarification, and take responsibility for maintaining productive interaction. These findings suggest that learner autonomy is expressed not through the absence of support but through learners' ability to make productive use of available support to regulate their own learning.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings reinforce the view that learner autonomy develops through mediation and social interaction. According to Vygotsky (1987), learners gradually internalize cognitive and metacognitive strategies through guided participation before applying them independently. Similarly, Little et al. (2017) argue that autonomy emerges through dialogue, feedback, and collaboration rather than through isolation. The participants in this study demonstrated that teacher feedback, peer interaction, and communication functioned as mediational tools that enabled them to reflect on their learning, revise their strategies, and strengthen their capacity for independent learning. Consequently, teacher guidance should not be regarded as contradictory to learner autonomy but as an essential component in its development.

These findings contribute to the growing body of learner autonomy research by providing evidence that graduate EFL learners strategically utilize teacher guidance and peer interaction as resources for autonomous learning. Rather than viewing autonomy as complete independence, the present study supports

a sociocultural understanding of learner autonomy in which responsibility for learning is gradually transferred from teachers to learners through ongoing interaction, feedback, and reflective practice.

Taken together, the findings of this study indicate that graduate EFL learners demonstrated a moderate level of learner autonomy rather than complete independence. Although participants showed confidence in interpreting guidance, solving problems, collaborating with peers, and adapting their learning strategies, they continued to experience difficulties in initiating learning independently, establishing learning goals, managing time, and organizing their own learning processes. These findings suggest that learner autonomy should not be viewed as a fixed attribute that learners automatically acquire upon entering higher education. Instead, autonomy appears to develop progressively across different dimensions, with some aspects, such as monitoring and adaptation, emerging earlier than others, including planning, goal setting, and self-initiation.

One important finding of this study is that graduate students continued to rely on teacher guidance despite being expected to demonstrate higher levels of independent learning. This reliance may be explained by several interrelated factors. First, many learners have experienced teacher-centered educational practices throughout their previous education, resulting in limited opportunities to independently plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Rattray, 2013; Khotimah et al., 2019; Lengkanawati, 2017). Second, autonomous learning requires sophisticated metacognitive competencies that develop gradually through repeated learning experiences rather than automatically with increasing educational level (Dang, 2012; Cotterall, 1995; Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Finally, learners appeared to perceive teacher guidance not as dependence but as an important source of clarification, feedback, and reflection that supported their learning. Consequently, the moderate level of learner autonomy identified in this study should be understood as representing an ongoing developmental process rather than a deficiency in learners' ability to learn independently.

The findings also contribute to the theoretical understanding of learner autonomy by reinforcing its sociocultural nature. Early conceptualizations of learner autonomy often emphasized learners' capacity to take responsibility for their own learning (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987). More recent perspectives, however, argue that autonomy develops through interaction, collaboration, and guided participation rather than through isolation (Little et al., 2017; Benson, 2011; Lamb, 2008). The present study provides empirical support for this sociocultural perspective by demonstrating that teacher guidance, peer interaction, and collaborative learning functioned as mediational resources that enabled learners to regulate, monitor, and improve their learning. Rather than reducing learner autonomy, instructional scaffolding appeared to facilitate learners' gradual internalization of autonomous learning behaviors.

Compared with previous studies, the present research extends the existing literature in several ways. While earlier studies in Indonesia primarily examined learners' and teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (Khotimah et al., 2019; Lengkanawati, 2017), autonomous learning activities (Khulaifiyah et al., 2021, 2022), or factors influencing learner autonomy (Indah et al., 2021; Melviana et al., 2021), this study simultaneously investigated learners' autonomy levels and the challenges they experienced in implementing autonomous learning through the integration of questionnaire and interview data. By combining descriptive quantitative findings with qualitative explanations, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how learner autonomy is experienced by graduate EFL learners in the Indonesian higher education context. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that learner autonomy develops unevenly across its dimensions and should therefore be understood as a dynamic, socially mediated process rather than as a simple distinction between autonomous and non-autonomous learners.

Overall, the findings suggest that promoting learner autonomy in higher education should move beyond encouraging learners to study independently. Instead, educators should design learning environments that progressively transfer responsibility to learners through clear instructional scaffolding, constructive feedback, opportunities for reflection, and meaningful collaboration. Such learning environments enable learners to gradually internalize the metacognitive and self-regulatory competencies necessary for lifelong autonomous learning. Therefore, learner autonomy is best understood not as the absence of teacher support but as the outcome of carefully mediated learning experiences that empower learners to assume increasing responsibility for their own learning.

This study contributes to the development of learner autonomy theory by providing empirical evidence from an Indonesian graduate EFL context that learner autonomy develops through guided participation rather than complete independence. Consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective (1987) and Little et al. (2017), the findings demonstrate that learners exhibit autonomy when appropriate instructional scaffolding is provided. Rather than viewing teacher guidance as contradictory to learner autonomy, the findings suggest that guidance serves as a mediating tool, enabling learners to gradually assume greater responsibility for their learning. This supports the sociocultural view that autonomy is socially constructed through interaction and collaborative support rather than acquired in isolation.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated graduate EFL learners' levels of learner autonomy and the challenges they encountered in implementing autonomous learning within an Indonesian university context. The findings indicate that participants demonstrated a moderate level of learner autonomy. Learners showed confidence in interpreting structured guidance, solving problems, collaborating with peers, and adapting their learning strategies. However, they experienced greater difficulty in initiating learning independently, planning learning objectives, managing time, and organizing their own learning processes. These findings suggest that different dimensions of learner autonomy develop at different rates, with planning and self-initiation remaining more challenging than monitoring, adaptation, and collaboration.

The findings further demonstrate that teacher guidance continues to play an important role in the development of learner autonomy. Rather than reducing learners' independence, instructional scaffolding, constructive feedback, and collaborative learning opportunities enabled participants to regulate their learning, reflect on their performance, and gradually assume greater responsibility for their learning. Consequently, learner autonomy should not be interpreted as complete independence from teachers but as a developmental process in which responsibility is progressively transferred from teachers to learners through meaningful interaction and guided participation.

The study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of learner autonomy by providing empirical evidence from an Indonesian graduate EFL context that autonomy develops through guided participation rather than complete independence. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural perspective and Little et al.'s (2017) conceptualization of learner autonomy, the findings demonstrate that teacher guidance, peer collaboration, and instructional scaffolding function as mediational resources that support learners' gradual development of autonomous learning behaviors. These findings reinforce the sociocultural perspective of learner autonomy by highlighting that autonomy is socially constructed through interaction and collaborative support rather than acquired in isolation.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that promoting learner autonomy in higher education should extend beyond encouraging learners to study independently. Instead, educators should design learning environments that progressively foster learners' metacognitive development by providing clear instructional guidance, opportunities for collaborative learning, constructive feedback, and structured support for planning, goal setting, and self-monitoring. Such learning environments may facilitate learners' gradual transition toward greater autonomy while maintaining appropriate instructional scaffolding throughout the learning process.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. Future studies could investigate instructional strategies that effectively promote learners' ability to initiate autonomous learning, particularly in developing planning, goal-setting, and time-management skills, which emerged as challenging dimensions in the present study. Further research may also examine how different forms of instructional scaffolding, including teacher feedback and collaborative learning activities, facilitate the development of learner autonomy across different educational contexts. Finally, longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how learner autonomy develops over time as learners progressively assume greater responsibility for their own learning. Such investigations would contribute to a deeper understanding of learner autonomy as a developmental and socially mediated process.

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