# Levels of Learning Autonomy: A Comparative Study of Freshmen and Seniors at the Faculty of Human Sciences

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# مستويات الاستقلالية في التعلم: دراسة مقارنة بين الطلاب الجدد والطلاب في السنة النهائية في كلية العلوم الإنسانية

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## Abstract

This study aimed to measure and compare the levels of autonomy between freshmen and seniors at the Faculty of Human Sciences at Alasmarya Islamic University. A quantitative method was employed to assess the difference and significance of autonomy levels. The Learner Autonomy Test, adapted from Dafei (2007), was used for data collection. The results indicated that freshmen exhibited higher autonomy levels than seniors, with 90% confidence. However, this difference may not be significant at stricter significance levels. Further research is needed to explore the reasons behind this difference.

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, Learning autonomy, Libya, University level.*

## الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى قياس ومقارنة مستويات الاستقلالية بين طلاب السنة الأولى وطلاب السنة النهائية في كلية العلوم الإنسانية، بالجامعة الأسمرية الإسلامية، للبنات. تم استخدام منهج كمي لتقييم الفروق وأهمية مستويات الاستقلالية باستخدام اختبار استقلالية المتعلمين المقتبس من (Dafei, 2007) لجمع البيانات. أشارت النتائج إلى أن طلاب السنة الأولى أظهروا مستويات استقلالية أعلى من طلاب السنة النهائية، بثقة بلغت 90%. ومع ذلك، قد لا يكون هذا الفرق ذا دلالة إحصائية عند استخدام مستويات دلالة أكثر صرامة. هناك حاجة إلى مزيد من البحث لاستكشاف أسباب هذا الفرق.

**الكلمات الدالة:** التعلم المستقل، الاستقلالية، ليبيا، المرحلة الجامعية.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years, the strategies employed in language teaching have evolved. Researchers have focused on identifying the most effective approaches for helping learners use the target language for communication, leading to the emergence of the communicative approach (CA). This approach encourages teachers to promote student participation to help them negotiate meaning. A key concept in this method is learning autonomy (LA).

Dam (1990) describes LA as the willingness to take responsibility for one's learning process. Being autonomous involves being a social individual who is both capable of and willing to work independently and collaboratively (p. 16). Because of its major role in improving learning, autonomy has received a lot of attention (Balçikanli, 2008).

Classroom learning alone will not produce competent English speakers. Learners are now seen as more accountable for their own learning, which makes sense since the instruction they receive in class represents only a small portion of their exposure to the target language. This idea aligns with Harmer's (1983) view that students will never fully learn anything, including a language, unless they engage in learning both inside and outside the classroom (p. 335).

As a consequence, students need to understand the material on a deeper level. If we want them to be able to use their knowledge outside of the classroom, we should allow them to learn on their own. As Dam (1990) describes, autonomous learners are those who are capable of understanding the information in their own way.

Moreover, putting one's knowledge in real-life practice requires autonomy. Simply memorizing information does not enable learners to think independently and make decisions based on their knowledge because they have not acquired the skill to interpret this knowledge and apply it.

Creating competent speakers is one goal of autonomy. Little (1990) emphasizes that autonomy is essential for effective communication in the target language. He argues that confidence, reliability, and independence are essential factors for successful communication (p. 8). This suggests that autonomy is not only important for learning, but also when using the language. To develop proficient language users, we must first teach them autonomy.

Furthermore, the language learning process extends beyond the time spent in the education system. Language learners must continuously engage in learning. Without being taught how to become independent learners, it would be challenging for them to continue learning and improving after leaving the education system.

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When learners are autonomous, they are better equipped to address language problems, practice the language, and continue their education after graduating or finishing their English course. Language learning requires consistency. Relying consistently on teachers is ineffective because students end up not taking responsibility for their own learning.

Several studies have demonstrated the role of autonomy in promoting vocabulary learning (Khalifa & Shabdin, 2016), the correlation between levels of autonomy and language proficiency (Dafei, 2007; Garita and Elizondo, 2013; Myartawan & Latief, 2013; and Hu & Zhang, 2017), as well as studies showing that willingness to communicate is positively influenced by autonomy (Mohammadi & Mahdivand, 2019). Taking agency for one's own learning has proven to be effective in language learning and building competent language speakers.

Despite extensive research highlighting the positive impact of learner autonomy (LA) on language success, little is known about its development across different academic years in university settings. This study aims to address this gap by examining variations in LA among students at various academic levels, with a particular focus on Libya, where challenges in applying LA persist due to prevailing perceptions of the educational process among both learners and teachers (Elmahjoub, 2014; and Al-Araibi & Saleh, 2020).

This study lays the foundation for further research into the factors influencing LA at the university level. Understanding these factors will provide deeper insights into what promotes LA across different academic years within an exam-oriented educational system. Such insights can help students transition from being dependent learners to empowered, active participants in their own learning journey, ultimately resulting in more proficient language users.

## 1.1. Aims

This study aims to compare the autonomy levels of freshmen and seniors, identifying differences that could inform strategies to foster and nurture learner autonomy at the university level.

## 1.2. Objectives

- To Investigate the difference in autonomy levels between freshmen and senior university students.
- To contribute to the development of effective language education practices.
- To determine whether a difference in learner autonomy exists to help learners foster autonomy.

## 1.3. Research Question

What is the difference in the level of LA between senior and freshman students at the Faculty of Human Sciences at Alasmarya Islamic University?

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. What is Learning Autonomy?

Learner autonomy refers to the skill and readiness to take responsibility for managing one's own learning journey. One part of being autonomous is the students' ability to identify and understanding themselves as learners, such as what strategies or techniques suit them best (Little, 1990, p. 12).

However, there are a lot of misconceptions relating to autonomy in both students' and teachers' perceptions. Therefore, it is important to correct these assumptions through identifying what is not part of LA.

Waterhouse (1990) identified some errors relating to learner autonomy as follows: 1) thinking students would immediately shift into a system where they are entirely accountable for their own educational progress, 2) autonomy means that students work individually without their peers, 3) lack of teacher guidance, 4) assuming the teacher plays an insignificant role in facilitating learning, and 5) assuming learner autonomy means no learning structure or guidance (p. 5).

LA is commonly known to be a Western concept. From the eighteenth century, the discourse of individual responsibility for people has risen in the philosophical, political, psychological and educational fields (Benson & Voller 2014). In language teaching, active participation in the classroom on the part of the students, even if they were not sure about the language they use, is encouraged. This is what is known to be good learning. These methods also highlight the importance of the teacher being a guide and an assistant in the learning process. They do not view teachers to be authoritative in the classroom (Harmer, 1983). These methods are based on a western view of the educational system, as well as the expectations from the teachers in those societies.

This explains the difficulties students have with autonomy in other societies. The expectations of teachers' and students' roles in the education system seem to be that of the provider and the receiver. However, Little (1990) seems to disagree with the notion that autonomy means learning on one's own, although it could be. Autonomy should be viewed as empowerment rather than simply working independently.

Traditionally, the teacher is known to hold authority, directing students and being responsible for their achievements. The student is known to be a follower, following the teachers' directions and doing what is demanded from them. The perception of these roles is known to be common not only among students and teachers, but also the education system as well as parents.

However, in the context of LA, teachers and students take on different roles. According to Benson and Voller (2014), teachers can adopt the roles of facilitators, counselors, and sources of information. They guide and

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help students achieve their goals. Students, on the other hand, take on the role of explorers. They take agency for their achievements and learning. They also exercise their ability to understand and interpret information their own way rather than being fed by the teacher.

Students may reject autonomy because their focus is on passing exams, and thus, they think that the teacher's role is to help them get there. This may affect their perception of their teachers if that was not the case (Little, 1990, p. 12). If teachers' focus was getting their students to pass exams and get good grades, this will be the focus of their students. Furthermore, shifting from the role of the dominator to the role of counsellor may be challenging (Little, 1990, p. 11). The shift does not occur immediately. You cannot expect students to suddenly start taking agency for their own learning.

Not only students, but teachers need to be ready for autonomy. LA does not occur without the support and encouragement of teachers. A study by Garita and Elizondo (2013) showed the effect of the assistance students received from their teacher on their success in their learning.

Also, teachers are affected by the perception of their role. Deci and Ryan (1985a) stated the factors that affect teachers including pressure from administration, parents, students, and society as a whole (p. 268), which was also further demonstrated by Hu and Zhang (2017). As Hamer (1983) explains it, autonomy does not occur automatically. It happens with the support of the education system (p. 335).

Without the collective help and assistance of teachers, the education system, and society, students cannot achieve autonomy on their own. They do not only need encouragement in that area, but also guidance and assistance to get there.

## 2.2. Previous Studies in LA

Plenty of studies have found a positive correlation between LA and language proficiency. Dafei (2007) suggested that autonomy is significantly linked to English language proficiency among non-English majors. This was demonstrated by the fact that students with different proficiency levels showed a significant difference in autonomy levels. This positive correlation was also demonstrated by Myartawan and Latief (2013), Hu and Zhang (2017), and Garita and Elizondo (2013), who showed the link between LA and high linguistic achievement. Other studies also illustrated the important role of teachers in encouraging the students' autonomous learning in their success (Garita & Elizondo, 2013; and Myartawan & Latief, 2013).

Another study by Mohammadi and Mahdivand (2019) showed that willingness to communicate — defined as the ability to communicate without feeling shy — is positively influenced by autonomy. The more autonomous the students were, the more willing they were to communicate, which further supports the link between communication and autonomy.

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Khalifa and Shabdin (2016) found that learner autonomy can be promoted. Furthermore, learners learn vocabulary faster through autonomous learning. In their study, they conducted an experimental study on high school students to test the effect of teaching autonomous learning on their performance in learning new vocabulary. The experimental group was taught strategies to encourage them to learn independently. They concluded that learners who were taught these strategies outperformed the control group.

These studies highlight the importance of LA in language performance. Learners who take accountability tend to become successful language learners. They also demonstrate the relationship between autonomy and academic achievement. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of the teacher in helping students achieve autonomy. By adopting strategies that encourage independence, teachers can foster successful language learners.

### 2.3. LA in the Libyan Context

Teaching in Libya is exam-oriented, with students focusing solely on passing exams. Teachers also focus solely on this, as expected by parents, the administration, and society. The knowledge students acquire is considered unimportant (Elmahjoub, 2014; and Al-Araibi & Saleh, 2020).

Furthermore, the teaching process is teacher-centered (Khalifa & Shabdin, 2016). Learners rely heavily on what they're being taught by their teacher and would hardly ever go beyond understanding or searching for information beyond that.

Al-Araibi and Saleh (2020) reported in their study investigating the implementation of autonomous learning in Libyan schools that teachers did not understand its meaning, as one teacher replied, "... I don't know what you mean. Do you mean we leave students to study on their own? How can that be teaching?" This is evident from Waterhouse (1990), who stated that many mistakenly believe LA is a method where students work without their teachers' guidance, and that the teacher has no significant role in the learning process. (p. 5)

Another teacher stated that good teachers are those who can provide students with information and good students are who are capable of retaining them as long as possible, and that the teachers' only role is to provide knowledge of the language. The only method of learning is memorization. Teachers often discourage student participation during class, stating that students should not speak unless seeking clarification.

One teacher disagreed with employing strategies that promote autonomous learning, stating that they would not work in the Libyan context and that students were not ready for them. Students only need to study to pass exams, and both teachers' and students' focus is on achieving this goal through memorization.

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They also stated that English majors in Libya are asked to memorize the material because the exams will only come from these materials, so they do not bother to study more or learn further than that. This is also supported by Khalifa and Shabdin (2016) where they stated that students depend on their teacher in the Libyan context, which hinders their ability later at university level.

This is evident from Suwaed's study (2023). The study was conducted on 36 EFL postgraduate students to test their attitudes toward autonomy in Libya. He found that although most of them agreed on the importance of autonomous learning, especially as MA students, they did not agree on their own role in correcting and identifying mistakes, as well as their role in making students comprehend the material and learning. The researcher mentioned that the way these students have been studying may have influenced their perception of their teachers' role, that is, they study only to pass exams. This means that not only during school and undergraduate years, but even in postgraduate studies, students rely heavily on their teachers. They think that the teacher is more responsible for their own learning.

Based on extensive research, it is clear that learner autonomy (LA) contributes to improved language proficiency (Dafei, 2007; and Myartawan & Latief, 2013). However, the application of LA in exam-oriented educational contexts presents significant challenges (Elmahjoub, 2014; and Al-Araibi & Saleh, 2020). While the literature highlights the positive effects of LA on language achievement, the development of LA across different academic years, particularly within the Libyan context, remains unexplored. This research seeks to fill this gap by investigating the differences in LA between students at various academic levels in Libya and examining the factors that contribute to these differences.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were students from the Faculty of Human Sciences at Alasmarya Islamic University (AIU). The questionnaire was distributed to 54 female participants, including both freshmen and senior students.

### 3.2. Instruments

A quantitative approach was used to assess the differences in learner autonomy (LA) levels. The Learner Autonomy Test, adapted from Dafei (2007), was utilized to investigate the LA levels between freshmen and senior students. This test was also used in Garita and Elizondo's (2013) study, which explores the role of autonomy in academic achievement. Google Sheets was used for data analysis, including calculation and chart creation.

### 3.3. Data Collection

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The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to the students, and they were shown how to answer the questions using a Google Form. Participants were asked for their consent to share their responses and use them for this study. They were assured that their names would not be shared. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to ensure all students understood the questions.

## 4. Results

The null hypothesis assumes that there is no significant difference in the levels of autonomy between seniors and freshmen.

$H_0$: $\mu$_freshmen = $\mu$_seniors

### 4.1. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics for both groups are summarized in Table (1). The mean autonomy score for freshmen was 70.27 (SD = 8.35), while for seniors it was 66.68 (SD = 8.36). On average, freshmen had slightly higher autonomy scores than seniors. The ranges for both groups were close, with a range of 35 for freshmen and 33 for seniors, reflecting a comparable spread of scores.

The variance for freshmen was 77.26, somewhat greater than the variance for seniors (69.15), suggesting that scores for freshmen were more dispersed around the mean. However, overall, both groups had similar levels of variability. These results indicate that while both groups have comparable ranges and variability, freshmen tend to have higher autonomy scores than seniors.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

| Groups | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Range | Median | Mode | Variance |
|--------|---|------|----------------|-------|--------|------|----------|
| Freshmen | 26 | 70.26923077 | 8.345334947 | 35 | 72 | 74 | 77.26315789 |
| Seniors | 28 | 66.67857143 | 8.362409592 | 33 | 65.5 | 62 | 69.14761905 |

Several tests were conducted to compare the autonomy levels between freshmen and seniors and to measure the significance of this difference.

### 4.2. T-test Results

First, the F-test produced an F-score of 0.996, indicating that both groups have similar variances. Assuming equal variances, a t-test was conducted. The alpha level was set at 0.1 due to the sample size. The t-test yielded a t-statistic of 1.686 with a p-value of 0.0978. This implies that at the 90% confidence level, the observed difference in means is unlikely to have occurred by chance, suggesting that the null hypothesis can be rejected at the 10% significance level.

### 4.3. Effect Size (Cohen's d)

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The Cohen's d value was 0.438, indicating a moderate effect size. This suggests a noticeable difference in the level of autonomy between freshmen and seniors.

### 4.4. Confidence Intervals (CI)

The results of the confidence intervals further support the t-test findings. The 90% confidence interval for the freshmen group was 67.51 to 73.03, while for the seniors group, it was 64.01 to 69.34. Since the confidence intervals overlap, this suggests that at stricter levels (i.e., 95% confidence), the difference is not significant. A visualization of the confidence intervals is shown in Figure (1).
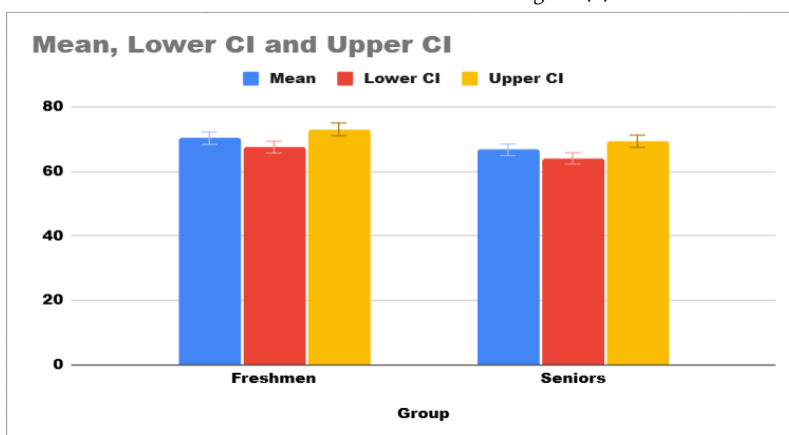


**Figure 1. CI results with corresponding error bars for autonomy levels**

However, a p-value of 0.0978, which is less than the alpha level of 0.1 (corresponding to a 90% confidence interval), allows us to reject the null hypothesis.

$H_0: \mu\_freshmen = \mu\_seniors$

We can say with 90% confidence that the difference in autonomy between freshmen and seniors is unlikely to be due to chance.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The results showed that freshmen scored higher in the Learner Autonomy Test than seniors, with a mean score of 70.27 compared to 66.68 for seniors. This suggests that the transition from high school to a new, unexplored environment may lead freshmen to adapt and prove themselves, motivating them to become more autonomous in their learning. Freshmen might also face more academic pressure, which fosters independence.

In contrast, seniors may exhibit lower autonomy levels because they rely more on familiar teacher-guided methods. At this stage, they often prioritize completing assignments and passing exams over actively

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engaging in their learning process. This focus on routine academic habits and structures may limit their ability to act autonomously.

Cultural and social factors specific to the sample, which consisted of female students in Zliten, Libya, may further explain these findings. Early marriage among female students might shift priorities away from education to family responsibilities. Single students, on the other hand, may focus more on achieving their educational and career goals. This difference in priorities could influence their motivation and level of autonomy.

The role of teachers may also contribute to these differences. Freshmen, who are experiencing a new academic environment, may benefit from greater opportunities for interaction and support provided by teachers, fostering a sense of control and autonomy. Seniors, accustomed to a more passive or routine learning approach, might feel disengaged in comparison.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a human motivation framework, further supports these results. SDT distinguishes between autonomous motives, which are driven by personal goals and self-determination, and controlled motives, which rely on external pressures like grades or rewards (McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Autonomous motives lead to higher-quality learning, while controlled motives result in lower-quality motivation, impacting autonomy.

SDT's Cognitive Evaluation Theory suggests that when students perceive their learning as unnecessary or externally imposed, they experience lower motivation. Seniors, for example, may focus more on graduating and passing exams than on meaningful learning, reducing their autonomy. Conversely, freshmen, motivated by personal interest in their chosen major, may feel more self-determined (Chaffee et al., 2019).

Similarly, SDT's Organismic Integration Theory explores the reasons individuals invest effort in learning. Learners driven by external goals, such as exam performance, exhibit lower-quality motivation, which negatively affects their autonomy (McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019).

Students who perceive themselves as lacking control over their learning often feel incompetent and dependent on external forces, such as teachers or grades, to drive their progress. This reliance results in reduced autonomy and lower-quality motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

The findings of this study highlight the need for further research to explore the underlying reasons for these differences. It is essential to investigate whether these variations are driven by cultural and social factors, differences in teacher-student interactions, or senior students' focus on graduating. Understanding these dynamics can help educators implement strategies to promote autonomy across all academic levels.

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Although the null hypothesis was rejected, this result may not be applicable at stricter significance levels. This limitation could be attributed to the small sample size. Unfortunately, obtaining more responses was not possible due to a lack of participation from students.

## 6. Conclusion

LA is a crucial aspect of language teaching and learning. Without autonomy, we cannot expect students to become effective language users. This study examined the differences in autonomy levels between freshmen and senior students at the Faculty of Human Sciences at Alasmarya Islamic University. The results showed that at the 10% significance level, the hypothesis assuming no meaningful difference in autonomy levels between freshmen and seniors was rejected. Due to the small sample size, the confidence intervals of both groups overlapped, suggesting that at stricter significance levels, the findings may not remain statistically significant. However, based on Cohen's d, the effect size of 0.4 is moderate, indicating that the difference in autonomy levels is noticeable.

## Acknowledgements

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