Mapping Research on Learner Autonomy in Saudi EFL Higher Education: A Scoping Review of Empowerment and Reform Amid Vision 2030 (2016–2025)

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Abstract

This study presents a scoping review of research on language learner autonomy (LLA) in Saudi EFL higher education, focusing on empirical studies published between 2016 and 2025. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework, the review systematically examined 28 studies selected from 218 initial records across five databases. The review examined how LLA is defined, the theoretical frameworks employed, and the methodologies utilised across 12 Saudi universities and institutions. Methodological analysis revealed 64% quantitative designs, 25% mixed-methods, and 11% qualitative approaches. The studies involved 4,847 participants, with sample sizes ranging from 25 to 630. The gender distribution consisted of 43% mixed-gender studies, 32% female-only studies, and 18% male-only studies. Geographically, 39% of studies were conducted in the Central region, 25% in the Western region. Findings reveal that 89% of studies framed LLA as learner control, while 39% showed shifts toward dynamic conceptualisations. Technology integration was observed in 68% of studies, with mobile-assisted learning in 32%. Despite Vision 2030's emphasis, only 18% of studies explicitly aligned with national reform agendas. Theoretical analysis revealed that 54% employed self-determination theory, while 36% utilised Holec's framework. Although 75% cited digital tools as enablers, pedagogical integration remained underdeveloped in 68% of cases. Notable gaps persist in gender analysis (25% of studies provide disaggregated data) and preparatory year focus (21% of studies). The review underscores the need for more theoretically grounded, methodologically robust research to advance autonomy-supportive pedagogies within Vision 2030's framework, emphasising qualitative investigations, gender-sensitive analyses, and policy alignment.

Keywords: language learner autonomy, EFL higher education, PRISMA-ScR, scoping review, Saudi Vision 2030

1. Introduction

Language learner autonomy (LLA) has emerged as a cornerstone of effective foreign language education, representing learners' capacity to take responsibility for and control over their learning processes (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991).

Research consistently demonstrates that autonomy-supportive teaching enhances student engagement, which is crucial for language learning achievement, particularly when learners are given the freedom to make choices about their education (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomous learning empowers EFL students to take charge of their language journey, fostering independence, critical thinking, and effective communication skills, making it increasingly vital in contemporary language education contexts (Ivanovska, 2015). In Saudi EFL higher education, the importance of LLA is amplified by the nation's educational transformation under Vision 2030, which emphasises critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning as essential competencies for global competitiveness (Albiladi, 2022; Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023).

The integration of self-directed learning principles in Saudi EFL higher education is vital for promoting autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and crucial lifelong learning skills. Furthermore, the current trend in English language teaching focuses on empowering learners to take charge of their own learning and helping them develop the learning strategies necessary for independent learning, making LLA particularly relevant for Saudi EFL contexts, where students must transition from traditional teacher-centred approaches to more autonomous learning models.

However, despite the recognised importance of LLA in language education, a comprehensive understanding of how learner autonomy (LA) has been conceptualised, investigated, and implemented in Saudi EFL higher education contexts remains limited, particularly during the critical period from 2016 to 2025 when Vision 2030 reforms were actively reshaping the educational landscape. Research addressing LA in Saudi Arabia represents a new area of investigation, with findings revealing that Saudi learners demonstrate low levels of autonomy and face significant cultural and pedagogical challenges in developing autonomous learning practices. While individual studies have examined various aspects of LLA in Saudi contexts (Alrabai, 2017a; Asiri & Shukri, 2020), no comprehensive synthesis exists to map the current state of research, identify emerging trends, or evaluate the alignment between autonomy research and national educational reform

objectives. This gap is particularly concerning, given that recent investigations have shown that online learning environments in Saudi EFL settings can provide learners with complete autonomy to fulfil assigned tasks. Yet, the broader implications and systematic development of such autonomy-supportive practices remain underexplored. The absence of a systematic review covering this transformative period (2016-2025) limits understanding of how LLA research has evolved in response to educational reforms, technological advances, and changing pedagogical paradigms in Saudi higher education. Understanding these trends is crucial because effective implementation of LLA can significantly enhance language learning outcomes, improve student motivation and engagement, help students develop critical thinking skills, and prepare learners for lifelong learning – benefits that directly align with Vision 2030's educational objectives (Al-Tamimi, 2025; Banafi, 2025).

To address this knowledge gap and provide a comprehensive understanding of LLA research trends in Saudi EFL higher education, a scoping review methodology offers the most appropriate approach for systematically mapping the existing literature. Scoping reviews are particularly useful when the purpose is to identify knowledge gaps, scope a body of literature, clarify concepts, or investigate research methodologies, making them ideal tools to determine the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic. Scoping reviews are an accessible knowledge synthesis research method that can significantly impact the research ecosystem by mapping concepts, developing critical research questions, and focusing research efforts. Unlike systematic reviews, which focus on specific research questions with narrow inclusion criteria, scoping reviews enable a broader examination of research trends, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and conceptual developments across diverse studies (Peters et al., 2020a, 2020b). Recent scoping reviews in language learning contexts have successfully provided comprehensive overviews of pedagogical approaches, theoretical foundations, and research trends, demonstrating the methodology's effectiveness in synthesising complex educational phenomena. In the context of LLA research in Saudi EFL higher education, a scoping review can systematically examine how autonomy has been defined and operationalised, identify the theoretical frameworks employed, analyse methodological trends, and reveal research gaps that require future attention. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding the relationship between LLA research and broader educational policy initiatives, such as Vision 2030, while also providing insights into how technological advances and pedagogical innovations have influenced autonomy research in this specific context.

Given the need for a comprehensive synthesis of LLA research in Saudi EFL higher education and the absence of systematic mapping during the transformative period of 2016-2025, this scoping review aims to provide a critical examination of empirical studies conducted within this timeframe. The study is guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework (Tricco et al., 2018) to ensure methodological rigour and transparency in the systematic mapping of research trends, theoretical frameworks, and emerging challenges related to LLA in Saudi EFL higher education contexts. By contextualising LLA research within the broader sociopolitical and educational transformations of Vision 2030, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving role of LA in shaping self-driven, globally competent, and adaptable individuals.

The following research questions guide this systematic exploration:

1) What are the substantive features of LLA studies in Saudi EFL higher education contexts?

2) How is LLA conceptualised and theoretically framed across studies conducted between 2016 and 2025?

3) What methodological features characterise LLA studies in Saudi EFL higher education during this period?

4) What emerging trends and research gaps exist in the study of LLA, and how do they relate to Vision 2030 educational reform objectives?

These research questions will enable a comprehensive mapping of the LLA research landscape in Saudi EFL higher education, providing valuable insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to enhance autonomous learning practices in alignment with national educational transformation goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Learner Autonomy

2.1.1 Defining LA in Language Learning

Learner autonomy has long been established as a central goal in language education, particularly within learner-centred paradigms that encourage responsibility, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Benson, 2011, 2016; Little, 1991).

The most widely accepted definition, proposed by Holec (1981), describes autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3), encompassing the capacity to determine learning objectives, define content and progressions, select methods and techniques, monitor procedures, and evaluate achievements.

This foundational definition has been consistently cited across the literature and remains the cornerstone of autonomy research (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991, 2007).

Recent research has expanded this conceptualisation to include multidimensional perspectives.

Contemporary studies emphasised that LA extends beyond self-regulated learning strategies to encompass "language as a mode of social action", empowering L2 learners to use the target language as a constructive tool to impact their society. This critical perspective of LA aims to develop learners who are self-reliant in using language for meaningful social engagement rather than merely acquiring native-like

competence (Borges, 2022; Chen & Liu, 2025).

2.1.2 Theoretical Frameworks in Autonomy Research

Autonomy research has been linked to enhanced learner motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002), and metacognitive development (Wenden, 1998), making it a cornerstone of effective language learning in contemporary educational discourse. Self-determination theory (SDT) has emerged as a particularly influential framework, proposing that learners have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Davis, 2022). Recent studies demonstrate that when educators meet these fundamental needs, it impacts learners' well-being, motivation, engagement, and achievement, with autonomy support in the classroom predicting higher levels of student engagement (Davis, 2022; Stringer, 2024). This theory provides a robust foundation for understanding how autonomous learning environments can enhance motivation and engagement.

Globally, the conceptualisation of autonomy has evolved from a static, individualistic construct to more socially situated, dynamic models. Emerging perspectives such as complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) and ecological models now position autonomy as context-sensitive, relational, and emergent—responsive to learners' evolving identities, environments, and sociopolitical structures (Stringer, 2024; Ushioda, 2011). These evolving theoretical perspectives highlight the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors in autonomy development.

2.1.3 Cultural Considerations in Autonomy Development

Researchers have contended that prevailing models of LA are predominantly based on Western educational perspectives and may fail to recognise learning behaviours shaped by different cultural contexts (Oxford, 2003; Ueno et al., 2025).

This information highlights the necessity of examining LA within specific sociocultural and educational environments of diverse regions. Research has shown that cultural factors significantly influence how autonomy is perceived and implemented, with some contexts requiring the adaptation of autonomy concepts to align with local educational traditions and expectations (Ivanovska, 2015). Given these cultural considerations and the need for context-specific approaches to autonomy development, the Saudi EFL higher education context presents a particularly relevant case study for examining how national policy, cultural factors, and educational transformation intersect with LA development.

2.2 Saudi EFL Higher Education Context

2.2.1 Educational Transformation Under Vision 2030

The Saudi educational landscape has undergone significant transformation under Vision 2030, which places critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning at the centre of its objectives, with particular emphasis on enhancing English-language proficiency to prepare students for the competitive global workforce (Albiladi, 2022; Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023). This national vision positions English language education as a vehicle for workforce readiness and international competitiveness within the framework of economic diversification and globalisation. The promotion of lifelong learning within Vision 2030 highlights the importance of autonomy, as autonomous EFL learners engage in continuous, self-directed language development and cultivate essential skills for ongoing self-improvement (Al-Wossabi, 2024).

2.2.2 Challenges in Saudi EFL Contexts

Despite the policy emphasis of Vision 2030, several challenges persist in Saudi EFL higher education. Research revealed mixed findings on Saudi learners' autonomy, from low scores of 2.35 out of 5 (Alrabai, 2017a) to evidence of autonomous beliefs and practices hindered by overreliance on teachers, limited learning discussions, and test-focused approaches (Haque et al., 2023). These findings suggest that Saudi learners possess autonomous potential but encounter systemic barriers that limit their expression. Cultural factors play a crucial role, as many Saudi learners rely heavily on teacher-centred methods and struggle with independent learning approaches. Studies have shown that teacher dominance in Saudi EFL classrooms and expectations that students follow teacher guidance constitute significant factors in EFL learning challenges (Alrabai, 2017b, 2017c; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Khreisat & Mugableh, 2021), with the teacher-student relationship being predominantly formal, which may hinder opportunities for greater interaction and communication. However, recent research suggests that online learning environments can provide opportunities for increased learner autonomy, as students take more responsibility for their learning in digital contexts.

2.2.3 Technology Integration and Digital Learning

The integration of technology in Saudi EFL higher education has accelerated, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Research indicates that asynchronous online courses provide learners with complete autonomy to fulfil assigned tasks, representing a shift from traditional teacher-dominated classroom settings (Roki'ah et al., 2023). Studies revealed that EFL teachers have positive perceptions of using technology to promote learner autonomy, with various applications and digital tools showing potential for enhancing independent learning (Alwasidi & Alnaeem, 2022).

2.3 Scoping Review Methodology in Educational Research

2.3.1 Characteristics and Applications of Scoping Reviews

Scoping reviews have emerged as a valuable approach to synthesise evidence and are particularly useful when the purpose is to identify knowledge gaps, scope a body of literature, clarify concepts, or investigate research conduct (Peters et al., 2020b). Unlike systematic

reviews that focus on specific research questions with narrow inclusion criteria, scoping reviews determine the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic and provide a clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available. Scoping review methodology is an accessible knowledge synthesis approach that has the potential to significantly impact research ecosystems by analysing academic literature to map concepts, develop critical research questions, and focus research efforts. This methodology is particularly valuable for emerging research areas where a comprehensive mapping of existing knowledge is needed.

2.3.2 Scoping Reviews in Language Learning Research

Recent scoping reviews in language learning have demonstrated the effectiveness of this methodology in synthesising complex educational phenomena (Hiver et al., 2022). A comprehensive scoping review of informal second language learning research between 2000 and 2020 successfully mapped 206 publications, providing valuable insights into theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and research trends in the field (Kusyk et al., 2025). Recent scoping reviews in second language acquisition have systematically examined specific aspects, exploring current trends and synthesising findings across multiple studies to identify research patterns and methodological developments (Chong & Reinders, 2022, 2025). These examples demonstrate the value of scoping reviews in providing comprehensive mapping of research landscapes in applied linguistics and language education.

2.4 Previous Studies on LA in EFL Contexts

2.4.1 Global Perspectives on EFL Learner Autonomy

Recent scoping reviews have examined LA in various EFL contexts globally, providing insights into autonomous learning in language education (Ueno et al., 2025), glocalized LA in Moroccan higher education (Kharroubi & El Mediouni, 2024), and autonomous learning in EFL in Bangladesh (Jamila & Zubairi, 2022). These studies highlighted the importance of LA, the need for culturally relevant approaches, and the challenges associated with implementing autonomous learning strategies across diverse contexts.

International research has explored various approaches to fostering LA in EFL learning, including resource-based, technology-based, learner-based, classroom-based, curriculum-based, and teacher-based approaches (Gupta et al., 2024). Particularly noteworthy are recent investigations of strategy-based instruction as a means of fostering LA in EFL reading, demonstrating the effectiveness of explicit strategy training in developing independent learning skills (Chong & Reinders, 2022).

2.4.2 Technology and Autonomy in EFL Learning

The relationship between technology and LA has garnered significant attention in recent research. Chong and Reinders (2022) suggested a nexus between formal and informal language learning through technology, arguing that digital tools can bridge traditional classroom learning with autonomous, self-directed practice outside formal educational settings. Research demonstrates that technology can positively impact EFL students' autonomy by providing opportunities for self-directed learning, accessing authentic materials, and receiving immediate feedback (Gupta et al., 2024); however, challenges remain in integrating technology appropriately and effectively.

Current trends in English language teaching emphasise empowering learners to take charge of their own learning through technology, with innovations focusing on giving learners resources and applications for self-paced learning and autonomous skill development. However, the integration of technology for autonomy development requires careful pedagogical consideration to ensure effective implementation.

2.4.3 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite growing research interest, several gaps remain in LA research, particularly in specific regional contexts. Studies have shown that LA is closely associated with the digitalisation of learning; however, few studies have specifically investigated its impact in developing countries, highlighting the need for context-specific research. The reviews emphasised the value of scoping reviews for synthesising knowledge in EFL education and identifying research gaps, such as the need for more qualitative studies and practical interventions to foster learner autonomy. Building on these global insights and conceptual developments, this review systematically maps empirical research on LA in Saudi EFL higher education, addressing the identified gaps in regional and context-specific autonomy research while contributing to a broader understanding of how cultural, technological, and policy factors influence the development of autonomous learning in EFL contexts.

3. Methodology

A scoping review methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses with Scoping Review extension (PRISMA-ScR) framework (Levac et al., 2010; Mattos et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2020a, 2020b; Tricco et al., 2018) was employed in this study to systematically map the research trends, theoretical frameworks, and challenges related to LLA in Saudi EFL higher education. Since the research focus is on conceptual and methodological trends rather than on effect sizes, PRISMA-ScR ensures rigour and transparency in study selection and synthesis (Moher et al., 2009; Munn et al., 2018).

3.1 Data Collection

3.1.1 Database Selection

Research publications from five databases were systematically examined: Web of Science (WOS; Social Science Citation Index/SSCI), Scopus, ERIC (ProQuest), Saudi Digital Library (SDL), and Arab Citation & Impact Factor (ARCIF). This combination provided comprehensive coverage across international and regional publications. WOS (SSCI) was selected for its high selectivity and quality

indexing standards, while Scopus and ERIC (ProQuest) ensured comprehensive coverage of education and social sciences. SDL was included to capture regionally relevant research on Saudi higher education, often not indexed globally (Alsalmi, 2021), and ARCIF provided access to peer-reviewed Arabic journals (Al-Shorbaji, 2022). Journal impact factors were not used as inclusion/exclusion criteria to ensure comprehensive and unbiased selection.

3.1.2 Search Strategy and Implementation

All database searches were conducted between March 15 and 25, 2025, with specific documentation of search strings and dates to ensure reproducibility. Systematic search strategies were implemented across databases using tailored keywords, with search strings adapted to accommodate structural differences across platforms. For Scopus, the search conducted on March 18, 2025, used the following string: TITLE-ABS-KEY("learner autonomy" OR "learner independence" OR "self-directed learning" OR "autonomous learning") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("EFL" OR "English as foreign language" OR "English language learning") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("higher education" OR "university" OR "college") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("Saudi Arabia" OR "Saudi"). The Web of Science search, conducted on March 19, 2025, employed: TS = ("learner autonomy" OR "learner independence" OR "self-directed learning") AND TS = ("EFL" OR "English as foreign language") AND TS = ("higher education" OR "university") AND TS = ("Saudi Arabia" OR "Saudi"). ERIC (ProQuest) was searched on March 20, 2025, using AB, TI ("learner autonomy" OR "autonomous learning" OR "self-directed learning") AND AB, TI ("EFL" OR "English as foreign language") AND AB, TI ("higher education" OR "university") AND AB, TI ("Saudi Arabia"). Since SDL and ARCIF do not support complex Boolean queries, manual searches were conducted on March 21 and 22, 2025, using simplified terms including "Learner Autonomy" + "EFL" + "Higher Education" + "Saudi Arabia" and "Self-directed Learning" + "University Students" + "English Learning".

3.1.3 Inclusion of Grey Literature

The search strategy was expanded to include grey literature sources, recognising their potential value in the Saudi context. PhD dissertations from Saudi universities were searched through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global and the Saudi Digital Library. Institutional reports from the Ministry of Education and major Saudi universities were also considered, as these sources often contain valuable insights not available in peer-reviewed publications, particularly in developing educational contexts where local research may not always reach international publication venues.

3.1.4 Screening and Selection Process

The screening process involved two independent reviewers to ensure methodological rigour. The primary author and a second reviewer with expertise in applied linguistics independently screened titles and abstracts. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using Cohen's Kappa (κ = 0.87), which indicated strong agreement between reviewers. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus-building. For full-text screening, both reviewers independently assessed articles, with final inclusion decisions made through structured consensus discussions. The inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1 were applied systematically across multiple stages of the study.

Table 1. A Summary of the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus	The research must focus on LA in language learning or teaching.	Studies that do not explicitly focus on LA in language learning or teaching.
Study Type	The study must be empirical, employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches.	Non-empirical research, including theoretical papers.
Publication Source	The research must be published in peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus, WOS, ERIC, SDL or ARCIF.	Studies published in non-peer-reviewed sources or journals that are not indexed in Scopus, WOS, ERIC, SDL or ARCIF.
Educational Context	The study must focus on higher education EFL settings in Saudi Arabia.	Research conducted in primary or secondary education (K-12) settings, or in non-Saudi higher education institutions.
Timeframe	The articles must have been published between January 2016 and March 2025.	Articles published before January 2016 or after March 2025.

Initial duplicate removal involved both automated detection and manual verification. Title and abstract screening required independent dual screening with systematic disagreement resolution protocols. A snowballing technique was then applied, involving forward and backwards citation searches via Google Scholar to identify additional relevant studies. Finally, full-text assessment was conducted with independent dual assessment and consensus decision-making. This systematic approach resulted in 28 studies being included for the final analysis, as detailed in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1).
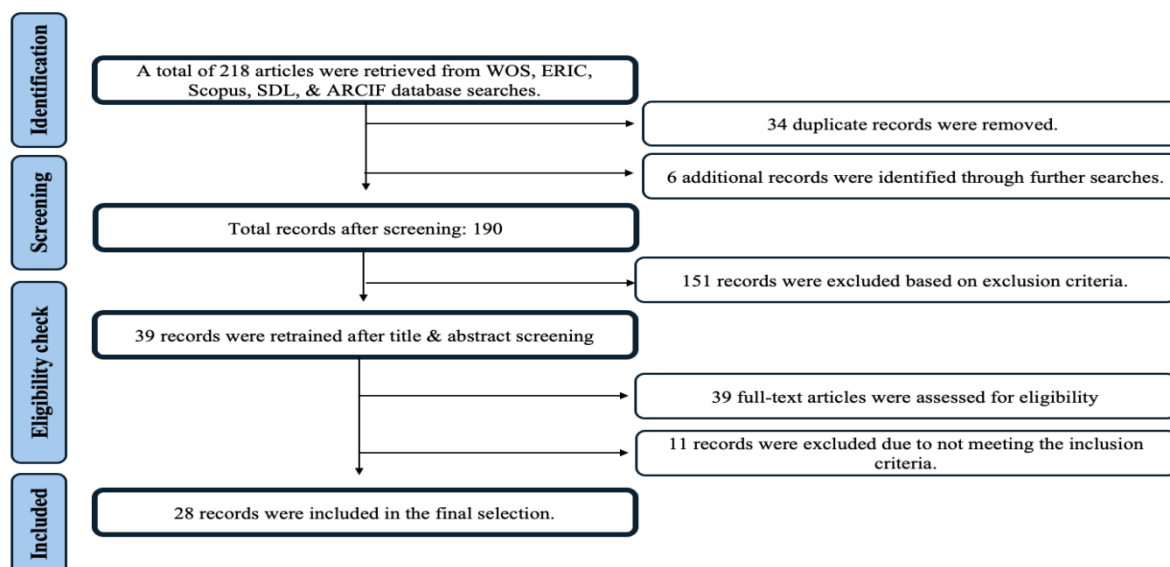
Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of the study selection process

3.2 Data Charting Framework

A structured data-charting framework was developed to systematically extract and organise information from selected studies, as presented in Table 2. Following PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018), the charting process was iterative and adaptive, allowing categories to evolve as patterns emerged from the literature. This flexibility ensured that the framework could accommodate the diverse range of studies while maintaining systematic data extraction procedures. It is important to clarify the distinction between data charting and thematic coding used in this study. Data charting refers to the systematic extraction of study characteristics, methodological features, and descriptive information into predetermined categories as outlined in Table 2. This process focuses on capturing information about each study's design, participants, context, and findings. In contrast, thematic coding represents the analytical process applied to the extracted content to identify patterns, themes, and conceptual relationships within the charted data. This distinction ensures clarity in the methodological approach and prevents confusion between data extraction and analytical interpretation phases.

Table 2. Data-Charting Framework for LLA Research in Saudi EFL Higher Education

Category	Data Extracted	Relevance to Study
Substantive Features of Reviewed Studies	Educational settings: Public vs. private universities, preparatory year programs, online/blended learning environments. Participant demographics: size and gender distribution.	Identifies learner demographics and institutional settings influencing LLA development.
Conceptualization of LA in Saudi EFL Higher Education	Definitions of LLA: How LA is operationalized within each study. Theoretical perspectives: Self-determination theory, sociocultural theory. Contextual influences: Institutional policies, curriculum reforms (Vision 2030), cultural perceptions of autonomy.	Examines how LLA is defined and understood in Saudi EFL higher education, linking it to educational policies and reforms.
Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks	Major theories applied: Whether the studies explicitly adopt autonomy-related theories or frameworks. Analytical lenses: Cognitive, social, political, or pedagogical perspectives on autonomy. Integration with broader frameworks: Whether autonomy is examined in relation to motivation, agency and self-regulation.	Maps theoretical trends and identifies how LLA is contextualized within different academic and pedagogical models.
Methodological Features	Research designs: Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods. Data collection methods: Surveys, interviews, classroom observations. Assessment tools: Standardized LA scales, qualitative rubrics. Analytical approaches: Thematic analysis, statistical modelling. Reporting standards: Transparency in data collection and analysis, adherence to established research protocols.	Assesses methodological robustness in LLA research and determines how findings are reported.
Trends and Future Directions	Patterns in LLA research: Recurring themes across studies. Challenges and limitations: Methodological constraints, lack of generalizability. Future research directions: Areas needing further exploration, gaps in the existing literature, potential for interdisciplinary studies.	Provides insights into recurring themes, methodological limitations, and future research opportunities.

The charting template was piloted on five representative studies to assess its clarity, comprehensiveness, and relevance to the research questions. This pilot phase allowed for refinement of categories and modification of data extraction procedures based on emerging patterns and the specific characteristics of LLA research in the Saudi EFL context.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Analytical Approach

The 28 reviewed studies were analysed using a dual approach that combined descriptive analysis and thematic mapping, consistent with the analytical goals of scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020b). MAXQDA Analytic Pro (24.8.0) supported this process by enabling systematic coding, categorisation, and visualisation of data segments, contributing to a rigorous and transparent analytical workflow (Figure 2).
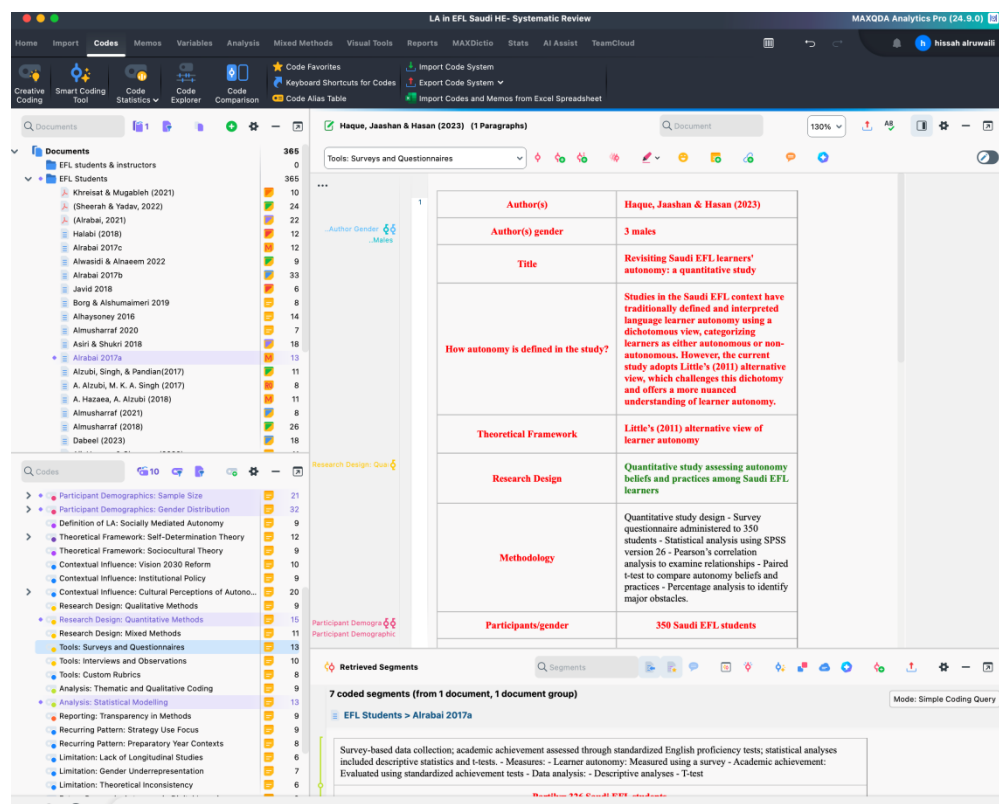

Figure 2. MAXQDA Analytic Pro (24.8.0)

Descriptive analysis summarised key methodological and contextual features across studies, focusing on the categories outlined in Table 2 without attempting to synthesise outcomes or effect sizes. This approach provided a structured overview of how LLA has been investigated within Saudi EFL higher education contexts, mapping the landscape of research approaches and study characteristics. The thematic analysis employed a hybrid approach that combined deductive and inductive coding strategies. Deductive coding was based on established autonomy theories and frameworks, including Holec's (1981) dimensions of learner responsibility and the components of self-determination theory. Inductive coding enabled themes to emerge from the data, particularly regarding Saudi-specific contextual factors, cultural considerations, and the influences of Vision 2030 reform. Some broad thematic categories were pre-defined based on the research questions, while context-specific patterns were identified during the analytical process as emergent themes. The thematic analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, involving systematic familiarisation with the dataset, initial code generation, theme development, and iterative refinement. Coding explicitly focused on how LLA was conceptualised across studies, the theoretical perspectives adopted by researchers, and contextual factors unique to the Saudi educational environment, including Vision 2030 reforms, cultural perceptions of learning, and institutional policies.

3.3.2 MAXQDA Implementation

Several specific MAXQDA features were utilised to enhance the analytical process. The code system development function enabled the creation of a hierarchical coding scheme with main categories and detailed subcategories that reflected both theoretical frameworks and emergent themes. The code co-occurrence matrix feature was employed to identify relationships between different autonomy concepts and contextual factors, revealing patterns in how theoretical constructs intersected with practical implementation challenges. Code frequency analysis quantified the prevalence of different themes and theoretical frameworks across the reviewed studies, providing insights into dominant approaches and underexplored areas.

Visual network analysis capabilities were used to map the complex relationships between concepts, theories, and contextual factors, thereby creating visual representations of the conceptual landscape of LLA research in Saudi contexts. The memo system facilitated ongoing analytical reflections and documented the development of themes, ensuring transparency in the analytical decision-making process. Document comparison features enabled systematic analysis of patterns across different study types, methodological approaches, and educational contexts within the Saudi EFL higher education system.

3.3.3 Quality Assurance

Several measures were implemented to enhance the reliability and validity of the analytical process. The coding framework was pilot tested on a subset of studies to ensure its appropriateness and comprehensiveness before full implementation. Coding decisions were reviewed periodically throughout the analysis to ensure consistency and adherence to established criteria. While the primary author conducted the majority of coding, a second researcher independently coded 20% of the studies to verify consistency, achieving an agreement rate of 89%. All coding decisions and theme development processes were systematically documented in MAXQDA memos, creating a comprehensive audit trail that supports the transparency and reproducibility of the analytical approach. Following the PRISMA-ScR framework and established scoping review best practices (Peters et al., 2020b), this analytical approach was specifically designed to chart the field of LA in Saudi EFL higher education rather than synthesise quantitative outcomes or effect sizes. The combination of descriptive and thematic analyses provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how LA has been approached, theorised, and practised within this unique educational context, while identifying key patterns, gaps, and future research directions.

4. Results

4.1 Substantive Features of the Reviewed Studies

4.1.1 Institutional Distribution Summary

The 28 selected studies of LLA in Saudi EFL higher education demonstrated broad representation across institutional settings. Table 3 summarises the institutional distribution to provide a clear overview of research coverage.

Table 3. Institutional distribution of LLA studies in Saudi Arabia

Institution type	Number of studies	Examples
Major Public Universities	12	King Abdulaziz University, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University
Regional Universities	8	Jouf University, Taif University, Najran University
Specialized Colleges	5	English Language Institutes, Preparatory Year Programs
Mixed/Multiple Institutions	3	Nationwide studies, multi-institutional collaborations

This broad representation reflects wide academic interest in LLA across different institutional tiers, spanning both well-established urban centres and rural settings. Studies were conducted in major cities, such as Riyadh (Alharbi, 2024; Almusharraf, 2018), Jeddah (Asiri & Shukri, 2020, 2018), and Shaqra (Alqahtani, 2024), as well as in rural locations, including Tabarjal College (Khreisat & Mugableh, 2021).

4.1.2 Gender Demographics and Sample Size Analysis

Gender reporting varied considerably across studies, with 71% (n = 20) of studies including gender-disaggregated data, while 29% (n = 8) provided only basic demographic information or omitted gender details entirely. Table 4 presents the gender distribution and sample size characteristics.

Table 4. Gender distribution and sample size characteristics

Study characteristic	Number of studies	Percentage	Sample Size Range
Mixed-gender studies	12	43%	84-630 participants
Female-only studies	9	32%	25-150 participants
Male-only studies	5	18%	45-200 participants
Gender unreported	2	7%	50-120 participants
Total sample across all studies	28	100%	25-630 (Mean=173)

Sample sizes varied significantly, ranging from small-scale qualitative studies (n = 25) to large-scale surveys involving hundreds of students (n = 630). Only 43% (n = 12) of studies provided detailed, gender-disaggregated analyses of autonomy patterns, limiting insights into gender-specific approaches to autonomous learning.

4.2 Conceptual and Theoretical Framings of LLA

LLA was defined consistently across the reviewed studies as the learner's capacity to take charge of their language learning and incorporating key elements such as self-direction, responsibility, and self-assessment. However, the adoption of theoretical frameworks varied significantly across studies.

4.2.1 Theoretical Framework Distribution

Most studies (n = 19, 68%) employed foundational autonomy theories, primarily drawing on Holec's (1981) seminal work and Little's (1991, 2007) conceptualisations. Emerging frameworks showed more limited adoption: self-determination theory (SDT) was utilised in 8 studies (29%), while complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) appeared in only 3 studies (11%). Seven studies (25%) integrated multiple theoretical perspectives, combining foundational and contemporary frameworks. The limited uptake of emerging frameworks suggests a preference for established theoretical foundations in Saudi EFL research, possibly reflecting both the relative novelty of dynamic

approaches and the complexity of their implementation in traditional educational contexts. Figure 3 illustrates the dominant theoretical concepts in the literature, generated through frequency analysis of coded theoretical terms and constructs using MAXQDA's keyword frequency and co-occurrence matrix functions. The visualisation represents the relative prominence of different theoretical concepts based on their occurrence across the 28 reviewed studies, with larger text indicating higher frequency of usage.
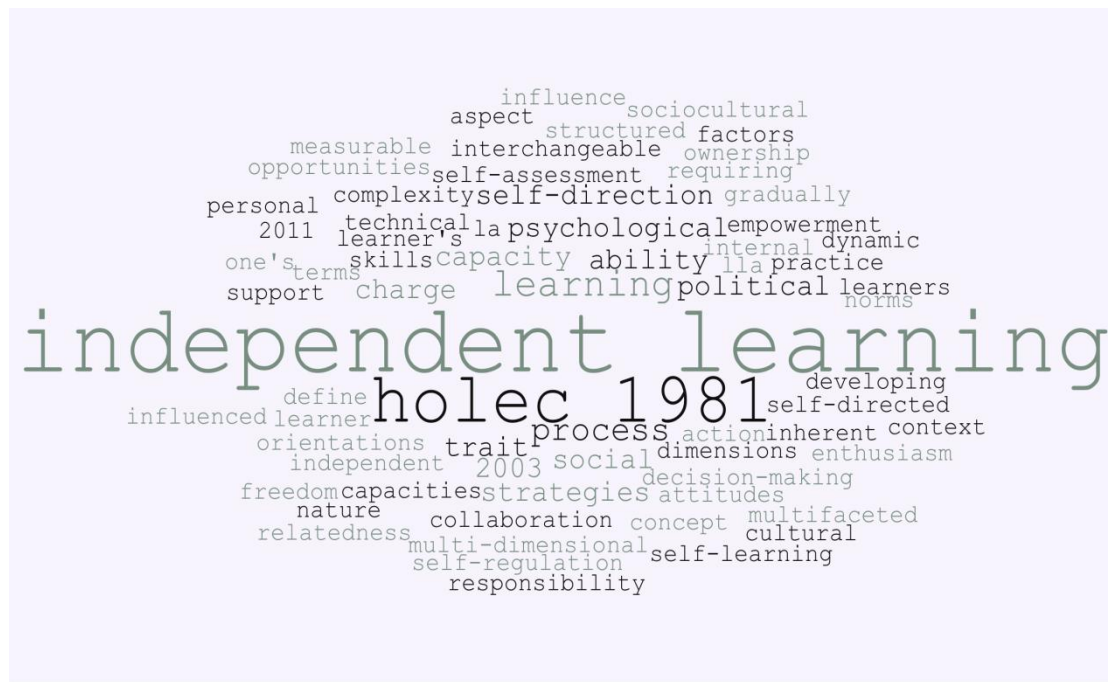
Figure 3. Frequent theoretical terms and constructs in LLA literature (2016–2025)

The analysis reveals that while foundational theories dominate, there is growing interest in dynamic, context-sensitive conceptualisations, particularly in studies focused on digital learning environments and cultural adaptation.

4.3 Methodological Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

The reviewed studies employed diverse methodological approaches, with quantitative designs predominating (n = 18, 64%), followed by mixed-methods approaches (n = 7, 25%), and qualitative methodologies (n = 3, 11%). Figure 4 presents a comprehensive visualisation of methodological integration across studies, highlighting the diversity of approaches and the prominence of survey-based research combined with qualitative insights.
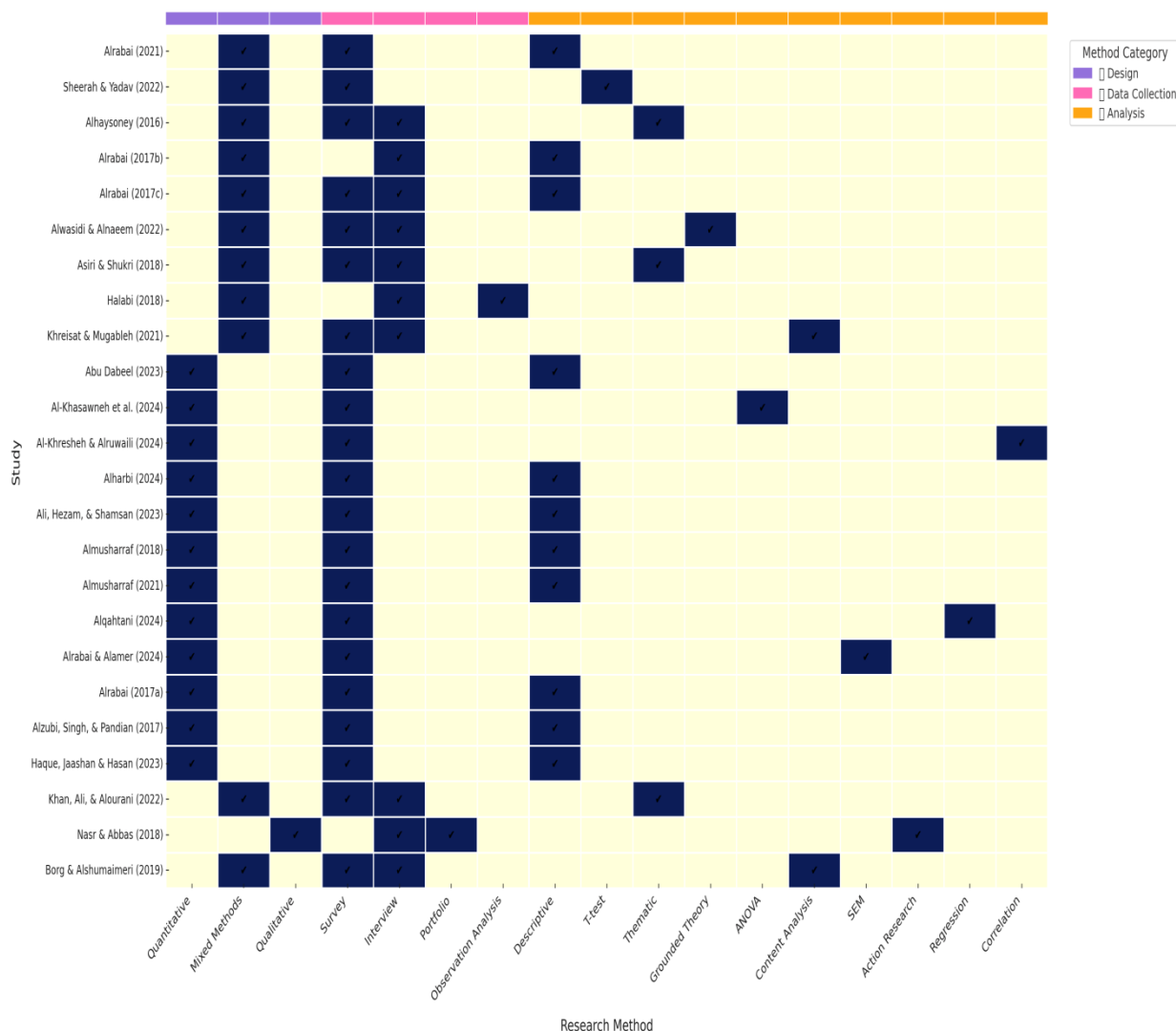
Figure 4. Integration of research methods across the reviewed studies

4.4 Emerging Trends and Research Gaps

4.4.1 Language Skills Coverage Analysis

Analysis of language skills revealed significant gaps in research coverage. Writing skills received the most attention (n = 8 studies, 29%), followed by vocabulary development (n = 6 studies, 21%). However, other essential skills remained severely underexplored: listening skills were examined in 2 studies (7%), speaking skills in 3 studies (11%), and reading skills in 4 studies (14%). Seven studies (25%) took a general approach without focusing on specific skills, while 8 studies (29%) examined autonomy as a broad construct without skill-specific analysis. This distribution highlights a critical gap in understanding how LLA develops across different language competencies, with traditionally productive skills receiving disproportionate attention compared to receptive skills and the development of integrated skills.

4.4.2 Research Coverage Gaps

Figure 5 visually represents research coverage across different dimensions of learning environments, clearly identifying where significant gaps exist in the current literature.
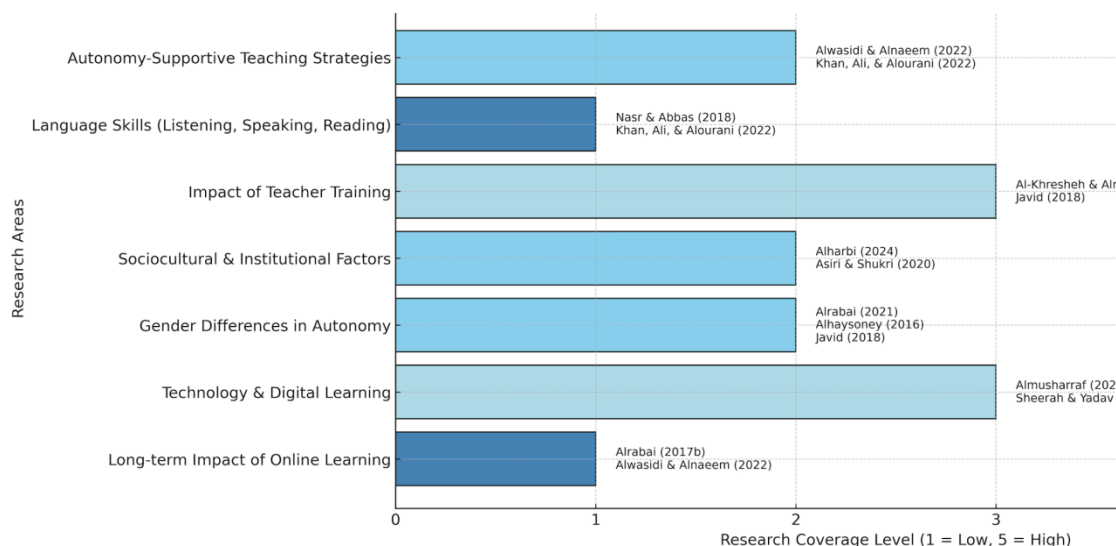
Figure 5. The mapping of research coverage across learning environment dimensions highlights existing gaps

The analysis reveals persistent gaps in several critical areas: only 18% (n = 5) of studies explicitly aligned with Vision 2030 reform agendas, 25% (n = 7) provided meaningful gender-disaggregated analysis, and 21% (n = 6) focused on the preparatory year as a critical space for autonomy development. Additionally, while 75% (n = 21) of the studies cited digital tools as enabling factors, only 32% (n = 9) provided empirical evaluations of their effectiveness in pedagogical integration.

Figure 6 presents a conceptual map outlining future research priorities, emphasising the need for a comprehensive investigation across underexplored areas.
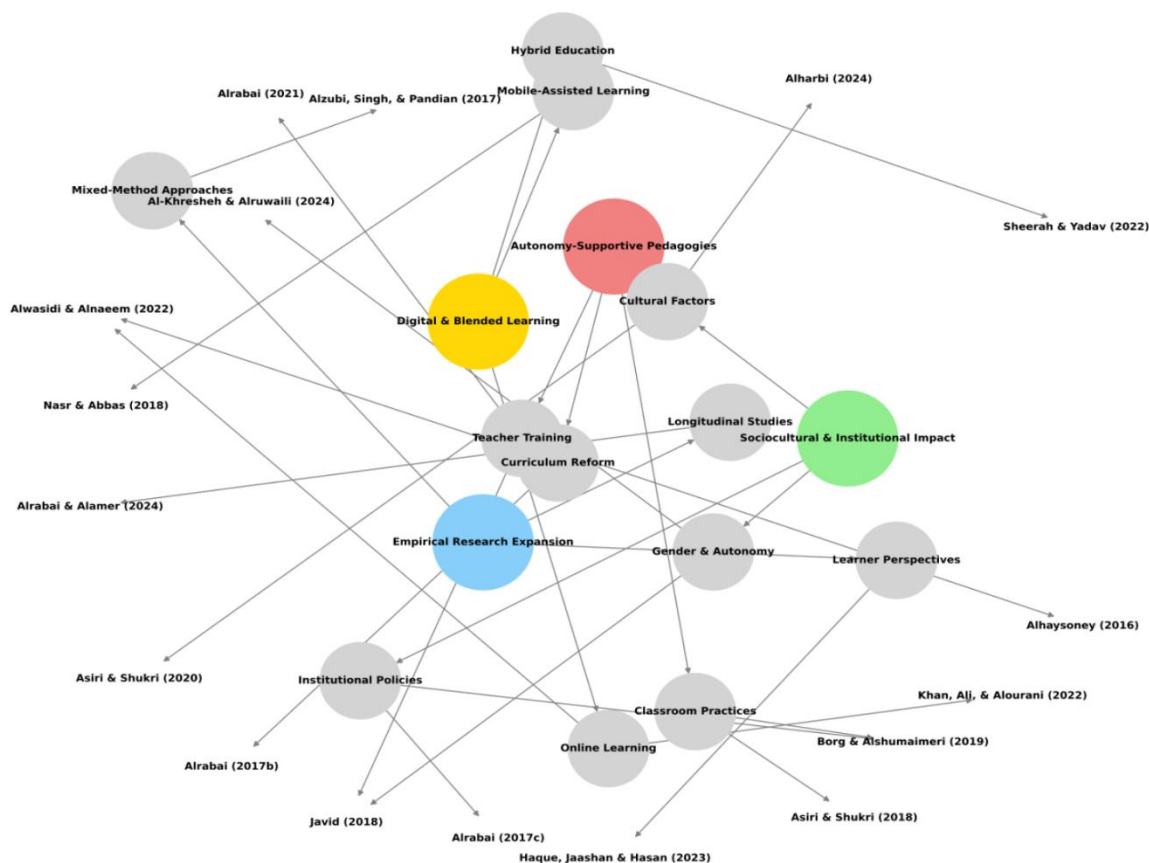

Figure 6. Conceptual map of future research priorities with an emphasis on digital and blended learning for promoting autonomy

5. Discussion

5.1 LA and Vision 2030 as an Underexplored Policy Nexus

Despite the central role of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 in reshaping national priorities, its influence on research that explicitly addresses LA in English-language education remains largely indirect and underdeveloped. The present analysis revealed that several studies (Alqahtani, 2024; Alzubi & Singh, 2017) addressed themes such as technology integration, pedagogical shifts, and learner agency—elements that are potentially shaped by broader societal transformations—yet these studies rarely established direct connections to Vision 2030's educational objectives. While some documents alluded to speculative links between LA and evolving social dynamics, they often omitted explicit references to national policy, resulting in a conceptual gap between educational research and reform agendas.

5.1.1 Bridging Educational Research and National Reform Frameworks

To bridge this gap, several concrete strategies can be implemented to align LLA research with the specific objectives of Vision 2030. Curricular integration represents a primary avenue for alignment, particularly with Vision 2030's emphasis on developing a robust and diversified economy through enhanced human capital. LLA principles can be systematically embedded within EFL curricula through modular design that promotes self-directed learning, project-based assessments that encourage autonomous research and presentation skills, and portfolio-based learning that develops reflective practice. Each of these principles directly supports the Vision's goal of producing graduates with 21st-century skills essential for economic diversification.

Assessment reform offers another critical alignment mechanism. Vision 2030 calls explicitly for educational systems that develop analytical thinking and problem-solving capabilities. LLA-informed assessment practices, including self-assessment rubrics, peer evaluation systems, and competency-based progression models, can directly address these goals while fostering the independent learning behaviours necessary for lifelong professional development in Saudi Arabia's evolving economy.

Teacher training policies represent perhaps the most impactful alignment strategy. Vision 2030's commitment to preparing Saudi youth for future jobs requires educators equipped to foster autonomous learning. Comprehensive teacher development programs should include training in autonomy-supportive instructional practices, digital literacy for technology-enhanced learning environments, and cultural sensitivity in implementing Western-derived autonomy concepts within Saudi educational contexts. Such training directly supports Vision 2030's emphasis on developing the nation's human capital as a cornerstone of national transformation.

5.1.2 Workforce Readiness and Global Competitiveness through Autonomous Learning

Two specific Vision 2030 policy goals demonstrate clear alignment opportunities with LLA research and implementation. First, enhancing employability represents a core objective of Vision 2030, with targets including increasing Saudi employment rates and developing workforce readiness for a diversified economy. LLA directly supports this goal by developing self-directed learning capabilities essential for professional adaptation, problem-solving skills crucial for workplace innovation, and English proficiency necessary for international business engagement. Research has shown that autonomous learners demonstrate higher motivation and achievement in language learning, directly contributing to the enhanced English competency that Vision 2030 identifies as essential for economic competitiveness. Second, global competence development is explicitly outlined in Vision 2030's goal to position Saudi Arabia as a global investment powerhouse and enhance international partnerships. LLA fosters global competence through developing intercultural communication skills via autonomous engagement with diverse English-language resources, critical thinking abilities necessary for cross-cultural business negotiations, and independent research capabilities essential for understanding global markets and trends. The autonomous learning behaviours developed through LLA—including self-regulation, goal-setting, and reflective practice—align precisely with the professional competencies that Vision 2030 identifies as necessary for successful international engagement.

By contrast, although not explicitly focused on LA, other studies emphasised the strategic significance of English-language education within the Vision 2030 framework. For example, Al-Tamimi (2025) illustrated how economic diversification and globalisation have amplified the demand for English proficiency, positioning language education as a vehicle for workforce readiness and international competitiveness. Similarly, Banafi (2025) highlighted students' positive perceptions of English-language programs, particularly in enhancing communication skills and employability outcomes closely aligned with Vision 2030 priorities. These insights suggest an increasing awareness of the relevance of English-language education policy. However, these findings also highlight a missed opportunity: LA is seldom examined through the lens of national reform. Future research would benefit from investigating how autonomy, both as a pedagogical aim and as a developmental outcome, contributes to—and is shaped by—Saudi Arabia's evolving educational landscape in alignment with Vision 2030.

5.2 Gender, Culture, and the Need for Contextualised Autonomy Research

The analysis revealed a significant research gap concerning the influence of gender and cultural factors on LA within the Saudi EFL higher education context. Although some studies (e.g., Sheerah & Yadav, 2022) reported gender-disaggregated data, they often stopped short of analysing or interpreting data in relation to gender-specific patterns of autonomy. This omission limits insights into how male and female students may experience autonomy differently in language-learning environments. Moreover, inconsistencies in reporting on participants' demographics across studies hinder comparative analyses and broader generalisations.

5.2.1 Cultural Alignment with Vision 2030's Social Goals

Vision 2030's commitment to empowering women and achieving social cohesion requires culturally sensitive approaches to autonomy development that respect traditional values while promoting progressive educational practices. Research gaps in gender-specific autonomy patterns directly impact Vision 2030's goal of increasing women's workforce participation to 30% (Saleh & Malibari, 2021), as autonomous learning capabilities are essential for professional development and career advancement. A specific example of how Saudi gender norms influence LLA behaviours can be observed in classroom participation patterns, where traditional cultural expectations may affect autonomous learning development differently for male and female students. In mixed-gender EFL classrooms, female students may demonstrate autonomous behaviours such as self-directed research and independent task completion. However, they may be less likely to engage in autonomous decision-making regarding classroom leadership roles or public speaking opportunities due to cultural norms that emphasise modesty and indifference in mixed-gender settings. Conversely, male students may feel more comfortable with autonomous decision-making and verbal participation. Still, male students may be less inclined toward collaborative autonomous learning activities that require emotional expression or peer support, reflecting cultural expectations of independence and self-reliance. These gender-differentiated autonomy manifestations suggest that effective LLA development in Saudi contexts requires tailored approaches that recognise how cultural gender norms shape students' comfort levels with different autonomous learning behaviours, from individual study strategies to group leadership and public presentation skills. Recent research supports gender-specific approaches, finding that while Saudi EFL students share similar perceptions of the classroom environment, female students demonstrate higher learning satisfaction than males, with both groups rating learning and motivational dimensions lower than physical aspects (Dabeel, 2023). These findings suggest that current environments inadequately support autonomous learning behaviours necessary for Vision 2030's objectives, reinforcing the need for gender-sensitive autonomy approaches.

Future LLA research should examine how autonomy-supportive practices can be culturally adapted to support the success of both male and female learners in achieving the Vision's employment and social development targets, while respecting traditional values and promoting inclusive educational environments. This lack of gender- and culture-sensitive analysis is not exclusive to the Saudi context. Research from other developing regions similarly highlights the need for culturally grounded autonomy studies. For instance, Chong and Reinders (2022) noted the overrepresentation of English language learners in autonomy research, which restricts the generalizability of findings across linguistic and cultural contexts. Similarly, Ueno et al. (2025) observed that much of the research on self-regulated learning was concentrated in Asian settings, suggesting a cultural bias in how autonomy is both conceptualised and operationalised. Such concerns align with the methodological limitations identified in this review, which consistently call for research that critically examines the sociocultural and institutional dimensions of LA. Mohebbi (2025), Stringer (2024), and Gupta et al. (2024) also advocated for more inclusive, complexity-informed approaches that recognise the influence of context. While Gupta et al. (2024) presented evidence of gender differences in self-efficacy in online learning, their limited cultural analysis highlighted the ongoing need for intersectional research frameworks. These findings reinforce the necessity for future Saudi-based studies to engage more explicitly with how gender and culture shape LA, not merely as demographic variables, but as dynamic, context-sensitive forces that influence language-learning experiences.

5.3 Preparatory Year as a Site for Developing LLA in EFL Contexts

The preparatory year in Saudi universities is widely recognised as a transitional phase that shapes students' academic skills, language proficiency, and learner identity (Brdesee & Alsaggaf, 2021; Othman & Alrayes, 2021). It is also a critical period for fostering LA in EFL contexts, particularly in alignment with Vision 2030's emphasis on building character and developing learning skills as foundational elements of educational transformation.

5.3.1 Strategic Integration with Vision 2030's Educational Framework

The preparatory year represents an optimal intervention point for implementing Vision 2030's educational priorities through LLA development. Vision 2030 calls explicitly for educational approaches that develop creativity and innovation alongside digital skills, capabilities that autonomous learning practices directly foster. Strategic implementation during the preparatory year can include the introduction of self-access learning centres equipped with digital resources supporting independent English language development, the implementation of learner training programs that explicitly teach autonomous learning strategies essential for university success, and the development of portfolio-based assessment systems that track progress toward Vision 2030's learning outcome targets.

Although varied in focus and methodology, several studies (Alqahtani, 2024; Alzubi & Singh, 2017; Alzubi et al.,2017; Asiri & Shukri, 2020) emphasised the importance of early support for autonomy in students' academic journeys. For example, Alqahtani (2024) identified intrinsic motivation as a key driver of both autonomy and academic success. Other scholars (Alzubi & Singh, 2017; Hazaea & Alzubi, 2018) examined the role of digital tools—particularly smartphones and mobile-assisted language learning—in encouraging self-directed learning.

However, autonomy development is not without challenges. Asiri and Shukri (2020) found that learners often resisted autonomous practices and instead relied on the teacher's direction. This finding suggests that, without intentional pedagogical support, autonomy will remain underdeveloped. Despite increasing recognition of its importance, implementing autonomy-supportive practices within preparatory year programs faces persistent systemic and cultural barriers. The gap between theoretical endorsement and practical application was a recurring theme across the identified studies (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Khreisat & Mugableh, 2021; Sheerah & Yadav, 2022). Teachers may value autonomy in principle but doubt its feasibility due to low student motivation, limited proficiency, and

rigid curricula (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). In turn, students often view instructors as responsible for much of their learning (Khreisat & Mugableh, 2021), reflecting cultural norms favouring structure and authority.

Even promising interventions have limitations. Sheerah and Yadav's (2022) Writing Hub initiative improved student writing; however, both students and instructors remained uncertain about sustaining autonomy without teacher support. By contrast, Khreisat and Mugableh's (2021) mixed-methods study offered a broader view of institutional and cultural constraints, providing a fuller picture of the challenges experienced. Of note, these studies also proposed actionable solutions. Sheerah and Yadav (2022) recommended strategies such as peer feedback, mind mapping, and process writing, while Khreisat and Mugableh (2021) advocated for curriculum flexibility, self-access learning time, and teacher/student training, and Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) emphasised the need for institutional support to enable teacher innovation. These findings suggest that promoting autonomy in Saudi EFL preparatory programs requires systemic change, addressing cultural expectations, empowering educators, redesigning curricula, and equipping learners with the tools to take charge of their learning.

5.4 Towards a Context-Sensitive and Methodologically Robust Understanding of LA

A core definition of LLA, featuring learner control, was prominent across the reviewed studies. While foundational, this view is increasingly seen as limited. Theoretical perspectives have evolved from static definitions to dynamic, situated interpretations. Stringer (2024) introduced emergent LLA within complex dynamic systems theory (CDST), where autonomy is fluid, non-linear, and context-shaped. Similarly, Gupta et al. (2024) conceptualised autonomy through a three-dimensional model incorporating learner agency, self-regulated learning, and self-directed learning.

5.4.1 Policy Implementation Framework for Dynamic Autonomy Concepts

This conceptual evolution demands integration with Vision 2030's adaptive learning initiatives. Future research should develop implementation frameworks that operationalise dynamic autonomy concepts within Saudi policy contexts, including guidelines for CDST-informed pedagogical approaches. These professional development standards integrate autonomy theories with cultural sensitivity and assessment protocols that capture emergent autonomy development. Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that teacher motivational practices directly and indirectly influence L2 achievement through students' autonomy and intrinsic motivation, explaining 87% of the variance in learning outcomes (Alrabai & Alamer, 2024), underscoring the need for systematic implementation within the framework of Vision 2030. This conceptual expansion demands methodological diversification. Saudi-based studies rely heavily on quantitative designs, often failing to capture the complexity of autonomy. Although calls for qualitative inquiries exist (Alrabai, 2021; Khreisat & Mugableh, 2021), adoption remains limited compared to global trends favouring mixed-methods approaches.

5.4.2 Adoption of Standardised Reporting Guidelines

Saudi LLA research would benefit from adopting established reporting standards such as Consolidated Requirements for Equality (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007) for qualitative studies and Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR; O'Brien et al., 2014) for mixed-methods investigations. COREQ guidelines would enhance transparency by requiring systematic reporting on research team characteristics, study design, and analysis procedures—areas where current Saudi studies often lack detail. SRQR standards would improve mixed-methods research by ensuring comprehensive reporting of integration strategies. Saudi institutions should consider mandating compliance with these standards to elevate research quality and international credibility. Stringer's (2024) advocacy for CDST and action research emphasises the emergent nature of autonomy and stakeholder collaboration. However, such complexity-informed methodologies remain largely absent from Saudi EFL research.

5.5 Strategy Training and Technology Integration in Saudi EFL Contexts

A recurring theme across the reviewed studies was the crucial role of explicit strategy training in fostering LA, particularly in digitally mediated environments. This aligns with Chong and Reinders' (2022) scoping review, which emphasised the need to equip learners with strategies that address not only the technical but also the psychological, social, and political dimensions of autonomy. Such a multidimensional view highlights the importance of moving beyond surface-level practices and engaging with learners' broader contexts and identities.

5.5.1 Technology Integration Supporting Vision 2030's Digital Transformation

Vision 2030's commitment to digital government and digital society initiatives creates opportunities for technology-enhanced LLA that directly support national digital transformation goals. Strategic technology integration can include development of AI-powered language learning platforms that provide personalized feedback aligned with Vision 2030's innovative education objectives, implementation of virtual reality environments for immersive English practice supporting the Vision's entertainment and tourism sector development goals, and creation of blockchain-verified digital portfolios that document autonomous learning achievements in formats recognized by Vision 2030's future workforce initiatives.

Despite this recognition, the current review identified a significant gap in empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions in Saudi EFL higher education. This gap is particularly concerning given the increasing reliance on digital and blended learning formats, which demand self-regulation and digital competence. Several studies (e.g., Al-Khresheh & Alruwaili, 2024; Javid, 2018) have highlighted the need to shift from teacher-centred instruction towards collaborative, inquiry-based models. Scaffolding and digital literacy training are essential in these contexts; however, their long-term impact remains underexplored, particularly in Saudi settings,

where digital learning has expanded rapidly but unevenly.

International research offers additional insights. Chong and Reinders (2022) documented various technology-mediated interventions, such as digital games, cloud tools, and mobile platforms, that support autonomy by encouraging engagement and personalisation. Mohebbi (2025) explored AI-driven tools for adaptive feedback and self-directed learning, while also cautioning against overreliance due to issues such as unequal access and digital dependency. Similarly, Raitskaya et al. (2021) pointed out mobile-assisted learning and blended instruction as autonomy-supportive trends, although their integration into mainstream EFL teaching remains limited. Gupta et al. (2024) and Inayati et al. (2024) advocated diverse formats to support learner agency and flexibility. These findings suggest that, while technology offers valuable tools for enhancing LA, its effectiveness relies on intentional pedagogical design. Strategy training, instructional scaffolding, and sensitivity to learner diversity and contextual limitations are essential.

6. Conclusion

This study reviewed empirical research on LLA in EFL contexts in Saudi higher education, focusing on studies published between 2016 and 2025. By systematically examining how LLA has been defined, theorised, and methodologically approached, the review highlighted the current state of LA within the context of national educational transformation.

Findings underscore the continued dominance of control-based definitions of LLA, alongside a gradual shift towards more context-sensitive conceptualisations. While technology and strategy training are frequently noted as facilitators, their pedagogical integration remains limited. The review also reveals ongoing gaps in aligning LLA research with national policy goals and addressing gender, cultural factors, and the potential of the preparatory year.

6.1 Implications of the Study

6.1.1 Theoretical and Methodological Implications

This review reveals the need for culturally grounded conceptualisations that integrate CDST and self-determination theory within Saudi contexts. The limited uptake of emerging frameworks (CDST in only 11% of studies) suggests theoretical stagnation. The heavy reliance on quantitative designs (64%) over qualitative approaches (11%) indicates a lack of methodological diversification. Researchers should adopt established reporting standards (COREQ, SRQR) and employ longitudinal designs to enhance the quality and comparability of their research.

6.1.2 Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

While 75% of studies cited digital tools as enablers, pedagogical integration remained underdeveloped in 68% of cases, reflecting the gap between theoretical endorsement and practical application. Cultural challenges persist when students view instructors as solely responsible for learning, necessitating systematic strategy training that balances cultural sensitivity with progressive practices. The underexploration of preparatory year programs (21% of studies) and uneven language skills coverage demand comprehensive autonomy approaches across all competencies.

6.1.3 National Policy and Research Directions

Despite Vision 2030's emphasis on critical thinking and lifelong learning, only 18% of studies explicitly aligned with national reform agendas. Limited gender-disaggregated analysis (25% of studies) contradicts Vision 2030's commitment to empowering women. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies, gender-specific cultural influences, and the integration of digital literacy, utilising designs that respect cultural values while promoting evidence-based educational reforms aligned with national transformation goals. Future research should adopt more theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous approaches to advance the field, emphasising context-responsive and sustainability-oriented inquiry that bridges the gap between LLA research and national policy implementation within the framework of Vision 2030's educational transformation objectives.

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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