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Navigating the Hybrid Classroom: Fostering Learner Autonomy in Saudi Higher Education

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Abstract
The rapid reconfiguration of global education following the COVID-19 pandemic has firmly established blended learning as a primary pedagogical modality. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, this shift presents a unique intersection of technological adoption and evolving educational norms. This study investigates the extent to which English language educators in a Saudi university cultivate learner autonomy within blended environments. Utilizing a quantitative approach grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), we analyzed survey responses from 32 educators to evaluate their implementation of organizational, procedural, and cognitive autonomy support. The findings reveal a complex pedagogical landscape: while educators demonstrate high levels of relational support and procedural flexibility, significant structural rigidities remain regarding curriculum design and rule-setting. These results underscore the tension between traditional teacher-centered authority and the aspirations of student-centered reform, offering critical implications for professional development in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords Learner Autonomy; Blended Learning; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Higher Education; Autonomy-Supportive Teaching.

Introduction

The global landscape of higher education has recently navigated a "seismic pedagogical shift," precipitated by the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic and solidified by the subsequent ubiquity of digital infrastructure. This trajectory has irrevocably altered the educational ecosystem, establishing blended learning not merely as an emergency contingency, but as a dominant modality for the foreseeable future [1]. Within the specific geopolitical and educational context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, this transition is distinct; it is not simply a reaction to global health crises but a strategic imperative aligned with the nation's *Vision 2030*. This comprehensive reform agenda envisions a modernized, knowledge-based society where digital literacy and self-regulated learning are paramount [2]. Consequently, English language education has emerged as a critical frontier in this transformation. The integration of traditional face-to-face instruction with sophisticated online Learning Management Systems (LMS) offers unprecedented opportunities to reconfigure the pedagogical dynamic, theoretically shifting the "locus of control" from the instructor to the learner [3].

However, the realization of this theoretical promise is fraught with complexity. The potential of blended learning to foster "learner autonomy"—defined extensively in the literature as the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action—often clashes with the stubborn realities of implementation [4, 5]. While the digital architecture for autonomy is present, the pedagogical architecture is often lagging. Learner autonomy is not an inherent byproduct of technology; rather, it is a psychological and behavioral construct that must be actively cultivated. This is particularly challenging in educational cultures historically characterized by teacher-centeredness and hierarchical transmission models, such as that of Saudi Arabia, where student passivity has often been the normative default [6]. Moving from a culture of compliance to one that valorizes independence requires more than the adoption of digital tools; it necessitates a fundamental epistemological shift in instructional behavior.

This article seeks to interrogate this "pedagogical friction." It operates on the premise that the mere provision of flexible learning modalities does not guarantee the development of self-governing learners. By examining the granular practices of English language educators through the theoretical lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), we aim to elucidate the mechanisms by which autonomy is either nurtured or inhibited in the Saudi blended classroom [7]. SDT posits that for deep learning to occur, the psychological need for autonomy must be satisfied; yet, we must ask whether current teaching practices are satisfying this need or merely replicating traditional constraints in a digital format [8]. Ultimately, this inquiry seeks to determine whether educators are leveraging these environments to cultivate genuine agency or simply using digital platforms as efficient delivery systems for static content.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory

The theoretical architecture of this inquiry is rigorously grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a macro-theory of human motivation and personality developed by Deci and Ryan. Diverging from behaviorist models that view learners as passive recipients of external stimuli, SDT operates on an "organismic dialectic" perspective, positing that human beings are inherently active, growth-oriented organisms. The theory asserts that for learners to achieve optimal psychological functioning, engagement, and well-being, the educational environment must nurture three innate psychological needs: *competence* (the need to feel effective in interacting with the environment), *relatedness* (the need to feel connected to others), and *autonomy* (the need to act with a sense of volition and self-endorsement) [9]. Within this triad, autonomy is not synonymous with independence or isolation; rather, it refers to the internal regulation of behavior, where the learner perceives the "locus of causality" to be internal. When these needs are satisfied, learners transition from "controlled motivation" (acting out of pressure or obligation) to "autonomous motivation," characterized by deep conceptual learning and greater persistence [11].

In the specific milieu of blended learning, the concept of "autonomy support" becomes the pivotal pedagogical variable. It differentiates between educators who act as "controllers" of behavior and those who act as "facilitators" of agency. This support is not a monolithic construct but is operationally defined through three distinct yet interconnected dimensions: *organizational*, *procedural*, and *cognitive* autonomy support.

Organizational autonomy support refers to the extent to which students are invited to participate in the structural governance of the classroom. This involves shifting the ownership of the learning

environment from the instructor to the collective, allowing students to influence decision-making processes such as the establishment of classroom rules or the selection of physical and digital learning materials. By democratizing these structural elements, educators foster a sense of ownership and relatedness that is often absent in hierarchical educational settings [9].

Procedural autonomy support addresses the flexibility of the instructional method. It grants students the latitude to determine *how* they engage with learning tasks. This dimension encompasses flexibility in deadlines, the choice of presentation formats, and the freedom to plan individual workflows within the blended environment. Procedural support is critical in preventing the LMS (Learning Management System) from becoming a rigid digital cage, instead transforming it into a flexible toolkit that accommodates diverse self-regulatory styles [12].

Cognitive autonomy support, arguably the most critical dimension for higher education, transcends the logistics of *how* and *where* learning happens to address the *depth* of intellectual engagement. It involves nurturing psychological ownership of ideas by encouraging critical thinking, self-reflection, and problem-solving. Rather than merely transmitting information for regurgitation, the autonomy-supportive educator scaffolds opportunities for students to formulate their own arguments, debate conflicting viewpoints, and construct personal meaning from the curriculum [11].

However, the application of this framework is not without friction, particularly in traditional educational cultures. Research indicates that implementing SDT-aligned practices in environments historically characterized by teacher-centered authority can create pedagogical dissonance. Educators must navigate the delicate balance between providing necessary structure—which supports competence—and allowing sufficient freedom—which supports autonomy [12]. If the digital transition in Saudi higher education is to be transformative rather than merely cosmetic, it must move beyond the "technocratic" adoption of tools to the "psychological" adoption of these autonomy-supportive practices, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation in a student body traditionally conditioned for compliance [10].

Methodology

To empirically interrogate the pedagogical dynamics of learner autonomy within the blended learning ecosystem, this study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design. This methodological configuration was selected for its efficacy in identifying prevailing trends and isolating specific instructional behaviors without the manipulation of independent variables, aligning with Creswell's paradigms for educational inquiry [13]. The primary instrument for data acquisition was a structured questionnaire, meticulously adapted from Reeve's (2006) seminal "autonomy-support framework." This instrument was calibrated to capture the nuances of organizational, procedural, and cognitive autonomy support, ensuring that the theoretical constructs of Self-Determination Theory were accurately operationalized into measurable pedagogical indicators [14]. The selection of a structured questionnaire is further justified by Dörnyei, who posits that such instruments are indispensable in applied linguistics for generating robust, generalizable datasets regarding educator beliefs and practices [15].

The study engaged a purposive sample of 32 English language educators situated within a Saudi higher education institution. The sampling strategy was designed to target practitioners actively navigating the blended learning modality, thereby ensuring the ecological validity of the findings. The

resulting demographic profile, detailed in Table 1, reveals a cohort characterized by distinct structural asymmetries. Notably, the sample is predominantly female (84.4%), a distribution that mirrors broader systemic trends within the Saudi educational landscape [16]. This gender imbalance is not merely statistical but reflects the logistical realities of gender-segregated campuses, where access to male sections can present specific research challenges. While this predominance aligns with observations by Murray regarding the feminization of certain EFL sectors, it also necessitates a critical reading of the data through the lens of gendered pedagogical dynamics [17, 18].

Furthermore, the participant pool exhibits a high degree of professional maturity. A significant majority—75%—possess more than six years of teaching experience, while only a marginal fraction (6.2%) are in the novice stage of their careers [16]. This skew toward experienced educators is analytically significant; it suggests that the reported autonomy-supportive practices (or lack thereof) are indicative of entrenched, calcified pedagogical habits rather than the tentative experimentation often associated with early-career teachers [19]. To ensure the ethical integrity of the research, strict protocols regarding informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdrawal were rigidly enforced, in accordance with Babbie's standards for social research [20].

Table 1: Participant Demographic Profile and Instructional Context

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Current Teaching Modality	Blended Learning	21	65.6%
	Face-to-Face	10	31.0%
	Online Only	1	3.1%
Gender	Female	27	84.4%
	Male	5	15.6%
Teaching Experience	More than 6 years	24	75.0%
	3 to 5 years	6	18.8%
	1 to 2 years	2	6.2%
Total Sample		32	100%

The Paradox of Autonomy Support

The empirical analysis of the survey data elucidates a profound "pedagogical dichotomy" in the operationalization of learner autonomy within the Saudi blended learning context. The findings reveal a bifurcated approach where educators appear comfortable ceding control over "micro-

autonomy"—the procedural and logistical aspects of learning—while simultaneously maintaining a rigid grip on "macro-autonomy," or the structural and curricular decisions that govern the educational experience. This phenomenon suggests that while the *form* of instruction has shifted toward a student-centered model, the underlying *power dynamics* remain tethered to traditional authoritative structures.

In the domain of procedural flexibility, the data demonstrates a commendable shift toward growth-oriented assessment, yet this is juxtaposed against a rigid adherence to curricular prescription. Educators evinced a willingness to prioritize developmental feedback over summative metrics, with a significant 37.5% of respondents indicating they "always" focus assessment on improvement rather than mere grading [21]. This alignment with Self-Determination Theory suggests an attempt to foster intrinsic motivation by reducing the punitive pressure of grades [22]. Furthermore, the SDT component of *relatedness* is actively nurtured through social scaffolding; for instance, 43.8% of teachers unconditionally allowed students to select their own group members, thereby validating student agency in the social construction of learning [23]. However, this flexibility is circumscribed by clear boundaries. While students possess the agency to choose *who* they work with, they are rarely afforded the agency to determine *what* they work on. Nearly 47% of educators reported "always" selecting specific homework assignments, and a rigid adherence to pre-planned activities remains the statistical norm [24]. This configuration points to a model of "guided autonomy," where learners are granted freedom of movement only within a tightly defined, teacher-constructed perimeter, effectively limiting their capacity to develop self-regulation skills regarding content selection [25].

Table 2: Frequency of Procedural Autonomy Support Practices

Instructional Practice	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Assessment & Feedback					
Assessing with focus on feedback/improvement rather than grades	37.5%	31.3%	18.8%	9.4%	3.1%
Task & Activity Choice					
Allowing students to choose tasks within planned activities	18.8%	18.8%	43.8%	15.6%	12.5%
Teacher selects specific homework assignments*	46.9%	25.0%	21.9%	6.2%	0.0%
Teacher selects specific in-class activities and adheres to them*	21.9%	46.9%	25.0%	6.2%	0.0%
Providing autonomy in choosing projects	43.8%	31.3%	15.6%	6.3%	3.1%
Collaboration & Presentation					
Asking students to decide between group or individual work	15.6%	28.1%	34.3%	15.6%	6.3%
Allowing students to choose their own group members	43.8%	25.0%	12.5%	18.8%	15.6%
Allowing students to choose presentation style (e.g., Role-Play)	37.5%	31.3%	21.9%	3.1%	6.3%
Structure & Pacing					
Reminding students of limited time for tasks*	56.3%	31.3%	9.4%	3.1%	0.0%

The disparity between affective support and structural control becomes most acute when examining organizational autonomy. The data presents a striking contrast between the "open door" and the "closed rulebook." On one hand, educators exhibited high levels of interpersonal accessibility; 62.5% maintained an explicit "open-door policy," actively encouraging students to express concerns, provide feedback, and seek redress [21]. This practice is indispensable for establishing the psychological safety and trust required for autonomous learning to flourish. Conversely, the democratic co-creation of the learning environment—a hallmark of true autonomous classrooms—was notably absent. Only 15.6% of educators involved students in the legislative process of setting classroom rules, and flexibility regarding deadlines for online tasks was

strictly curtailed [21]. This finding aligns with the prevailing cultural norms of the region, where hierarchical teacher-student relationships, characterized by high power distance, remain resilient despite educational reforms [26]. Consequently, the classroom functions as a space open for discussion but closed to structural negotiation, reinforcing a "benevolent authoritarianism" where the instructor retains absolute sovereignty over the temporal and regulatory dimensions of the course.

Table 3: Frequency of Organizational Autonomy Support Practices (%)

Instructional Practice	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Governance & Environment					
Involving students in setting initial classroom rules	**15.6%**	**15.6%**	**34.4%**	**15.6%**	**18.8%**
Allowing student choice in seating arrangement	**18.8%**	**9.4%**	**15.6%**	**21.9%**	**34.4%**
Involving students in classroom decoration (e.g., displaying work)	**9.4%**	**15.6%**	**15.6%**	**18.8%**	**40.6%**
Communication & Student Voice					
Maintaining an explicit 'open-door' policy for student concerns	**62.5%**	**21.9%**	**15.6%**	**0.0%**	**0.0%**
Encouraging student feedback on teaching/course	**37.5%**	**31.3%**	**25.0%**	**6.3%**	**0.0%**
Logistical Flexibility					
Flexible deadlines for online tasks	**9.4%**	**15.6%**	**46.9%**	**15.6%**	**12.5%**
Flexible deadlines for face-to-face tasks	**9.4%**	**12.5%**	**40.6%**	**31.3%**	**6.3%**

Finally, the dimension of cognitive autonomy support, which involves fostering critical thinking and the psychological ownership of ideas, exhibited a promising yet inconsistent trajectory. The transition from passive reception to active inquiry is evident in specific instructional strategies; for example, educators frequently encouraged inductive learning by asking students to "predict the rule" rather than explicitly stating it, and 71.9% provided guidelines for presentations rather than dictating every procedural step [21]. Notably, 40.6% of respondents "always" provided opportunities for students to explore topics of personal interest related to the textbook, a practice that directly links curricular content to the learner's internal value system [27]. However, the "tether to

the textbook" remains a formidable constraint for a significant subset of educators, who continue to rely heavily on prescribed tasks. This variability indicates that while the pedagogical intent to promote independent thought is present, the transition away from curriculum-dependency is incomplete. It suggests that many educators are operating in a liminal space, striving to promote cognitive independence while still being bound by the systemic requirements of standardized curricula and the traditional imperative to cover content [21].

Table 4: Frequency of Cognitive Autonomy Support Practices

Instructional Practice	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Fostering Critical Thinking & Inquiry					
Asking learners to predict grammar rules from context	34.4%	25.0%	31.3%	0.0%	9.4%
Encouraging multiple solutions to a single problem	34.4%	28.1%	25.0%	9.4%	3.1%
Encouraging comparison of different problem-solving methods	28.1%	31.3%	28.1%	9.4%	3.1%
Encouraging application of grammar rules in real-life contexts	28.1%	15.6%	31.3%	18.8%	6.3%
Curricular Choice & Flexibility					
Allowing choice of activities in place of standard textbook tasks	21.9%	31.3%	31.3%	37.5%	15.6%
Offering a range of assignment options within a broader theme	18.8%	25.0%	18.8%	21.9%	15.6%
Providing guidelines for presentations (scaffolding autonomy)	71.9%	12.5%	15.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Teacher relies solely on textbook tasks*	12.5%	15.6%	34.4%	15.6%	21.9%
Personalization & Resource Use					
Suggesting additional external resources (websites, books)	46.9%	25.0%	21.9%	3.1%	3.1%
Opportunities to explore topics of personal interest	40.6%	28.1%	18.8%	9.4%	3.1%

Opportunities for self-correction and reworking assignments	**37.5%**	**21.9 %**	**31.3%**	**9.4%**	**0.0%**
Sharing responsibility for teaching activities with learners	**18.8%**	**28.1 %**	**25.0%**	**21.9 %**	**6.3%**

Discussion: Navigating Cultural and Pedagogical Shifts

The empirical landscape revealed by this study depicts a faculty currently navigating a complex pedagogical interregnum. The high prevalence of blended learning adoption—reported by 65.6% of participants—indicates that the structural modernization of the Saudi educational environment is well underway [28]. However, beneath this digitized veneer, the pedagogical core retains significant traces of traditionalism. The data suggests that Saudi educators are effectively functioning as "benevolent authorities"; they exhibit a willingness to be supportive, approachable, and procedurally flexible, yet they fundamentally retain the reins of governance regarding the classroom's organizational logic. This hybridity does not necessarily represent a failure of implementation but rather a culturally specific adaptation of global pedagogical norms. As Al-Zahrani argues, the successful implementation of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in the Saudi context necessitates a delicate recalibration, balancing the Western ideal of autonomy with deeply ingrained cultural expectations of respect, hierarchy, and collectivism [29]. A precipitate or radical shift toward total student autonomy, devoid of adequate scaffolding, risks inducing cognitive anxiety rather than engagement, particularly among students habituated to structured guidance.

Furthermore, this dynamic cannot be fully understood without interrogating the gendered dimensions of the educational context. With the participant cohort being predominantly female (84.4%), the findings may inherently reflect the specific pedagogical navigations of women educators within the Kingdom [28]. Kane and Pullen posit that female educators in Saudi Arabia often operate within a unique intersection of empowerment and constraint; their high reliance on "open-door policies" and relational support (relatedness) may function as a strategic mechanism to foster agency within a system that remains structurally patriarchal [30]. Thus, the "guided autonomy" observed in this study—where students choose peers but not rules—may be interpreted as a pragmatic pedagogy that valorizes social cohesion and collective competence over the radical individualism often championed in Western definitions of learner autonomy.

Table 5: Synthesized Empirical Findings across Autonomy Support Dimensions

Dimension/Category	Observed Level of Support	Key Empirical Insight
Instructional Context	**Dominant Modality**	**Blended learning has become the primary instructional delivery mode, utilized by a substantial majority (65.6%) of the surveyed English language educators.**
Procedural Autonomy	**High**	**Educators demonstrate significant flexibility regarding *how* learning occurs. This includes allowing student choice in social groupings for collaborative work and prioritizing assessment practices focused on developmental feedback rather than mere summative grading.**
Cognitive Autonomy	**High**	**Pedagogical practices frequently encourage deep intellectual engagement. Teachers actively scaffold critical thinking by prompting students to predict grammatical rules inductively and encouraging multiple pathways for problem-solving.**
Organizational Autonomy	**Low**	**Structural governance of the classroom environment remains heavily teacher-centered. There is minimal evidence of democratic practices such as involving students in rule-setting, offering choices in task selection, or allowing flexibility in submission deadlines.**

Consequently, the challenge lies in reconciling this "benevolent authority" model with the aspirational goals of *Vision 2030*, which demands graduates who are not merely compliant but capable of critical, independent inquiry. While the current pedagogical model successfully maintains order and promotes procedural engagement, it risks creating a "glass ceiling" on cognitive autonomy [31]. If educators continue to monopolize the "macro-decisions" of the curriculum—such as rule-setting and task selection—students are denied the opportunity to develop the self-regulatory meta-skills essential for the knowledge economy. As Reinders and Balçikanli caution, the true potential of online platforms is realized not when they are used to replicate offline hierarchies, but when they disrupt them, allowing the learner to become a co-architect of their educational journey [32]. Therefore, the transition from "benevolent authority" to "autonomy-supportive facilitation" requires not just technical training, but a profound epistemological shift in how educators conceive of power, control, and trust within the blended classroom [33].

Conclusion

This empirical investigation serves as a critical corrective to the techno-optimist assumption that the digitization of the learning environment inevitably precipitates a democratization of pedagogical practice. The findings definitively confirm that English language educators within the Saudi higher education sector are actively engaged in a complex negotiation with the principles of learner autonomy, albeit in a manner that is distinctively stratified and uneven. While the blended learning architecture is being successfully operationalized to provide students with "procedural latitude"—offering choices regarding the logistical and social dimensions of task execution—the sphere of "organizational democracy" remains conspicuously circumscribed [34]. This dichotomy suggests that the current pedagogical model acts as a form of "scaffolded sovereignty," where learner agency is encouraged within the safety of teacher-defined boundaries but is systematically curtailed at the level of structural governance. Consequently, the potential for blended learning to function as a catalyst for radical educational emancipation remains partially latent, constrained by the persistence of traditional, hierarchical power dynamics that prioritize instructional control over co-constructive governance [35].

For educational policymakers and institutional leadership, the implications of this study are unambiguous and pressing: the mere provision of sophisticated technological infrastructure is a necessary but profoundly insufficient condition for educational transformation. There is an urgent imperative to transcend the prevailing "technocentric" discourse, which conflates digital adoption with pedagogical innovation. Instead, strategic attention must pivot toward the cultivation of an ecosystem that incentivizes pedagogical risk-taking. Professional development initiatives must undergo a paradigmatic shift; rather than focusing exclusively on the technical mechanics of Learning Management Systems (LMS), training must address the "psychological architecture" of autonomy support [36]. This involves equipping educators with the "soft skills" required to safely relinquish control over critical curricular dimensions—such as rule-setting and content selection—without the fear of compromising academic rigor or institutional authority.

Ultimately, the transition from a "benevolent authority" model to a truly "autonomy-supportive" framework requires a confrontation with deep-seated pedagogical habits that have long defined the region's educational culture. Only by addressing these epistemological barriers can the blended classroom transcend its current status as a flexible delivery system and fulfill its true promise: the cultivation of independent, self-directed learners who possess the cognitive agility and self-regulatory efficacy required for the post-oil knowledge economy [37].

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