

Understanding Learners Autonomy through Students' Voices: Insights from ESL  
Undergraduate learners at University of Sindh

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to investigate learner autonomy among undergraduate ESL learners, with a exacting focal point on BS English students at the Institute of English language and literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro. The paper aims to investigate learners' beliefs and experiences concerning learner autonomy and to recognize the responsibilities, capability and confronts related with autonomous language learning in a higher education context. Considering learner autonomy is measured a necessary academic goal, as it plays an important part in sustaining efficient language learning. To attain the aims of the study, a qualitative research design was employed, and semi structured interviews were conducted with 30 purposively selected undergraduate students representing diverse levels of academic performance. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The results reveal that learners first and foremost conceptualize autonomy in terms of psychological skills, technical skills and institutional and curriculum related constrains. Learners related learner autonomy with inner characteristic such as motivation, confidence, self-regulation, and emotional control as well as autonomous resource use self monitoring and proactive learning practices. The study emphasizes the requirement for helpful institutional exercises and learner centered approaches to successfully promote learner autonomy in Pakistani higher education contexts.*

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy, learner beliefs, ESL learners, higher education, Pakistan

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of learner autonomy has increasingly gone through mainstream discussions within language pedagogy, particularly with the move towards learner-centred approaches. Generally visualize autonomy refers to the learner's ability to direct feature of their learning rather than depending completely on teachers. Though the term is not new, its understanding differs significantly across contexts. Institutions in Pakistan, mostly public-sector universities, keep strong teacher-directed conducts. In such settings, it becomes significant to first recognize learners' beliefs before expecting autonomous learning behaviours.

This paper focuses on undergraduate students enrolled in Institute of English language & literature at University of Sindh. These students are engaged in various language learning activities and are expected to enhance autonomous academic skills. Nevertheless, it is uncertain to what level they believe they should, or can, take accountability for their own learning. This paper consequently searches to investigate their beliefs and experiences concerning learner autonomy. To situate this inquiry within in existing research, the following section reviews key literature on learner Autonomy and related concepts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Understanding Learner Autonomy**

The notion of autonomy is linked with learners taking responsibility for preparation, organising, and assessing their learning. Holec (1981) illustrated autonomy as the capability to take charge of one's learning, while later scholars put emphasis on the importance of metacognitive awareness in autonomous behaviour (Benson, 2011). In language learning, autonomy is thought to add to better engagement and improved performance.

### **Learner Beliefs and Learning Behaviour**

Learner beliefs form how students understand their role in the classroom and how much independence they consider proper. According to Horwitz (1999), beliefs persuade motivation, strategy use, and readiness to participate. When students believe that learning is principally the teacher's responsibility, they tend to keep away from initiating tasks on their own. In contrast, optimistic beliefs about autonomy often guide to more self-directed behaviour.

### **Autonomy in the Pakistani Context**

Research within Pakistan suggests that most universities maintain to rely on lecture-based teaching and examination-driven evaluation (Farooq, 2019). While this scheme provides structure, it does not give confidence to learners to search knowledge autonomously. Rahman (2020) notes that learners often equate academic achievement with memorisation rather than understanding. As a result, their autonomy remains weak, even when they acquire theoretical awareness of the idea. Given these contextual challenges the present study seeks to address this gap by formulating the following research question.

### **Aims of the study**

The aim of this paper is to investigate ESL undergraduate students' beliefs and experiences regarding learner autonomy at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. The research paper seeks to comprehend how learners examine their responsibilities, capability and boundaries in supervising their own learning with mainly teacher-centred educational context. It also aims to study how learners discuss independence and dependence on teachers in their academic exercises. Moreover, this research paper proposes to reveal the background confronts that persuade the growth of learner autonomy and to emphasize learners' voices in elucidating how autonomy is understood and exercised in real classroom settings.

### **Research Question**

Q1. What beliefs do undergraduate students at the University of Sindh hold about learner Autonomy in the context of their English language learning?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This paper used a qualitative research design to gain in-depth understanding of learners' beliefs. Such an approach is appropriate when investigating thoughts and beliefs that cannot be gathered through quantitative measures.

### Participants

Thirty 30 undergraduate learners from the BS English programme participated in the present study. Purposive sampling was used to incorporate learners of third and final year and with different levels of academic performance.

### Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted independently. The interviews lasted between twenty-five and thirty-five minutes and were recorded with the participants' permission. Questions focused on learners' understanding of autonomy, their study habits, and factors influencing their independence.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The interview data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step of thematic analysis procedure. The transcripts were read many times, coded by hand, and assembled into themes that reproduced frequent patterns.

### FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews led to the identification of three major themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Quote
<b>Psychological skill</b>	Self-responsibility and Self Regulation	<i>'Strategy of self-study can work in a very good manner to achieve one's goal'(S14)</i>
	Confidence/self-efficacy	<i>'When I complete the given task, I feel confidence to complete more challenging task'(7)</i>
	Interdependence (Flexible Autonomy)	<i>'No doubt that autonomous working gives you confidence but sometimes I need a teacher to guide and support'(S12)</i>
<b>Technical Skill</b>	Digital Literacy	<i>'I use different websites and apps to search material for my assignment, this saves my time'(S6)</i>
	Online communication and collaboration	<i>'I feel digital communication creates hurdles in learning, physical classes with the direction of teacher is more productive'(S14)</i>
<b>Institutional and Curriculum Constraints</b>	Curriculum limitations	<i>Teachers sometime impede our autonomous learning by giving lot of assignment and projects without consulting students'(S3)</i>
	Rigid Educational policies	<i>'Due to the rigid educational policies, neither teachers nor</i>

		<i>student can exercise autonomy'(S9)</i>
	Curriculum inflexibility	<i>'In classroom practices we are bound to complete the task on given time, we hardly find time to do something from our own side'(S18)</i>
	Psychological constraints associated with institution	<i>'Hesitation in making choices, anxiety regarding failure affects my autonomy'(S2)</i>

**Psychological Skill**



Several respondents in the study highlighted that psychological readiness as a major factor in autonomous learning and this factor form the self directed learning strategies. Four respondents (S-3, S-20, S-6 and S14) noted that their motivation and perseverance were strongly influenced by their belief in their own capacity to succeed. One participant illustrated this by saying: *'Strategy of self-study can work in a very good manner to achieve one's goal'(S14)*

This response illustrates how the intentional acceptance of self-regulated learning scheme can promote incremental achievement, which in turn reinforces learners' self-assurance and determination. By breaking multipart responsibilities into lesser, more convenient mechanism, students are able to practice early success that strengthens their sense of ability and self-efficacy. Such progressions are reliable with result in learner autonomy research, where regular goal achievement is viewed as a significant pathway to constant motivation and willingness to connect with more challenging challenges.

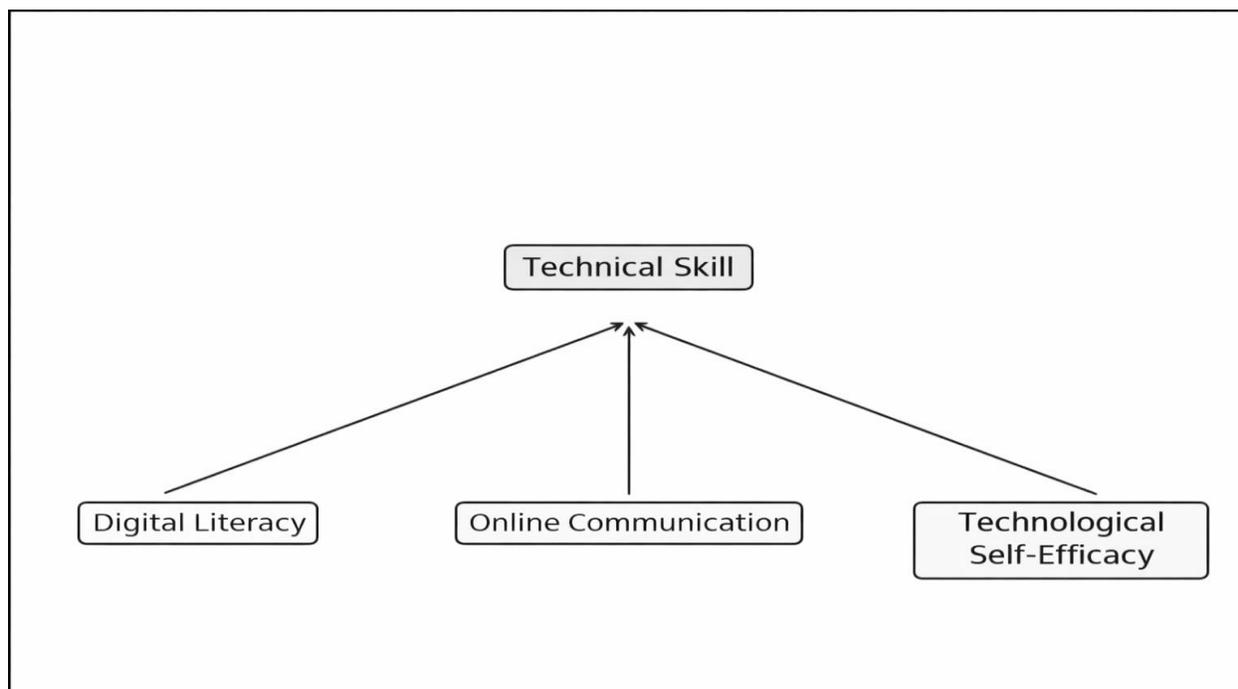
Similarly, another respondent highlighted in detail how assuming a regular, confidence-building approach sanctions them to undertake progressively more complicated tasks. He explained that breaking larger tasks into smaller, manageable goals allowed them to experience small successes, which in turn reinforced their confidence and motivated them to persist:

*“Previously I faced many challenges but when I built in confidence and start doing small tasks and achieve goals, I felt more confidence which inspired me a lot to take more challenging tasks.” (S12)*

This response suggested how students view autonomy as something developed through concrete actions rather than as a fixed trait. For most respondents, learner autonomy was described as a process of actively planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning, which enabled them to gain a sense of control and accomplishment. At the same time, three participants (S25, S20, and S4) highlighted that autonomy also involved a degree of interdependence, where they could choose to work independently or seek support from teachers and peers when needed. Together, these perspectives suggest that students perceive autonomy not simply as freedom from guidance, but as the ability to exercise judgement over when and how to take responsibility for their learning, thereby strengthening their self-confidence and capacity for self-directed study.

In contrast to the above excerpt, three respondents (S2, S18, and S22) believed that they are scared of doing the things on their own which means they had low self-efficacy, as one respondent reported: *‘I'm scared to try new tasks which are not assigned to us, because of having fear inside of making mistakes’(S2)*. This response emphasizes the ways in which self-efficacy has an effect on a learner's approach towards tasks, readiness to take charge and ultimately academic performance.

### **Technical Skill**



Technical Skill also emerged as a main theme from the interview data. This theme was defined through three sub-themes: (1) Digital Literacy, (2) Online Communication and Collaboration, and (3) Technological Self-Efficacy. The data exposed altering levels of participants' technical skills across these three areas. These skills appeared to persuade how students accessed resources, engaged with peers and teachers, and managed their own learning in this study.

The findings demonstrated that among students' beliefs, this view was less prevalent than the psychological view. One respondent (S7) believed he required to advance his level of LA provided evidence for this point of view. He remarked that he needed to have seeking and communication skills and that he thought his learning abilities would sustain the growth of LA. *'Alternatively, I may use the brainstorming technique to generate ideas on my own. For instance, I outline key concepts after reading.'*

Digital Literacy emerged as a sub-theme within the broader theme of Technical Skills. This sub-theme was drawn from participants' descriptions of how they use digital tools to support their studies, organize their time and exercise greater self-control. Three respondents (S14, S22, and S19) noted that incorporating technology into their learning practices improved efficiency and independence. As one respondent (S22) reported:

*"Most of the time, I use various apps while doing my assignments, for example, Google Calendar which serves as the study reminders. These types of apps help me a lot to save my time."* (S22)

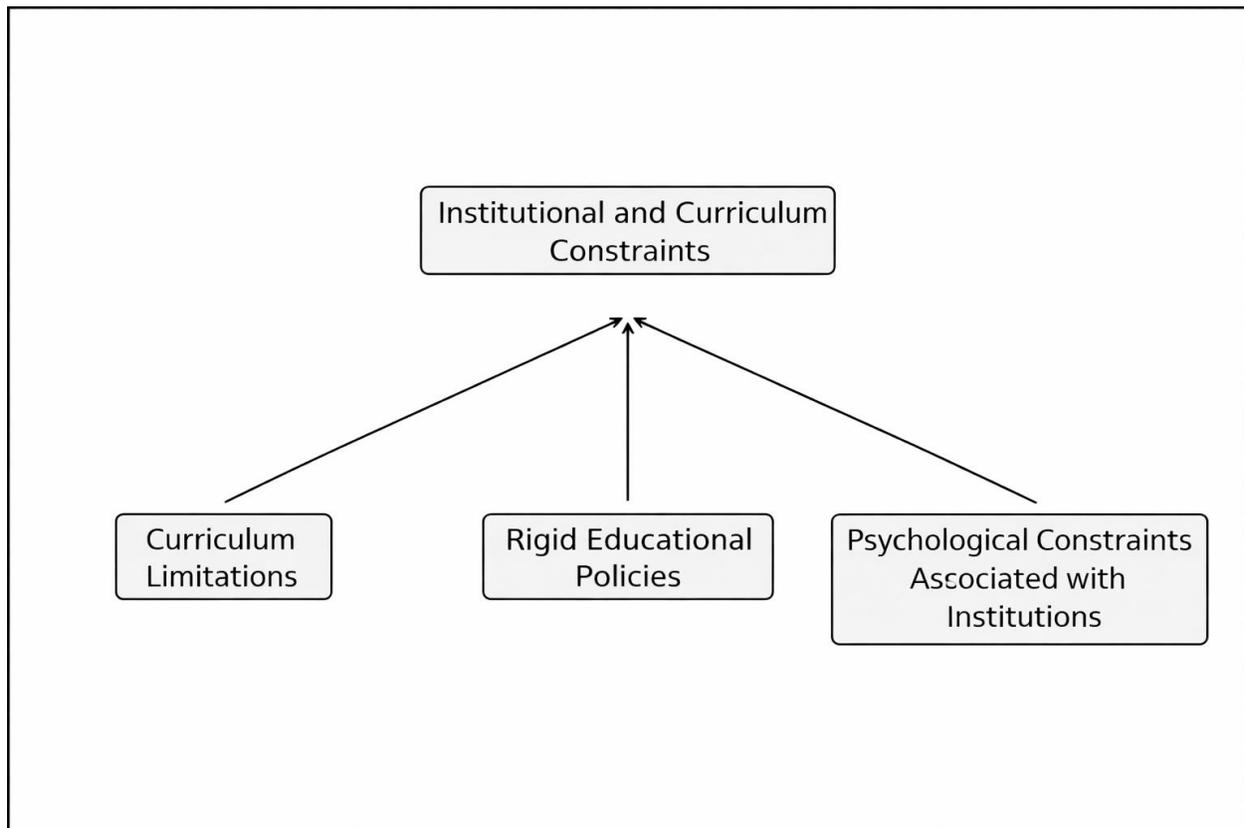
This response demonstrates how digital literacy can improve learners' capability to map, control and supervise their own learning — key fundamentals of learner autonomy. The learners efficiently incorporate proficiency of digital information into their learning, increasing self-control and time management. This digital literacy helps the learners to self evaluate and monitor their progress, increasing their autonomy and it is because they can plan and monitor their progress on their own, the student successfully incorporates technology into their learning process, enhancing autonomy and academic performance, not only this but they also improve time management and self-regulation. Similarly, three respondents (S25, S18, S15)

narrated that knowledge of digital world enhances their academic performance in a very well manner, as one of the respondent stated:

*‘ Usually I feel no difficulty in completing my assignments, because most of the time I work independently through various online resources which help me to cover my topics. I even assist my classmates with digital platform difficulties. ’(S18)*

This response demonstrates a strong level of learner autonomy supported by digital literacy. By independently using online resources to complete assignments, they show initiative, self-reliance and the ability to manage their own learning without heavy teacher input. Their readiness to help colleagues with digital platforms further indicates both confidence in their technical skills and a combined orientation. This grouping of autonomous learning and peer hold up reflects not only high digital capability but also self-efficacy and responsibility—key characteristics of autonomous learners that add to better academic performance.

### Institutional and curriculum constraints



Another central and frequent theme that emerge from the interview data was Institutional and curriculum constraint which was discovered from respondents’ references to different limitations to the development of LA. These were about students, instructors, and the educational system. Their beliefs associated with various LA viewpoints. Several participants (S7, S20 and S5) shared their views about learner autonomy stand a similarity to psychological perspective, demonstrating suitable essentials. For instance, (S7) identified, *'hesitation in making choices, I mean anxiety regarding failure'*, at the same time as (S5)

highlighted *'lack of consistency'* as barrier, implying that her effort was limiting LA progress, at other place she continued:

*'When parents direct their children in everything—if the child does not want to do his homework, let him be, because he will be penalized by the teacher for ignoring his homework and then realize the consequences and take responsibility. Teachers may additionally impede learner autonomy by giving a lot of projects and homework tasks without giving students the opportunity to share their opinions.'* (S5)

This response highlights how planned tasks and home works can bound opportunities for autonomous analysis and personalization of learning. These constraints bound learner autonomy, which can hinder the growth of critical thinking skills and have a negative effect on overall academic performance. Similarly, another respondent shared the same idea as:

*'Educational policies give teachers less flexibility to adapt lesson plans or create new plans further than the typical curriculum... students often accept a one-size-fits-all approach that does not talk to different learning requirements.'* (S20)

This response highlights that educational policy is deficient in flexibility, compelling educators to severely stick to approved curricula. This standardized approach may bound both teachers' and students' capability to contribute in adaptive, student-centered approach. Moreover, these approaches are significant for rising autonomy and improving academic performance. Moreover, the importance on consistent evaluation, driven by educational constraints, often prioritizes traditional method of learning over theoretical understanding. This narrow approach bounds students' autonomy and which may result in poorer performance in real-world learning, as shared by one of the respondents:

*'In the classroom, we are limited to grammar. As a Sindhi speaker, I avoid rigorous grammar and instead concentrate on the past or present tense. Consequently, I feel like the English curriculum should be flexible.'* (S4)

The data indicated that impediments to students' beliefs were connected to their psychology, including lack of effort, poor decision-making skills, and low confidence. Over-interference by teachers was perceived as a barrier to LA growth in students' beliefs. Students questioned the curriculum and teachers' explanations in university. These findings highlight the significance of psychological factors in LA development for students and offer implications for future research in University of Sindh

## **DISCUSSION**

The data revealed that learner autonomy is based on the psychological characteristics of the participants such as, intrinsic motivation, self-confidence and self direction. The data also revealed the importance of disciplined mind, controlling one's regulation in learning and it represents that start of autonomy which is psychological readiness. However, these features play a very important role in academic growth.

The qualitative findings also point out that learner autonomy is not only a set of obvious behaviours but also ingrained in students' inner temperament Motivation, self-confidence, and self-regulation appeared as opening qualities that allow learners to take charge of their educational experiences. Participants of the present study repeatedly highlighted the importance of sustaining the positive mindset by following discipline, and exercising affecting control when facing academic disputes. These psychological characteristics work as a policy from which autonomous behaviours—such as planning, goal setting, and planned study—can expand.

Simultaneously, few other participants questioned whether motivation and self-discipline independently were sufficient to reach autonomy. While some other participants reported that other characteristics such as supportive teachers, entrée to resources, or clear institutional management—were similarly significant for filling self-regulated behaviours. Others reported that even if they are having high motivation but burden of heavy workloads, nervousness, or a be deficient in of confidence from time to time do not permit them from put into effect complete autonomy. These opposing views of the participants emphasize that psychological features form the primary groundwork but these features unaided may not guide to autonomous behaviour, it need enabling surroundings as well.

The data also highlighted that learner autonomy include a variety of sensible and intended competencies. These competencies comprise time management, well-organized employ of digital tools, research skills, and various study methods. The findings show that autonomy is not restricted to psychological readiness alone but expand to real, learnable behaviours. Participants described autonomy as a lively procedure connecting the conscious organisation of their study schedules, focused collection and use of online resources, logical expansion of research skills, and the normal submission of well-organized study strategies. These competencies signified the functioning side of autonomy, demonstrating that autonomous learning necessitate more than motivation or self-confidence; it entails a toolkit of behaviours and strategies that can be purposely learned, experienced, and developed. In this sense, autonomy was supposed not only as a mindset but also as a negotiable skill set that supports academic training, autonomous examination, and well-organized knowledge acquisition.

The present study of ESL undergraduate students' beliefs about learner autonomy conducted at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, make known a absolute but multifaceted perceptive of the matter under investigation. Learners usually associate autonomy with psychological readiness, such as motivation and regulation as well as practical competencies like time management, digital literacy, and autonomous study skills. They also distinguish the contextual and political scope of autonomy, demonstrating an understanding of educational structures and their cause on autonomous behaviour.

On the other hand, some respondents hold different viewpoint. A number admit unruly to hold their time effectively, feeling overwhelmed by challenging tasks, or lacking confidence in their digital or research skills. Others distinguished that devoid of obvious direction from teachers or adequate institutional support, it was not easy to distinguish or apply appropriate study techniques on their own. On the other hand, these participants are of view that even having mastery or command over the digital skills but leaner still needs instructions from the teachers to achieve the targeted goal.

These corresponding analyses highlight that while rational and intended competencies can considerably get better autonomy, they are not mechanically acquired; students may need clear instruction, mentoring, or entrée to resources to enlarge and sustain these skills. By uniting these competencies with self-regulatory approach and institutional support, students can modify their target into constant, creative learning practice that get better both engagement and academic performance.

### **Practical Contributions to Higher Education Policy and Teaching Practices**

The findings of the present study highlight that the enhancement of academic performance and the development of learner autonomy necessitate a coordinated and mutually reinforcing approach. The results of the study have profound implications for extensive choice of Pakistan's higher education institutes stakeholders and mainly concerned with ESL and academic growth.

### **Implications for students**

The study reveals that autonomous behaviour from the students is not always manifested, even though many students perceive themselves as autonomous. Autonomy is the set of skills and practices rather than just a mindset. Thus, students need to engage in self –reflection, time, goal setting and independent learning strategies to improve their academic performance. They need to actively seek opportunities and take personal responsibility for their learning experiences to develop autonomy both inside and outside of the classroom. To improve their academic performance, students must recognise that autonomy is a set of skills and practices rather than a mindset.

### **Implications for teachers**

In the development of learner autonomy, teachers play a crucial role. The following are some implications that emerge based on the results.

Educators must receive professional development trainings that teaching mechanisms of creating a structured and supportive learning environment for transferring responsibility from a teacher to student. Moreover, teachers should use strategies that support autonomy, such as promoting students’ choice, voice and self direction. They should create a learning environment that balances both guidance and independence of the students. Moreover, educators must receive training and professional development on how to transition responsibility from teacher to student in a structured and supportive manner and they should create a objective learning environment that provides supervision while allowing learners to be independent.

### **Implications for Curriculum Designers**

Curriculum designers must include practical components in the curriculum that build autonomy. Such as: independent projects, reflective learning journals and project-based activities led by students and can accommodate different learning styles. Assessments should be designed in a way that they allow students to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.

This study suggests evidence-based suggestions for curriculum designers to include more students – centered learning strategies like problem – based learning self directed learning modules and flipped classrooms and project- based learning that promotes critical thinking and introspection can be introduced in the assessment procedures of universities instead of rote memorisation and make sure the assessment methods encourage students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning and also create flexible curricula that accommodate various learning styles and allow for student-led activities.

The study offers curriculum designers evidence-based suggestions for implementing more student-centred learning strategies, including self-directed learning modules, flipped classrooms, and problem-based learning (PBL). And in place of rote memorization, universities can modify their assessment procedures to promote critical thinking, introspection, and project-based learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study set out to explore how undergraduate students at the University of Sindh understand and experience learner autonomy within the broader constrictions of a teacher-centred educational environment. The results of the present study identified that autonomous learning is amalgamation of many components

such as; Psychological willingness, practicing strategies and competencies and favourable environment, learner autonomy is not only the standardized construct. Furthermore, the respondents of the present study continuously linked the emotional and psychological features like motivation, self-assurance, and self-reliance with learner autonomy, which highlights that these psychological characteristics are actually forming the ground for assuming the dependability for learning. Simultaneously, the findings of the study revealed that tangible skills such as digital literacy, institutional strategies and the ability to entrée and assess information autonomously also play an important role in learner autonomy. These tangible skills help many students to engage them in self directed learning, schedule their work, and manage time.

Alternatively, the results of the present study also revealed certain hindrances that actually stop fostering the development of learner autonomy. The respondents of the present study highlighted the constraints in the shape of rigid and fixed curricula, not only this but heavy course outlines and syllabus to be covered in limited time and at last the assessment and evaluation system limit the opportunities of fostering learner autonomy. Moreover, these institutional constraints not only limit learner autonomy but also limit critical thinking of the learners. They rely most of the time on the directions of the teachers and wait for the orders to be followed. These institutional and curriculum hindrances cause psychological barriers for the learners such as low confidence or fear of making mistakes, creating additional barriers to independent behaviour.

Overall, the findings of the present study indicated that in higher educational institutes in Pakistan, developing and practicing learner autonomy alone will not work in a better way but they require dual approach to be followed, firstly, to work on mindsets of the learners associated with learner autonomy and support the learners to develop the skills to work autonomously. Secondly, to take initiative to transform the institutional planned schemes to insert more flexibility and give space and time to learners for their contribution. In this regard, higher institutes like Universities can perform better role by implementing the teaching strategies which are autonomy –oriented. These pedagogies can offer professional certified trainings in digital literacy and in autonomous learning skills. These types of practices should be mandatory for the teachers motivating them to take the role of facilitators rather than directors. By addressing both inner and outer aspects institutions can generate an atmosphere in which learner autonomy becomes both attainable and sustainable, eventually contributing to deeper learning, improved engagement, and improved academic performance among students.

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