Role of learner autonomy in intrinsic motivation in EFL writing

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ABSTRACT

The researchers investigated students' perceptions of various autonomous and nonautonomous activities in the writing class through the semester to examine the relationship between two concepts: autonomy and intrinsic motivation. The sample of this study included twenty university students, who were taught by researchers for the whole semester. This article investigated if and to what degree students' intrinsic motivation and satisfaction with these activities were affected by the independent variables of autonomy and non-autonomy. This study aimed to reveal any potential links between learner autonomy (LA) and academic performance in students' EFL writing classes. A paired sample t-test was used to evaluate whether the differences between the resultant pairs of student perceptions are statistically significant. This study found that students' perceptions of autonomous activities are positive. Besides, autonomous activities helped their performance in such EFL writing contexts. Based on the results of the present study, it is strongly recommended that instructors, curriculum designers, and policymakers incorporate autonomous activities in the teaching process in EFL writing classes. Consequently, students can have an active rather than passive role in EFL writing classroom, where they can effectively contribute to developing the syllabus and curriculum, and thus their intrinsic motivation can be increased and their academic performance in turn can improve (as this motivation develops a sense of ownership and responsibility in students). The findings offer important insights into the necessity of implementing autonomous policies in such EFL writing contexts where traditional methods are still the predominant mode of teaching.

Contribution/ Originality: This study investigates students' perceptions of autonomous and nonautonomous activities simultaneously in EFL contexts for the purpose of examining the relationship between LA and intrinsic motivation and how this relationship affects students' academic performance in writing. The results of this study introduced some very effective autonomous strategies in EFL contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Jordan, the teaching of writing at university level tends to be more classical than interactive. Students' complete exercises from the textbook in the classroom and at home, most of which are traditionally performed by

them. A textbook aims to advance students' performance in writing skills, which has content and exercises that help students write essays effectively. Instructors also follow many approaches in teaching EFL (English as a foreign language) writing at the university level. Most of those approaches tend to be instructor-based. LA is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981). Cotterall (1995) defines this concept (LA) as "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning" (p. 195). In another definition, LA is seen as "related to the strategy of planning, monitoring and self-regulation of motivation" (Uslu & Durak, 2022).

In fact, it is premised that autonomous and non-autonomous practices intrinsically motivate students, and hence their performance can improve. Carreira (2012) argues that this type of motivation (which is, intrinsic motivation) is "highly self-determined: the reason for doing the activity is linked solely to the individuals' positive feelings" (p.193).

This research paper aims at investigating students' perceptions of autonomous and non-autonomous tasks or activities in EFL writing classes at the university level in Jordan. This study draws policymakers' attention to the conclusion that instructors and students should have an active role in suggesting and implementing teaching policies that focus on peer review and collaboration in ways that help promote students' autonomy. Instructors have been increasingly considering autonomous activities associated with peer assessment in EFL writing classes; hence, their ability to design these activities has significantly improved (Meletiadou & Tsagari, 2022). This study investigates this aspect of autonomy and examines one of these motivational orientations, which is intrinsic motivation. In this study, intrinsic motivation is emphasized as an important factor for students' success in academic contexts in Jordan. It should thus be an integral part of the learning process as higher education institutions in Jordan are significantly moving forward to enhance LA in the learning process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been many studies on writing in EFL contexts, (Rababah, 2021; Rababah, 2022; Rababah, Al-Shboul, & Banikalef, 2023). However, they have not primarily focused on LA. The few studies that have investigated LA in EFL contexts, e.g., (Meletiadou & Tsagari, 2022; Uslu & Durak, 2022; Vergara-Morales & Del Valle, 2021), have examined this concept and its implementation only in learning contexts. Holec (1981) presents a concise definition for this notion (LA), which is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). Most studies into LA link this concept 'autonomy' with the 'self' and 'responsibility' concepts. They emphasize the role of how the learner himself/herself becomes responsible for his/her learning and thereby can develop his/her academic performance.

Numerous research studies on LA have highlighted strategies that may be implemented in the classroom to foster autonomy. For example, Dam (2011) states that even though "in an institutional environment, learners are not free to do whatever they wish to do" (p.43), multiple strategies, such as the evaluation strategy and classroom reporting, may be utilized to increase LA. These tactics can assist students in identifying their requirements. This, according to him, might boost not just learning awareness but also self-esteem. This is a very essential consequence in such traditional educational scenarios.

Many studies on LA have revealed promising results based on participants' perceptions. Man, Xu, and O'Toole (2018) reported an exploratory case study of peer feedback among a small group of grad-level (masters) students (only five students) enrolling in the translation studies program at a Chinese university. The data was collected using various sources including participants' drafts with comments on them and also interviews with participants. The researchers demonstrated that the participants were so motivated that they improved their research writing skills (including reflection, revision, critical thinking, and among others) and thus, as they further argued, this motivated these participants to benefit from different sources (e.g., feedback from peers and instructors). However, a larger study Uslu and Durak (2022), which surveyed 335 participants (university students), revealed similar results

showing that self-reliance-based activities help promote LA more than those activities that require teachers' tracking. However, Tajmirriahi and Ehsan (2021) examined learner readiness in L2 writing to explore any potential linkages between LA in writing, academic self-concept (ASC), and academic accomplishment. The results revealed that while participants showed positive attitudes towards LA writing practices to some extent, they were not completely ready to employ those practice strategies in such contexts. They used rating questionnaires and interviews for their data collection. This study included three subsequent stages: preparing 69 EFL students in three full English essay writing sessions; a focus group interview; and multiple regression and correlation analyses.

Many researchers have examined the extent to which autonomous tasks or activities can help motivate learners in different contexts, assuming that autonomy can result in motivation. For example, Vergara-Morales and Del Valle (2021) found that there is a straightforward relationship between psychological needs including autonomy and students' intrinsic motivation, and thus such needs should be highly considered in various activities implemented inside and outside the classroom. Carreira (2012) examined this relationship, employing more reliable tools to find whether (and how) autonomy, (among basic psychological needs), was linked to intrinsic motivation and regulation (motivational orientations) from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory. The study used two scale-rating questionnaires, with the scale of questionnaires from 1 to 4 (not at all true to very true). While the first scale-rating questionnaire was used for measuring psychological needs, the second one for measuring intrinsic motivation and other motivational orientations. The findings of this study support the current study's main assumption that LA has a stronger relationship with intrinsic motivation than any other psychological need.

Unlike previous studies employing questionnaires and interviews, Ceylan (2015) employed a pre-test and post-test experimental design in his study. In this study, the participants were asked to do activities in the classroom at the English Preparatory school at Kocaeli University. Ceylan (2015) found that the differences between the participants' scores in the pre-test and post-test were not statistically different in both the control and experimental groups performing learning activities. However, the treatment was conducted over a short period of time (only two weeks). The short period for this treatment might undermine the validity of the results of this study. Another study with the same design Cömert and Kutlu (2018) used the same experimental design (pre-test and post-test) over a longer time scale (eight weeks). They found that writing tasks conducted through traditional methods and through self-assessment significantly differed in terms of improving students' writing skills. They found that the difference of the mean values in the experimental group and that of the control group was significant. This means that the writing tasks conducted using students' self-assessment were more effective than those tasks traditionally conducted.

It is worth mentioning that autonomy has been investigated not only from students' side but from instructors' perspective as well. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), for instance, examined autonomy from teachers' perspectives (rather than students') using a rating and open-ended questionnaire and interviews in Oman at the Sultan Qabus University English Center. They assumed that teachers' beliefs about autonomy can be one important source for improving LA from the teacher's perspective. However, Meletiadou and Tsagari (2022) who investigated teachers' perceptions about LA, also found that teachers were initially reluctant to use peer assessment in the EFL writing classroom but this attitude started to change during its implementation. Additionally, they reported that peer assessment (PA) facilitated learning processes by making them much easier and thus learners' needs are catered. This contributed to fostering their autonomy.

This study fills gaps in the literature by examining autonomous and non-autonomous activities simultaneously to see whether the differences in the students' perceptions of these types of activities are statistically significant. In addition, most of the previous studies investigated autonomous activities separately from non-autonomous activities in EFL contexts; this study contributes to the literature by examining if there are significant differences between these two types of activities in EFL contexts. Furthermore, as the EFL teaching is characterized mainly by

applying traditional methods, investigating autonomy in such contexts (where classes still tend to be more instructor-centered than student-centered) is an important contribution to literature.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were the focus of this study's investigation:

1. To what extent does LA promote students' intrinsic motivation in EFL writing?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in how participants in Jordan's EFL writing courses perceive autonomous and non-autonomous activities?
3. Do autonomous activities help improve students' performance in EFL writing?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Pilot Study

For the purpose of determining the reliability and validity of this study, the researchers administered a pilot study with a scale-rating questionnaire, given to five students to ensure that the items of this questionnaire were clearly worded and to make sure whether the participants could respond to these items correctly. In addition, the researchers themselves administered this questionnaire to students so that they can ask about any items they did not fully understand.

4.2. Participants

The participants involved in the study were 20 participants from the Department of English at Jadara University in Jordan. They were in their second year. The writing class textbook was based on activities that were based on communicative and traditional approaches. Generally, students showed a good level of proficiency.

4.3. Data Collection

A well-structured questionnaire was employed to make this research more trustworthy by greatly reducing any potential misunderstanding that can arise from respondents using their own language in filling out open-ended surveys. This questionnaire was adapted from Garrett and Shortall (2002), the results of which were obtained with a five-point rating system. The type of scale used in this research was ordinal, where 1 represented the lowest point on the scale, while 5 represented the highest position. This questionnaire had two primary elements, and was structured in a manner to collect both quantitative and qualitative information from participants. The first section was a quantitative data-focused grading system operating on a range of 1 to 5. Respondents were asked to rate their experience on each task they had done by selecting a number from 1 to 5 on the accompanying scale. With the "because" option provided in the survey's second section, they were asked to elicit justifications or arguments. In this method, the researchers wished to acquire a deeper knowledge of the participants' impressions of the activities and guarantee that they had assessed the activities with care. The participants in this study kept the questionnaire sheet until they had completed ratings of all activities throughout the study period.

The second section of the questionnaire employed the qualitative lexical item "because," to probe individuals' attitudes about these pursuits. Therefore, this questionnaire facilitated to get both the quantitative and qualitative data from the participants. Classroom observations were also carried out during the course of the study to observe what was going on.

4.4. Procedures

Similar to Garrett and Shortall (2002) research, participants in this study were given a rating scale questionnaire (See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). While Appendix 1 illustrates the rating scale questionnaire for non-autonomous activities, Appendix 2 is the rating questionnaire for autonomous activities. Participants were

asked to assess the importance of several classroom activities on a scale from 1 to 10. The whole duration of this trial continued for 14 weeks. During this time, each participant took two classes per week for a total of 28 classes. During this period, the participants were directed to do 10 autonomous and 10 non-autonomous activities based on the syllabus schedule. Full instructions on how to fill out this questionnaire were given to those participants. They were instructed on how to rate the activities, using the continuous scale in the questionnaire. Then, items were explained to the participants to ensure they can rate each activity correctly for the sake of increasing the reliability of the results of this study. Thus, while the quantitative information assisted the researchers with interpreting and supporting the findings and assumptions of this study, the qualitative data allowed examining the participants' feedback.

4.5. Coding and Data Analysis

In this study, the perceptions of the participants were examined using a numeric rating scale on a rated questionnaire. The independent variables, which included both autonomous and nonautonomous operations, were coded as follows: N1, N2, N3, N4/ A1, A2, A3, A4 (where N represented non-autonomous activities, and A represented autonomous activities and 1, 2, 3 and 4 represented the item numbers in this questionnaire). Thus, N1 was the first item in non-autonomous activities, while A1 was the first item in autonomous activities.

For the purpose of testing the null hypothesis, and to ensure that there were no mean differences between participants' perceptions of the two types of activities (autonomous and non-autonomous ones), the researchers classified the scaled questions of the questionnaire (ranging from 1 to 5) into two primary sets with 5 and 4 questions respectively. Each section reflected the highest points on the scale, comprising a positive set, where 2 and 1 represented the lowest points on the scale as a negative pair. According to Mackey and Gass (2016) analysis, not all data can be utilized. In other words, just the top and bottom data (numbers) from the participants could be used, so the information in the center (the third column) was disregarded for this study.

Using a paired sample t-test, the researchers evaluated the average discrepancies between the means of autonomous and non-autonomous actions that had good outcomes. In order to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the participants' opinions, the researchers compared the means of negative autonomous tasks with that of negative non-autonomous tasks. In this evaluation, scientists predicted the mean outcomes of autonomous and non-autonomous behaviors using positive and negative data sets, respectively. To determine the standard error of the mean difference, researchers calculated the standard deviation of the differences.

The justification for employing this test (the paired sample t-test) was based on three considerations consistent with the test's assumptions:

1. The dependent variable, the perceptions of the participants, was assessed at the interval level on a continuous numeric rating scale.
2. The independent variable consisted of matched pairs (autonomous and non-autonomous activities).
3. The same participants were exposed to two types of activities so they were surveyed twice on two occasions on the same continuous scale.

The students were also asked to perform the non-autonomous activities from thier curriculum in the classroom. The instructor directed students to specific activities that they performed in the classroom. These activities lacked collaboration, and unlike autonomous activities, students were found unmotivated. The reason was that in these types of activities, the participants worked individually.

To increase the validity and reliability of this research, this study employed various instruments for the purpose of collecting qualitative and quantitative data. It was thus collected through communication with students and observation in the classroom as well as using instrumental methods (rated questionnaire).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 gives information concerning the participants' perceptions of non-autonomous activities. The results reveal that the participants were not much interested in writing about topics previously selected by the instructor. They argued that they did not have sufficient information about these topics. They had much less information about these topics than those topics that they themselves selected. They knew less vocabulary items about such topics than of the topics of their choice.

The second practice was performed traditionally, which was writing on paper using paper and pen. The biggest concern and challenge of such practices was that students found it difficult to write about new ideas and reformulate sentences during the revision process. They were asked to rewrite on their own instead of employing Microsoft features, so that they can learn to edit parts of writing. However, they said that it was an exhausting and time-consuming process.

Table 1. The participants' perceptions of non-autonomous activities.

Scale / Q. Items	Positive		Undecided	Negative	
	5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
N1: It is fun to write about a specific topic suggested by the instructor.	2	7	5	4	2
N2: It is interesting to use traditional methods to find some required information.	2	3	7	6	2
N3: It is fun to receive traditional teacher assessments and correct the errors identified by the instructor.	3	4	5	5	3
N4: It is interesting to solve exercises from the textbook according to the lesson plan.	2	4	6	5	3
Total	27		23	30	
Mean	6.75		5.75	7.5	

The third practice was where the students received comments and feedback from the instructor. The teacher's dependence thus took a larger part when writing using this practice. Students did not negotiate their errors; rather they believed that they sometimes did not understand these comments or how they should rework their writing accordingly. Likewise, the participants were asked to solve the exercises from the textbook. These exercises aimed to direct them to avoid specific errors in their writing. The participants in this study did not show much interest in this exercise. Most of them said that this exercise required a better knowledge of grammar.

Table 2 presents information about the students' (the participants) perceptions of autonomous activities. The autonomous tasks or activities that the participants performed were various, including:

1. Choosing any topic for discussion.
2. Discussing in groups (of two or more) the main challenges when writing or speaking and suggest solutions to these challenges.
3. Using a dictionary to check for specific information (such as the part of speech, spelling, meaning, etc.) and using some educational websites to search for required information.

After these activities, the instructors would grade their writing sample sheets and provide suggestions/feedback. Subsequently, based on the feedback, they would design a class lesson for the class. Table 2 gives information concerning the participants' perceptions of autonomous activities.

Regarding the autonomous activities, participants were very positive. They reported that when they were allowed to select topics of their interest, they could provide better ideas about these topics. The topics they selected were related to their real life and thus they could enthusiastically write about them. Additionally, this way, they could find better ways to find sources to write about their topics. The participants found it very interesting when they performed such types of activities. They also find it interesting to employ technological tools in the classroom.

It helped them to save time and effort as they could use many features in the revision process such as copy and paste or deletion and moving any parts without the need to rewrite the whole essay.

Table 2. The participants' perceptions of autonomous activities.

Scale		Positive		Undecided	Negative	
Q. Items		5	4	3	2	1
A1: It is fun to select a topic for the discussion.		9	4	2	2	3
A2: It is interesting to use technological tools to find some required information.		6	5	3	4	2
A3: It is fun to grade writing sample sheets and provide suggestions/feedback.		5	8	2	3	2
A4: It is interesting to design in groups a lesson plan for the class.		8	4	2	4	2
Total		49		9	22	
Mean		12.25		2.25	5.5	

Based on the participants' responses, grading and peer review tasks also helped students in many respects. The peers could direct them to realize their own errors by looking at their classmates' errors in this type of practice. It thus promoted collaboration. These activities focused on in-class activities rather than homework and gave them opportunity for more collaboration in the classroom. Shen, Bai, and Xue (2020) maintain that peer assessment not only reduces students' dependence on the Regarding the autonomous activities, participants were very positive. They reported that when they were allowed to select topics of their interest, they could provide better ideas about these topics. The topics they selected were related to their real life and thus they could enthusiastically write about them. Additionally, this way, they could find better ways to find sources to write about their topics. The participants found it very interesting when they performed such types of activities. They also find it interesting to employ technological tools in the classroom. It helped them to save time and effort as they could use many features in the revision process such as copy and paste or deletion and moving any parts without the need to rewrite the whole essay.

Based on the participants' responses, grading and peer review tasks also helped students in many respects. The peers could direct them to realize their own errors by looking at their classmates' errors in this type of practice. It thus promoted collaboration. These activities focused on in-class activities rather than homework and gave them opportunity for more collaboration in the classroom. Shen et al. (2020) maintain that peer assessment not only reduces students' dependence on the teacher but also increases their confidence in their learning ability. Therefore, peer assessment can potentially motivate students to develop their performance. Al-Shboul (2022) also proved that motivation is an important psychological factor to achieve success (e.g. improving performance) in the EFL classroom. When they design a lesson plan themselves, students can develop a sense of responsibility. They can become more responsible about what they learn. This helps them understand how the class is managed. They become more aware of the lesson objectives and what activities they perform and how they can perform them. Unlike monitoring and tracking, planning, which is a basic component of metacognition, significantly contributes to LA (Uslu & Durak, 2022). This type of (autonomous) activity creates a challenge for instructors for two reasons: teaching tends to be more classical than interaction-based. Second, the curriculum used at the university encourages non-autonomous activities as it focuses on instructor-students interactions rather than student-student interactions. Designing autonomous activities helps students improve their performance and develop their communication skills.

In Table 1, the figures in the middle (the undecided category) are higher than in those seen in Table 2. This is because participants significantly evaluated the autonomous practices more positively than negatively or undecided. However, participants were undecided about nonautonomous activities far more than autonomous ones. This indicates that participants were much more enthusiastic and motivated in autonomous activities and thus were more

certain to evaluate these practices as positive. Accordingly, the undecided category (column 3) reveals demotivation. Thus, being intrinsically motivated can be one important source for students for having fun. "Learners who have intrinsic motivation might find activities interesting and fun "(Deci and Ryan, 2002) cited in Carreira (2012). These (autonomous) activities enhance ownership which in turn increases intrinsic motivation in students. Ownership was rooted in activities A1 to A4. Table 3 and Table 4 present information about mean, standard deviation (SD), standard error of the mean (SEM), effect size (ES), and P-value.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for students' positive perceptions of nonautonomous and autonomous activities.

Group	Nonautonomous	Autonomous
Mean	6.75	12.25
SD	1.71	0.96
SEM	0.85	0.45
N	4	4
ES	3.75	
P-value	0.004	

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for students' negatives perceptions of nonautonomous and autonomous activities.

Group	Nonautonomous	Autonomous
Mean	7.50	5.50
SD	1.00	0.58
SEM	0.50	0.29
N	4	4
ES	4.26	
P-value	0.002	

With regard to the research questions, the participants' perception of the non-autonomous activities was not equal to that of the autonomous activities average. As illustrated in Table 3 and Table 4, the difference between the averages of positive perceptions between non-autonomous and autonomous was so big that it is statistically significant, where the p-value is 0.004 which is less than the significance level α (0.05). Similarly, it can be seen with the difference between the averages of negative perceptions between non-autonomous and autonomous activities (though it is smaller). That is, the p-value is 0.002 which is also less than the significance level α (0.05). Therefore, the null Hypothesis (H0) is rejected. That is, the participants' perceptions of non-autonomous and autonomous activities are not equal to that of autonomous activities. The observed effect sizes for both groups are 3.57 and 4.26 respectively, which is large. This indicates that the magnitude of the differences between the average of these differences and the expected average of the differences is not small. In addition, as their motivation has significantly increased in autonomous activities, their performance is highly likely to develop in writing.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that intrinsic motivation was significantly associated with the fundamental psychological need, which is autonomy. When autonomous activities are involved in the curriculum and the textbook, students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, and thus writing class becomes interesting and fun for them. This is one source to learn writing effectively, and therefore their academic performance can be improved. Instructors and course designers should focus on these (autonomous) practices of teaching that push students to perform tasks on their own so that they can develop a sense of ownership. This study recommends instructors that they should direct students to go through as many autonomous activities as possible throughout the semester. The instructor should give much more consideration to this type of activities as it helps students develop many aspects of writing. These kinds of activities help students themselves invest their time and abilities to develop their academic performance in writing. This study asserts that while students should have an active role in the teaching process,

instructors' role should not be neglected. Their role should be directed to creating such activities that help promote LA. Thus, instructors' readiness (for contributing to developing LA) can be increased by including various guidelines that help them design various tasks that promote LA in the EFL classroom so that their role (instructors) is not confined to teaching but also developing (designing) materials by suggesting different autonomous activities. The same role can also be extended to students. That is, they should share some teaching responsibilities so that they can constantly have an active role in the classroom. This study revealed that promoting autonomy in learners can help qualify them for collaborative writing in many language courses. Among the most important characteristics of autonomous activities are collaboration, responsibility, and social interaction. They can learn from their own errors (self-learning). The researchers recommend that policymakers and course designers should seriously consider autonomous activities in the curriculum. Autonomous activities such as peer assessment should be an integral part of EFL writing in higher education. Additionally, curriculum designers and instructors should make use of technological tools, including mobiles, Google, online dictionaries, laptops, and social networking websites such as Facebook. They should be incorporated in the curriculum as an important source for performing autonomous activities.

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Appendix 1. The rating scale questionnaire for non-autonomous activities.

Scale / Q. Items	Positive		Undecided	Negative		Provide an explanation
	5	4	3	2	1	
N1: It is fun to write about a specific topic suggested by the instructor.						Because _____
N2: It is interesting to use traditional methods to find some required information.						Because _____ _____
N3: It is fun to receive traditional teacher assessments and correct the errors identified by the instructor.						Because _____ _____
N4: It is interesting to solve exercises from the textbook according to the lesson plan.						Because _____ _____
Total						

Appendix 2. The rating scale questionniare for autonmous activities.

Scale / Q. Items	Positive		Undecided	Negative		Provide an explanation
	5	4	3	2	1	
A1: It is fun to select a topic for the discussion.						Because _____ _____
A2: It is interesting to use yourself technological tools to find some required information.						Because _____ _____
A3: It is fun to grade writing sample sheets and provide suggestions/feedback.						Because _____ _____ __
A4: It is interesting to design in groups a lesson plan for the class.						Because _____ _____ __
Total						