International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies
ISSN(e): 2306-0646
ISSN(p): 2306-9910
DOI: 10.55493/5019.v14i4.5705
Vol. 14, No. 4, 439-459.

URL: www.aessweb.com

Learner autonomy in the Jordanian EFL context: Constraints, culture, and classroom realities

Fatima Abdul Kareem Salman[1+]
Ruba Fahmi Bataineh[2]

[1,2]*Department of Curriculum and Methods of Instruction, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.*
[1]*Email: 2020230129@ses.yu.edu.jo*
[2]*Email: rubab@yu.edu.jo*

(+ Corresponding author)

Article History
Received: 22 July 2025
Revised: 24 September 2025
Accepted: 16 October 2025
Published: 17 November 2025

Keywords
EFL
Gender differences
Jordan
Learner autonomy
Sociocultural factors
Tawjihi

ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy is widely regarded as essential to meaningful language learning, but in contexts shaped by high-stakes tests and strong familial involvement, it often proves elusive. This study explores how twelfth-grade Jordanian EFL students experience and understand autonomy in the shadow of the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (commonly known as the Tawjihi), the high-stakes national exit examination that exerts a pervasive influence over students' future academic trajectories and educational priorities. Drawing on responses from 600 students across six public schools, the study examines how gender and academic stream influence perceptions of autonomy and which factors are most likely to support or constrain it. While internal factors, such as metacognition, critical thinking, and motivation, were rated low, respondents pointed overwhelmingly to environmental and sociocultural pressures, crowded classrooms, peer disengagement, family control, and exam anxiety as major barriers to autonomy. Female students and those enrolled in the scientific stream consistently reported higher levels of learner autonomy, whereas male and literary-stream students conveyed a stronger sense of being externally regulated. The findings underscore that learner autonomy is shaped less by personal disposition than by broader sociocultural and institutional contexts. The authors call for contextually responsive interventions across pedagogy, family engagement, and curriculum.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of the few investigations into learner autonomy among Jordanian EFL twelfth-grade students, analyzing individual, instructional, cultural, and environmental influences. It highlights Jordan's sociocultural specificity, fills a literature gap, and offers practical recommendations for educators and policymakers in exam-oriented, collectivist contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, education systems worldwide have undergone significant philosophical and pedagogical transformations, the most important of which is the shift from viewing the teacher as the sole authority and knowledge transmitter to embracing learner-centered pedagogies, approaches that position learners as active participants in the acquisition and construction of knowledge. This shift transcends mere pedagogical aesthetics to embody a fundamental reconfiguration of the purposes and practices of education itself, particularly in light of globalization, digital transformation, and the growing need for lifelong learning (e.g., Howlett and Waemusa (2019)). Within this evolving landscape, the concept of learner autonomy has become both a theoretical ideal and a practical goal across many disciplines.

In foreign language education, autonomy is recognized as a core instructional goal (Holec, 1981; Little, 2022; Rahmasari, Munir, & Nugroho, 2025), one that transcends linguistic competence to encompass individual learners' ability to manage their own learning in- and outside the formal language classroom. This is especially critical in contexts with limited classroom time and scarce opportunities for real-world language use, where autonomy is not simply beneficial but necessary for sustaining long-term engagement and progress.

The concept of autonomous learning has been popular in language education for decades. Nonetheless, the literature does not offer a single conclusive definition due to its multifaceted and complex nature. Little (1991) defines autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". To Little (2022), learner autonomy denotes "a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate their own learning", whereas Benson (2013) defines it as one's ability to take charge of one's own learning based on his/her desire, ability, and degree of freedom. In these definitions, learner autonomy refers to a learner's ability to take charge of his/her own learning process, set learning goals, select and apply strategies, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes.

However, autonomy is not simply about learning alone or without support but rather about assuming responsibility and exercising agency within a structured and supportive environment (e.g., Salmani Ghasemzadegan, Xodabande, Koleini, and Lotfi Gaskaree (2025)). Cotterall (1995) conceptualizes autonomy as the extent to which learners can apply specific tactics to manage their learning, while Benson (2013) underscores the centrality of control over learning content, method, pace, and evaluation as fundamental to autonomous practice. Autonomy must be both cognitive and metacognitive, argue Ozer and Yukselir (2021) for individual learners to be able to both act and reflect on their actions and decisions in the classroom and beyond (Ozer & Yukselir, 2021).

Learner autonomy is not an innate trait but rather a developmental competence that evolves over time and is heavily influenced by environmental, cultural, and institutional conditions (Holec, 1981) which aligns with the emphasis of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) on the social origins of cognitive development. To Vygotsky, learning occurs through interaction with more capable others and is gradually internalized. Autonomy, thus, is not the absence of guidance but the internalization of regulatory strategies originally modeled in social contexts. This sociocultural view finds further resonance in Dewey (1916) progressive educational philosophy, which foregrounds inquiry-based, experiential learning as central to the cultivation of democratic and reflective individuals. For Dewey, autonomy is not achieved through detachment from structure but rather through sustained engagement in meaningful activity within supportive and intentionally organized educational contexts. Piaget (1957) constructivist theory 1957 complements these perspectives by emphasizing that knowledge is not passively received but rather actively constructed, with autonomy emerging through learners' dynamic interaction with their physical and social environments.

While these theoretical underpinnings provide strong justification for promoting autonomy, the enactment of learner autonomy in pedagogical practice is fraught with complexity, especially in high-stakes, exam-oriented, and culturally collectivist contexts, such as that of Jordan. In such environments, autonomy is often overshadowed by more immediate goals, such as exam performance, curriculum coverage, and adherence to established hierarchies. This is particularly true in the Jordanian educational context, where Grade 12, culminating in the high-stakes standardized nationwide Tawjihi examination, marks a turning point in students' academic and professional futures, as it determines university admission and, by extension, their social and economic trajectories. As a result, the twelfth-grade classroom becomes a site of intense pressure, where the priorities of students, teachers, and parents often align around maximizing test scores, frequently at the expense of fostering independent thinking or reflective learning habits (Chamani, Safaeizadeh, & Xodabande, 2023; Sadeghi & Pourbahram, 2024; Sulis, Mercer, Babic, & Mairitsch, 2023).

Despite curricular documents that call for autonomy and critical thinking, what is prescribed in policy is often undermined in practice by entrenched cultural expectations, structural constraints, and pedagogical traditions. This

disconnect between pedagogical ideals and actual classroom practice is not unique to Jordan. Recent evidence from other EFL contexts confirms that while teachers express strong support for autonomy, the implementation often remains superficial due to time constraints, curriculum rigidity, and insufficient training (Cao, Jeyaraj, & Razali, 2024a; Cao, Jeyaraj, & Razali, 2024b; Rahimjonova, 2025; Susanti, Rachmajanti, & Mustofa, 2023). In the Jordanian context, this global misalignment is further amplified by the systemic pressures of the Tawjihi exam and the enduring emphasis on rote learning, teacher control, and standardized performance.

Globally, the challenge of implementing autonomy-supportive instruction in exam-oriented systems is well documented (e.g., (Basri, 2020; Nanbedeh, 2025; Saani, Shoukat, & Usman, 2024; Salmani Ghasemzadegan et al., 2025; Wang, Luo, Liao, & Zhao, 2024)). For example, Dang (2012) provides a synthesized overview of the theoretical dimensions of learner autonomy and critiques traditional classroom practices that claim to promote autonomy while retaining authoritarian structures. His work presents various models of autonomy and ultimately proposes a theoretical framework that better captures the nuanced, dynamic nature of learner self-regulation. Fedj and Benaissi (2018), drawing on their Algerian context, explore the conceptual variations of autonomy and how it interacts with cultural expectations, particularly in societies where hierarchical teacher–student relationships persist. They emphasize that autonomy must be understood relationally and contextually, rather than imposed as a fixed set of Western-derived practices.

Research has specifically addressed the gap between belief and behavior in relation to learner autonomy. In Jordan, Zreagat and Kaur (2012) found that while university students expressed strong support for the idea of taking responsibility for their own learning, their actual practices remained highly teacher-dependent. This was attributed to longstanding educational habits, teacher-centered instruction, and systemic assessment pressures. Similar patterns have been reported in neighboring regions. Abdel Razeq (2014), studying EFL learners in Palestine, found that students' readiness for autonomy was constrained by their prior schooling experiences. While learners believed they could work independently, few demonstrated the metacognitive or strategic abilities to do so effectively.

Autonomy, in these cases, was not absent in aspiration but underdeveloped in practice, often due to a lack of exposure to autonomy-supportive environments. This aligns with Ardi (2013) findings in Indonesia indicate that tertiary students exhibit moderate levels of out-of-class English learning autonomy but demonstrate low overall strategy use and self-regulation. Such findings suggest that autonomy cannot be assumed to emerge naturally with age or academic advancement but rather requires deliberate scaffolding and explicit instruction in strategy use, reflection, and goal-setting.

Additionally, learner autonomy is not only shaped by pedagogy and policy but also by sociocultural norms and familial structures. In collectivist societies, such as Jordan, family is highly influential in students' academic decisions and daily study habits. The notion of a self-regulating learner can appear at odds with familial expectations of compliance, diligence, and collective achievement. (Gharti, 2019) in the Nepalese context, it was found that despite widespread support for self-directed learning among both teachers and students, deep-rooted social expectations about deference to authority and the role of the family often limit learners' ability to act independently. Moreover, in under-resourced contexts, learner autonomy is often actively discouraged by parents and teachers who equate it with disengagement or lack of discipline (Salmani Ghasemzadegan et al., 2025; Singh & Laudari, 2022).

In Jordan, this cultural tension is amplified during the *Tawjihi* year. Families often provide financial, emotional, and logistical support to ensure their children's success, including hiring private tutors, managing schedules, and regulating study routines. While these practices stem from concern and care, they often inadvertently erode learners' autonomy and sense of responsibility. As Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) argue, excessive parental control, albeit well-intentioned, can impede the development of self-regulation and critical thinking, especially when it undermines opportunities for independent decision-making.

In addition to familial influence, institutional constraints also play a major role. Large class sizes, inflexible curricula, and assessment-driven instruction leave little room for student choice, negotiation, or exploratory learning.

Basri (2020), examining autonomy support in teacher education, emphasizes that teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are mutually reinforcing. Teachers who lack autonomy in their instructional decisions are less likely to cultivate autonomy in their students. Conversely, teacher empowerment and reflective practice are key to creating the conditions in which learners can grow into autonomous agents.

Despite these challenges, empirical research also points to strategies and practices that support the development of autonomy, even in constrained settings. Daflizar (2023) reviews six approaches to fostering autonomy, including resource-based, curriculum-based, and teacher-based strategies, concluding that while the approaches, albeit varied in emphasis, collectively promote learner reflection, goal-setting, and opportunities for strategic decision-making. Similarly, Vuong and Tran (2023) studying the Vietnamese tertiary context, it was found that students who experienced autonomy-supportive teaching, characterized by dialogue, flexibility, and shared decision-making, were more likely to develop autonomous behaviors.

Al-Husban and Tawalbeh (2023) who examined Jordanian EFL teachers' practices in virtual learning environments, reported that while teachers were generally aware of the psychological and motivational aspects of autonomy, they rarely addressed its political or transformative dimensions. Teachers also tended to equate autonomy with confidence and motivation rather than with agency, critical thinking, or curricular negotiation, which suggests that autonomy is often dangerously interpreted in narrow psychological terms rather than as a complex, context-dependent set of practices.

Similarly, Al-Khasawneh, Huwari, Alqaryouti, Alruzzi, and Rababah (2024), studying the Saudi Arabian context, identified both internal (viz., psychological, cognitive, metacognitive) and external (viz., teacher role, task demands, learning environment) factors affecting learner autonomy. Their findings suggest that autonomy is not the result of a single variable but an emergent property of multiple interacting forces, some of which lie within the learner while others are shaped by institutional design and cultural context.

To conceptually capture these interlocking influences, Figure 1 offers a preliminary model situating learner autonomy at the intersection of three broad domains: *individual abilities* (e.g., metacognition, motivation, critical thinking), *environmental conditions* (e.g., classroom resources, teacher practices, peer engagement), and *sociocultural structures* (e.g., familial expectations, high-stakes exams, collective norms). While this schematic does not exhaust the complexities explored in the empirical section, it sets the stage for examining the layered architecture of constraints and affordances shaping learner autonomy. The model will be revisited and expanded later in the discussion section as the findings reveal more specific mechanisms of interaction.

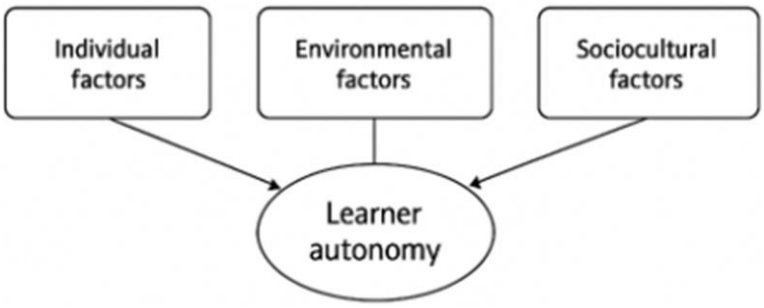

Figure 1. Preliminary conceptual framework of the interaction of individual, environmental, and sociocultural factors shaping learner autonomy.

1.1. Problem, Purpose and Research Questions

Grade 12 occupies a uniquely pivotal position in the Jordanian educational system, as it culminates in the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination, *Tawjihi*, which acts as a national benchmark for university admissions and career prospects. This exam not only determines students' access to higher education but also shapes their social standing and professional futures. As such, the final year of school is often characterized by intense academic pressure, parental involvement, and a rigid focus on exam preparation. Within this environment, opportunities for independent

learning, experimentation, or reflective engagement are frequently minimized. The *Tawjihi*-driven context thus provides a particularly revealing lens through which to examine the challenges and contradictions of fostering learner autonomy in the Jordanian EFL classroom. In light of the literature reviewed above, it is clear that learner autonomy is a desirable, albeit fragile, educational goal, particularly in high-stakes, exam-oriented, and culturally collectivist environments such as Jordan. While autonomy is endorsed in official curricula and valued in educational rhetoric, twelfth-grade students' actual learning conditions may inhibit its development. This is especially true in contexts where instructional practices are dominated by performance metrics, family pressures emphasize external control, and institutional systems reward compliance over critical engagement.

Thus, this study seeks to address a gap in the literature by investigating the factors that constrain learner autonomy among Jordanian EFL Grade 12 students. Unlike most previous research, which focuses on tertiary-level learners, this centers on a pivotal pre-university stage, where habits of dependency may become most deeply ingrained. Against this backdrop, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. Which factors are perceived to have the highest potential effect on Grade 12 students' learning autonomy in the Jordanian EFL context?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in perceived learning autonomy, which can be attributed to gender?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in perceived learner autonomy, which can be attributed to the academic stream (Scientific vs. Literary)?
4. What strategies can be implemented to foster greater learner autonomy among EFL learners in high-pressure educational environments?

By addressing these questions, this research aims not only to describe the current state of learner autonomy among Jordanian secondary-stage students but also to identify points of pedagogical, institutional, and familial intervention that can support the cultivation of more autonomous and self-regulating learners in contexts that do not easily permit such development.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Design

This study adopted a quantitative, survey-based design to investigate the factors perceived to affect learner autonomy by Jordanian EFL twelfth-grade students and to explore how the demographic variables of gender and academic stream may influence those perceptions. By using a questionnaire, the study aimed to capture a broad understanding of autonomy-related behaviors, beliefs, and challenges experienced by students during a pivotal year in their academic journey.

2.2. Instrument Development and Adaptation

The data collection instrument is a structured questionnaire, developed through a multi-stage process grounded in the literature and localized to the Jordanian context. Drawing on an extensive review of the literature on learner autonomy in EFL contexts (e.g., (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2024; Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Daflizar, 2023)) a learner autonomy scale was designed, including key theoretical dimensions within the Learner-Related domain, such as learning strategies, psychological readiness, metacognitive control, cognitive ability, and critical thinking. To ensure cultural and contextual relevance, sections were dedicated to the effect of social and cultural factors, such as family expectations, peer dynamics, and exam-related pressures, and environment-related factors, such as classroom conditions and access to native language input, deemed critical to understanding autonomy in the Jordanian highly collectivist, exam-driven educational landscape, and consistent with the tripartite model of autonomy (individual, environmental, and sociocultural factors) guiding this study. To validate the content of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by a panel of ten domain experts, faculty members from Jordanian universities specializing in applied

linguistics and curriculum development, as well as senior educational supervisors with expertise in English language instruction. The reviewers assessed the questionnaire for clarity, content alignment, face validity, and contextual appropriateness. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to item wording and section organization. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 55 items organized into six thematic domains: *learner-related factors*, *teacher-related factors*, *resources and materials*, *task-related factors*, *environment-related factors*, and *social and cultural background*.

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To ensure score interpretability, all negatively phrased items in the first four domains were reverse-coded so that higher scores consistently reflected greater levels of learner autonomy. In contrast, items in the final two domains, Environment-Related Factors and Social and Cultural Background, were intentionally left unreversed, as higher scores on these dimensions were designed to indicate constraints or negative influences on autonomy.

2.2.1. Validity and Reliability Testing

To assess the construct validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of 30 students drawn from the population of the study but not included in the final dataset. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for each item against its corresponding subscale and overall section. Across all domains, *Learner-Related*, *Teacher-Related*, *Resources and Materials*, *Task-Related*, *Environment-Related*, and *Social and Cultural Background*, the items demonstrated strong and statistically significant correlations with their designated constructs, with all coefficients well above the 0.30 acceptance threshold (Brown, 1983); therefore, no modifications or deletions were necessary. Correlation coefficients across all subscales demonstrated strong internal consistency, with values typically exceeding 0.85, particularly within the sociocultural, environmental, and resources and materials domains.

In terms of reliability, the internal consistency of the instrument was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, while temporal stability was examined through a two-week test–retest procedure. Reliability testing was conducted with the same 30-student pilot group. All subscales demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.88 to 0.96. Specifically, the learning strategies domain achieved an alpha of 0.94, while resources and materials and social and cultural background reached 0.96, indicating excellent reliability. Test–retest reliability coefficients also demonstrated strong temporal stability, with correlation values ranging from 0.78 to 0.92 across all domains. The cognitive abilities subscale, for example, yielded a test–retest coefficient of 0.90, while task-related factors achieved 0.82, confirming the consistency of the questionnaire over time. These figures suggest that the scale is both psychometrically sound and stable across repeated administrations.

To interpret participant responses, mean scores were categorized using the following rubric based on the five-point Likert scale: scores below 1.80 were classified as *very low*, 1.80–2.59 as *low*, 2.60–3.39 as *moderate*, 3.40–4.19 as *high*, and 4.20–5.00 as *very high*. This classification enabled the researchers to discern patterns in learner autonomy and identify areas where participants demonstrated stronger or weaker self-regulatory behaviors.

In sum, the instrument was developed with careful attention to theoretical integrity, cultural relevance, and psychometric robustness. The validation process ensured that the scale was both statistically reliable and pedagogically meaningful, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent stages of data collection and analysis.

For the purposes of this study, the term *domain* refers to one of the six overarching categories of learner autonomy measured in the questionnaire (e.g., learner-related, teacher-related). Within the learner-related domain, *dimensions* represent finer-grained constructs, such as metacognitive ability and critical thinking. The term *section* is used only to describe the organizational layout of the questionnaire.

2.3. Participants

A two-stage sampling procedure was used. First, six secondary schools (viz., Al-Ramtha Secondary School for Girls, Al-Zahraa Secondary School for Girls, Al-Nahda Secondary School for Girls, Al-Ramtha Secondary School for

Boys, Abi Tammam Secondary School for Boys, and Musab bin Umair Secondary School for Boys were purposefully selected from the Ramtha Directorate of Education based on accessibility and school type. Then, within each selected school, a random sample of twelfth-grade students was drawn to ensure variability in gender and academic stream.

The aggregate sample consisted of 600 students, distributed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample distribution.

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Age	17	312	52.0
	18	269	44.8
	19	19	3.2
Gender	Female	300	50.0
	Male	300	50.0
Stream	Scientific	252	42.0
	Literary	348	58.0
English proficiency level (Self-assessed)	Beginner	201	33.5
	Intermediate	339	56.5
	Advanced	60	10.0
Do you take private English lessons?	Yes	415	69.2
	No	185	30.8
Do you have internet access at home?	Yes	554	92.3
	No	46	7.7
Do you have access to English-language resources outside school?	Yes	428	71.3
	No	172	28.7
Who supports your study most?	Parents	372	62.0
	Teacher	162	27.0
	Private tutor	66	11.0
How many hours per week do you spend learning English outside the classroom?	0	56	9.3
	1-2	328	54.7
	3-5	151	25.2
	More than 5	65	10.8

Note: n = 600.

Table 1 shows that the demographic profile of the sample (n = 600) reflects a well-balanced distribution across gender, academic streams, and self-reported proficiency levels. While most students reported access to digital and language resources, their out-of-class engagement with English was reportedly modest. A reported substantial reliance on private tutoring and parental support further highlights the exam-oriented nature of the Jordanian Grade 12 experience, suggesting that learner autonomy may be shaped as much by social structures as by individual traits.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

To address the research questions, the data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations, were calculated to identify the perceived effect of various factors on learner autonomy among EFL twelfth-grade students. These were used to answer the first research question concerning the relative perceived weight of different autonomy-related domains. To examine differences in perceived learner autonomy by gender and academic stream (research questions 2 and 3), independent-samples t-tests were conducted. For each test, the level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.01$. All analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 26), ensuring methodological consistency and rigor in interpreting group differences and patterns across the data.

The fourth research question, addressing potential strategies to foster learner autonomy in high-pressure environments, was informed by patterns observed in the quantitative data, insights from relevant literature, and contextual factors specific to the Jordanian Grade 12 experience, as explicated in the Discussion sections.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

All necessary ethical protocols were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, official approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities. Informed consent was secured from all participating students and their legal guardians, who were provided with clear information about the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures of the study. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and would be used solely for research purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the statistical analyses conducted to answer the research questions. The analysis begins by identifying the factors perceived to most strongly influence learner autonomy among Grade 12 EFL students, followed by comparisons across gender and academic streams. Each research question is addressed in turn using descriptive or inferential statistical procedures as appropriate.

3.1. Results Pertinent to the First Research Question

The first research question aimed to identify the broad domains perceived by participants as having the greatest effect on their ability to act autonomously in learning English. These domains reflect both internal and external dimensions of learner autonomy. To address this question, the researchers calculated the means and standard deviations for each of the six domains comprising the major sections of the questionnaire. The resulting values were ranked in descending order to highlight which factors were perceived as the most and least influential, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of factors perceived to affect learning autonomy by domain.

Rank	Domain	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	Social and Cultural Background	4.06	0.90	High
2	Environment-Related	4.05	0.96	High
3	Learner-Related Factors (Aggregate)	2.34	0.83	Low
4	Resources and Materials	2.30	0.87	Low
5	Teacher-Related	2.28	0.86	Low
6	Task-Related	2.25	0.83	Low

As shown in Table 2, participants perceived social and cultural background and environment-related factors as the most influential determinants of learner autonomy, far more than learner-related factors, resources and materials, teacher-related factors, and task-related factors. This pattern suggests that autonomy is shaped less by individual traits and more by the sociocultural and educational environments in which students operate. In a high-stakes context, such as Grade 12 in Jordan, efforts to promote autonomy must, therefore, extend beyond the learners to engage with the broader social and institutional structures that frame their learning. Overall, the social and cultural background domain was perceived as a major influence on learner autonomy, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the social and cultural background domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
1	The significance of grade twelve negatively affects my confidence in my abilities.	4.09	1.24	High
2	Family skepticism about school quality and past struggles with English influence my confidence.	4.08	1.23	High
3	Most of my peers are not interested in learning English.	4.07	1.26	High
4	My family insists I take private lessons, even if I do not want to do so.	4.06	1.28	High

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
5	Social comparisons within my extended family and neighborhood make me reluctant to act independently and lead me to rely on private tutoring.	4.05	1.28	High
6	Family involvement in planning for private lessons affects my autonomy.	4.04	1.27	High
7	Social pressure and fear of failure in English discourage me from learning independently.	4.04	1.27	High
8	Time constraints and early reliance on parents shape my study habits.	4.02	1.26	High
Overall		4.06	0.90	High

Table 3 shows that the pressure associated with Grade 12 had the strongest perceived effect on students' confidence (M = 4.09, SD = 1.24), while the effect of early reliance on parents was rated slightly lower (M = 4.02, SD = 1.26). The next set of findings examines environment-related factors, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the environment-related factors domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	My friends' lack of interest negatively affects my effort to learn English.	4.08	1.25	High
2	Teacher support for peer learning is needed.	4.07	1.24	High
3	I lack access to native speakers and resources.	4.06	1.26	High
4	I have relied heavily on teachers since childhood.	4.02	1.27	High
5	A crowded and unsupportive classroom environment reduces my motivation for learning English.	4.01	1.23	High
Overall		4.05	0.96	High

Table 4 indicates that *peer disinterest* had the strongest perceived negative effect on students' learning motivation (M = 4.08, SD = 1.25), while *crowded classrooms* were rated slightly lower but still highly influential (M = 4.01, SD = 1.23). Overall, environment-related factors were perceived as a major barrier to learner autonomy. The analysis next turns to the internal dimensions of autonomy captured under learner-related factors, as summarized in Tables 5-10.

Table 5. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of dimensions within the learner-related domain

Rank	Dimension	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	Psychological factors	2.39	0.91	Low
2	Metacognitive abilities	2.36	0.92	Low
3	Critical thinking	2.33	0.91	Low
4	Learning strategies, behaviors, and habits	2.32	0.82	Low
5	Cognitive abilities	2.30	0.91	Low
	Overall	2.34	0.83	Low

Table 5 shows that all five learner-related factors were perceived to have a low effect on learner autonomy, with mean scores tightly clustered between 2.30 and 2.39. Psychological factors ranked highest, while cognitive abilities ranked lowest.

The overall mean score (M = 2.34, SD = 0.83) suggests that participants view internal factors, such as motivation, habits, and thinking skills, as playing a limited role in shaping their autonomy. Table 6 details the items within the learning strategies, behaviors, and habits dimension.

Table 6. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the learning strategies, behaviors, and habits dimension within the learner-related domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	I practice English through conversation, self-study, and grammar and vocabulary building exercises.	2.42	1.03	Low
2	I do English assignments, avoid procrastination, and seek help when needed.	2.38	1.08	Low
3	I use strategies, such as memory tricks and self-assessment to retain information.	2.36	1.10	Low
4	I avoid relying on others to do my assignments.	2.34	1.09	Low
5	I review material and do extra work without being asked to do so.	2.33	1.09	Low
6	I study English with other students, using various sources (e.g., books, movies, the Internet, apps).	2.32	1.06	Low
7	I ask questions and consult fluent speakers when unsure.	2.31	1.02	Low
8	I set my own objectives and look for helpful extra resources.	2.30	1.08	Low
9	I show interest in English-speaking cultures.	2.28	1.08	Low
10	I study English independently, using various sources (e.g., books, movies, the Internet, apps).	2.24	1.03	Low
11	I take notes of new information (e.g., grammatical structures, vocabulary, meanings).	2.22	1.05	Low
Overall		2.32	0.82	Low

Table 6 reveals that students rated the item, *I practice English through conversation, self-study, and grammar and vocabulary building exercises*, highest (M = 2.42, SD = 1.03), while *I take notes of new information (e.g., grammatical structures, vocabulary, meanings)* received the lowest score (M = 2.22, SD = 1.05). These results reinforce the overall perceived low effect of this dimension on learner autonomy. The items within the psychological factors dimension are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the psychological factors dimension within the learner-related domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	My motivation varies depending on how relevant the material is to the test.*.	2.49	1.15	Low
2	I feel confident when using English in class.	2.38	1.09	Low
3	I feel constant pressure and sometimes doubt my English ability.*	2.37	1.10	Low
4	I worry about my performance on Tawjihi and its effect on my university admission.*	2.36	1.09	Low
5	Negative complaints about English influence my motivation for studying.*	2.32	1.16	Low
Overall		2.39	0.91	Low

Note: *:: Negative item.

Table 7 indicates that participants are reportedly *most motivated when material is test-relevant* (M = 2.49, SD = 1.15), while negative attitudes toward English had the least effect on their motivation (M = 2.32, SD = 1.16). Despite slight variation, the overall perception of *psychological factors* remained low. The analysis proceeds to metacognitive abilities, as summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the Metacognitive Abilities dimension within the Learner-Related Domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
1	I reflect on my progress, know my weaknesses, and set clear goals.	2.41	1.12	Low
2	I recognize the importance of English for my academic future.	2.36	1.20	Low
3	I understand why topics are important to learn.	2.34	1.11	Low
4	I seek and create opportunities to use English.	2.33	1.07	Low
	Overall	2.36	0.92	Low

Table 8 shows that participants rated *self-reflection* and *goal-setting* highest (M = 2.41, SD = 1.12), while *actively seeking opportunities to use English* received the lowest score (M = 2.33, SD = 1.07). As with previous domains, *metacognitive abilities* were perceived to have a limited effect. Table 9 presents the results for cognitive abilities.

Table 9. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the cognitive abilities dimension within the learner-related domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
1	I frequently use new vocabulary in writing and speaking.	2.43	1.18	Low
2	I engage with English media and practice pronunciation.	2.34	1.19	Low
3	I reread English textbook passages repeatedly to improve my reading skills.	2.30	1.08	Low
4	I identify language patterns and use English for practical tasks.	2.27	1.11	Low
5	I read texts and apply reading comprehension strategies independently.	2.26	1.05	Low
6	I independently seek out simple listening materials to improve my listening comprehension.	2.22	1.08	Low
Overall		2.30	0.91	Low

Table 9 shows that the highest-rated item was *I frequently use new vocabulary in writing and speaking* (M = 2.43, SD = 1.18), while the lowest, *I independently seek out simple listening materials to improve my listening comprehension*, was rated at 2.22 (SD = 1.08). Overall, *cognitive abilities* were perceived as having a limited effect on learner autonomy. The next set of results, presented in Table 10, examines the critical thinking dimension.

Table 10. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the critical thinking dimension within the learner-related domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	I give examples and attempt paraphrasing, even when it is challenging to do so.	2.36	1.06	Low
2	I integrate information, restructure texts, and explore meanings.	2.35	1.09	Low
3	I recognize multiple ways to express my ideas.	2.34	1.16	Low
4	I evaluate the usefulness of different learning resources before using them to study English.	2.28	1.10	Low
Overall		2.33	0.91	Low

Table 10 shows that students rated their *ability to paraphrase and provide examples* highest (M = 2.36, SD = 1.06), while *evaluating learning resources* was rated lowest (M = 2.28, SD = 1.10). As with previous domains, *critical thinking* was perceived to have a limited role in shaping learner autonomy. Table 11 presents the results for the Resources and Materials domain.

Table 11. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the Resources and Materials Domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard. deviation	Level
1	I do not have adequate access to resources (books, Internet, etc.)*	2.37	1.12	Low
2	Available materials are often inadequate, outdated, or irrelevant*.	2.29	0.97	Low
3	Excessive testing reduces my interest in learning*.	2.25	1.03	Low
Overall		2.30	0.87	Low

Note: *: Negative item.

Table 11 indicates that *lack of access to resources* was perceived as the most pressing issue (M = 2.37, SD = 1.12), while the *effect of excessive testing* was rated lowest (M = 2.25, SD = 1.03). Overall, students viewed *resources and materials* as a minor influence on their autonomy. The items of the Teacher-Related Factors domain are shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the teacher-related factors domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	My teacher helps with goal setting, material selection, and evaluation.	2.36	1.05	Low
2	My teacher models learning and allows independent practice.	2.33	1.027	Low
3	My teacher gives appropriate homework and effective feedback.	2.24	1.09	Low
4	My teacher's assignments promote decision-making, self-assessment, and independent learning.	2.24	1.08	Low
5	My teacher encourages me to learn on my own.	2.24	1.04	Low
Overall		2.28	0.86	Low

Table 12 shows that the highest-rated teacher-related support was *assistance with goal setting and evaluation* (M = 2.36, SD = 1.05), while *direct encouragement for independent learning* received the lowest score (M = 2.24, SD = 1.04). Overall, *teacher-related* factors were perceived to have a limited impact on learner autonomy. Table 13 presents the items of the Task-Related Factors domain.

Table 13. Means, standard deviations, and ranking of the items of the Task-Related Factors Domain.

Rank	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	I work hard on tasks and do my best to accomplish them to the best of my ability.	2.31	1.07	Low
2	Some coursebook content is either irrelevant or too difficult*.	2.30	1.02	Low
3	Tasks rarely spark my interest*.	2.29	1.04	Low
4	I reflect before tasks and collaborate with my peers.	2.11	1.03	Low
Overall		2.25	0.83	Low

Note: *: Negative item.

Table 13 shows that students rated *personal effort on tasks* highest (M = 2.31, SD = 1.07), while *reflecting and collaborating before tasks* received the lowest rating (M = 2.25, SD = 0.83). Overall, Task-Related Factors were perceived as having a limited influence on learner autonomy.

3.2. Results Pertinent to the Second Research Question

To address the second research question, *are there statistically significant differences in perceived learning autonomy, which can be attributed to gender?*, the mean scores and standard deviations for each dimension of the Learner-Related domain (viz., learning strategies, behaviors, and habits, psychological factors, metacognitive abilities, cognitive

abilities, and critical thinking) and for the domains of learner autonomy (viz., *Learner-Related*, *Teacher-Related*, *Resources and Materials*, *Task-Related*, *Environment-Related*, and *Social and Cultural Background*) were calculated for male and female students, as shown in Table 14 which also reports Cohen's *d* values to indicate the practical significance of the observed differences.

Table 14. Means, standard deviations, and Cohen's d values for domains and dimensions of learner autonomy by gender.

Domain	Dimension	Group	Mean	Standard deviation	Cohen's d (Male/Female)
Learner-related	Learning strategies, behaviors, and habits	Male	1.79	0.61	1.70
		Female	2.85	0.64	
	Psychological factors	Male	1.80	0.67	1.70
		Female	2.97	0.71	
	Metacognitive abilities	Male	1.75	0.64	1.78
		Female	2.98	0.74	
	Cognitive abilities	Male	1.75	0.68	1.54
		Female	2.86	0.76	
	Critical thinking	Male	1.77	0.76	1.57
		Female	2.89	0.67	
	Overall	Male	1.78	0.59	1.83
		Female	2.89	0.63	
Teacher-related		Male	1.77	0.70	1.48
		Female	2.79	0.69	
Resources and materials		Male	1.81	0.71	1.37
		Female	2.80	0.74	
Task-related		Male	1.78	0.71	1.34
		Female	2.72	0.65	
Environment-related		Male	4.37	0.92	-0.71
		Female	3.73	0.89	
Social and cultural background		Male	4.38	0.89	-0.78
		Female	3.74	0.79	

Note: Negative Cohen's *d* values indicate that male students scored higher than female students on these domains.

Table 14 shows observed differences between male and female students' mean scores on the domains and dimensions of learner autonomy. These differences consistently favored female students across Learner-Related, Teacher-Related, and Resources and Materials domains, whereas male students reported higher scores on the Environment-Related and Social and Cultural Background domains. The reported Cohen's *d* values (ranging from 1.34 to 1.83) confirm that these gender-based differences are not only statistically significant but also practically large, especially in the dimensions of the Learner-Related domain, such as metacognitive abilities ($d = 1.78$) and psychological factors ($d = 1.70$). To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, independent samples t-tests were conducted, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15. An independent samples t-test the domains and dimensions of learner autonomy by gender.

Domain	Dimension	t-value	df	Sig.
Learner-related	Learning strategies, behaviors, and habits	-20.72	598	0.00
	Psychological factors	-20.78	598	0.00
	Metacognitive abilities	-21.74	598	0.00
	Cognitive abilities	-18.73	598	0.00
	Critical thinking	-19.11	598	0.00
	Overall	-22.50	598	0.00
Teacher-related		-17.93	598	0.00
Resources and materials		-16.66	598	0.00
Task-related factors		-16.96	598	0.00
Environment-related		8.60	598	0.00
Social and cultural background		9.24	598	0.00

Table 15 reveals statistically significant gender-based differences across all dimensions of the domains of learner autonomy. Female students consistently reportedly outperformed their male counterparts in the overall Learner-Related domain and its dimensions: learning strategies, psychological factors, metacognitive and cognitive abilities, and critical thinking. Similarly, female students reported higher autonomy in areas affected by Teacher-Related, Resources and Materials, and Task-Related domains. Conversely, male students scored significantly higher in the Environment-Related and Social and Cultural Background domains, suggesting a stronger perception of external and sociocultural influences on their learning, which underscores the nuanced ways in which gender may shape learners' experiences of autonomy across personal, instructional, and contextual domains.

3.3. Results Pertinent to the Third Research Question

To address the third research question, *are there statistically significant differences in perceived learner autonomy that can be attributed to the academic stream?* The researchers compared the mean scores and standard deviations of students in the Scientific and Literary streams as shown in Table 16, which includes Cohen's *d* values to quantify the magnitude of stream-based differences in perceived autonomy. This analysis aimed to identify potential variation in how learners from different academic backgrounds perceive and experience autonomy in their English language learning.

Table 16. Means, standard deviations, and Cohen's d values for domains and dimensions of learner autonomy by academic stream.

Domain	Dimension	Group	Mean	Standard deviation	Cohen's d (Scientific/Literary)
Learner-related	Learning strategies, behaviors, and habits	Scientific	3.10	0.54	2.74
		Literary	1.76	0.45	
	Psychological factors	Scientific	3.20	0.55	2.41
		Literary	1.79	0.61	
	Metacognitive abilities	Scientific	3.25	0.60	2.87
		Literary	1.72	0.48	
	Cognitive abilities	Scientific	3.20	0.54	3.14
		Literary	1.66	0.45	
	Critical thinking	Scientific	3.17	0.56	2.55
		Literary	1.73	0.57	
	Overall	Scientific	3.16	0.49	3.33
		Literary	1.74	0.38	
Teacher-related		Scientific	3.04	0.63	2.37
		Literary	1.73	0.51	
Resources and materials		Scientific	3.02	0.69	1.94
		Literary	1.79	0.58	
Task-related		Scientific	2.98	0.57	2.35
		Literary	1.72	0.53	
Environment-related		Scientific	3.57	0.89	-0.96
		Literary	4.40	0.84	
Social and cultural background		Scientific	3.55	0.75	-1.14
		Literary	4.43	0.82	

Note: Negative Cohen's *d* values indicate that literary stream students scored higher than scientific-stream students on these domains.

Table 16 shows observed differences in the mean scores of the dimensions of the domains perceived to affect learner autonomy of students in the scientific and literary streams. Effect sizes were also substantial across all learner-related dimensions, with Cohen's *d* values ranging from 2.35 to 3.33, confirming that these stream-based disparities are not only significant but highly meaningful in educational terms. To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, independent samples t-tests were conducted, as shown in Table 17.

Table 17. Independent samples t-test for domains and dimensions of learner autonomy by academic stream.

Domain	Dimension	t-value	df	Sig.
Learner-related	Learning strategies, behaviors, and habits	32.84	598	0.00
	Psychological factors	29.26	598	0.00
	Metacognitive abilities	34.44	598	0.00
	Cognitive abilities	38.01	598	0.00
	Critical thinking	30.82	598	0.00
	Overall	40.14	598	0.00
Teacher-related		28.14	598	0.00
Resources and materials		23.81	598	0.00
Task-related factors		27.79	598	0.00
Environment-related		-11.67	598	0.00
Social and cultural background		-13.35	598	0.00

Table 17 presents strong statistical evidence of significant differences in perceived learner autonomy across academic streams. Within the Learner-Related domain, all five measured dimensions, cognitive and metacognitive abilities, psychological factors, critical thinking, and learning strategies, show large positive t-values, indicating that scientific stream students perceive themselves as more autonomous in these internal abilities. In contrast, the negative t-values for the Environment-Related and Social and Cultural Background domains suggest that literary stream students report being more influenced by contextual and socio-cultural constraints. The consistently significant results across all comparisons ($p < 0.01$) underscore the robustness of these differences and highlight how academic stream affiliation differentially shapes students' perceptions of both internal competencies and external challenges to learner autonomy.

4. DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis of the questionnaire data highlights the perceived significant role of sociocultural context in shaping learner autonomy among Jordanian EFL grade 12 students. The Social and Cultural Background domain received the highest mean score ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.90$), reflecting a strong perceived influence on students' ability to act autonomously. The close range of mean values across the eight items within this factor suggests a consistent perception among respondents.

These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the effect of sociocultural factors on autonomy development (Benson, 2013; Littlewood, 1999). In individualist cultures, where self-direction and independence are encouraged, learners tend to develop greater autonomy. In contrast, the Jordanian context, characterized by collectivist and tribal social structures, prioritizes group conformity and familial involvement, which may inhibit the development of autonomous learning behaviors. This cultural orientation appears to shape students' reliance on external validation and support, ultimately constraining their ability for self-regulated learning.

To effectively foster learner autonomy in collectivist contexts, such as Jordan, it is essential to integrate sociocultural awareness into educational strategies from an early stage. Rather than imposing abrupt shifts toward individualism, autonomy should be cultivated gradually through pedagogical approaches that promote critical thinking, self-initiative, and reflective engagement while remaining sensitive to cultural norms. Oxford (2003) notes that learners who are raised in environments that encourage critical thinking and independent action are more likely to develop autonomous learning behaviors, which emphasizes that autonomy is not solely an individual trait but one shaped by social support and cultural context.

The high mean score observed for sociocultural factors also reflects the substantial influence of families and communities. Parental involvement, in particular, can either constrain or enhance autonomy depending on its nature. Families that emphasize intrinsic motivation, by nurturing curiosity, valuing learning for personal growth, and minimizing external pressures, are more likely to support the development of learner autonomy. As such, such

environments foster self-determination and internal motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017), both of which are essential foundations for autonomous learning.

Moreover, parents are predominantly overprotective or excessively involved in their children's education, which can hinder the development of autonomous learning. This over-involvement often results in learners who rely heavily on external guidance, favoring rote memorization and spoon-feeding over self-directed inquiry. This resonates with earlier research findings that excessive parental control is negatively associated with the development of metacognitive skills, which are critical for learner autonomy (e.g., Pomerantz et al. (2007)).

In the Jordanian context, this pattern appears particularly pronounced based on students' self-reports, which suggest that many parents equate effective learning, especially in the high-stakes Grade 12 year, with direct teacher intervention and support. This often takes the form of hiring private tutors to explain content, guide study routines, and supervise exam preparation. While well-intentioned, such practices can inadvertently undermine students' ability for self-regulation and critical thinking, leading to a dependency that obstructs the autonomy required for effective lifelong learning.

Learners with older siblings or autonomous peers are reported to develop earlier autonomous strategies (e.g., Murray and Fujishima (2013)), highlighting the influential role of the immediate social environment in shaping learner behavior. This provides a meaningful connection between the *Social and Cultural Background* and *Environment-Related* domains of the study, the latter of which recorded a high mean score of 4.05 (SD = 0.96). In particular, self-reports indicating that negative effects of peer attitudes affect learners further underscore the environmental constraints on autonomy, which aligns with Vygotsky (1978) claim that social interaction and environmental context are crucial for cognitive development.

One critical environmental factor, in the Jordanian context, is the highly exam-oriented education system, especially in Grade 12, where national assessments dominate teaching and learning. Such systems often emphasize compliance, rote memorization, and performance over self-directed inquiry, leading to reduced opportunities for students to exercise autonomy. This resonates with research reports (e.g., Benson (2013)) that rigid assessment policies and exam-focused curricula can suppress the development of autonomous learning, especially when learners are socialized into viewing academic success as a function of conformity rather than personal initiative.

The analysis revealed gender-based differences in all learner autonomy domains, with female students consistently reporting higher scores across internal dimensions (viz., learning strategies, psychological readiness, cognitive and metacognitive abilities, and critical thinking). These differences were not only statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) but also substantively large, as reflected in Cohen's d values ranging from 1.34 to 1.78, denoting strong practical effects.

Interestingly, the only domains where male students reported higher scores than their female counterparts were Environment-Related ($d = -0.71$) and Social and Cultural Background ($d = -0.78$), as indicated by the negative Cohen's d values. This reversal highlights that male students perceive greater external and sociocultural constraints on their autonomy. While superficially contradictory, given their greater mobility and independence, this may reflect how institutional discipline, peer influence, and social expectations about masculinity interact to produce forms of disengagement or resistance. In many Jordanian classrooms, male students face stricter behavior management, are more likely to be labeled as unmotivated, and may receive less affective support, leading them to view the learning environment as more alienating or externally controlling.

Importantly, interpreting these gender-based disparities solely through the lens of individual disposition risks obscuring the broader sociocultural ecologies that shape learners' behavior. Female autonomy may emerge not from innate aptitude but from cumulative support structures and constrained social roles that incentivize academic engagement. By contrast, male underperformance may stem not from inability but from unmet affective needs and reduced alignment with school norms. These patterns in student perceptions echo sociocultural perspectives on

learner development (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978) and underscore the need for gender-sensitive pedagogies that respond not just to disparities in performance but also to the structural conditions that cause them.

The statistical analysis also revealed significant differences in perceived learner autonomy between students in the scientific and literary streams. Scientific-stream students consistently reported higher scores across the dimensions of the Learner-Related domain (viz., learning strategies, psychological readiness, metacognitive control, cognitive ability, and critical thinking). These differences were not only statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) but also substantively large, with Cohen's d values ranging from 2.35 to 3.33, reflecting strong effects by educational research standards.

However, this disparity cannot merely be reduced to differences in aptitude or academic disposition. Scientific-stream placement in Jordan is typically contingent on prior academic success, resulting in a selection effect, as students entering this track already have higher academic motivation and are more likely to receive encouragement to develop goal-oriented learning behaviors. In addition, the instructional style in science-focused classrooms often encourages systematic problem-solving and structured self-study, which in turn reinforces autonomy-supportive habits. These findings align with Cotterall (2008) assertion that learner autonomy emerges most readily when academic contexts promote analytical engagement and individual accountability.

In contrast, literary-stream students, while often assumed to have a natural orientation toward languages, reported significantly lower scores across internal domains, which suggests that subject matter alone is insufficient to foster autonomy. Literary-stream instruction in Jordan tends to be content-heavy and exam-focused, emphasizing teacher transmission over learner agency. Moreover, literary-stream students may be positioned within an academic hierarchy that implicitly views them as less capable, reducing opportunities for autonomous initiative.

Notably, the two domains where literary-stream students outperformed their scientific-stream peers were Environment-Related ($d = -0.96$) and Social and Cultural Background ($d = -1.14$), as indicated by the negative Cohen's d values. These results suggest that literary-stream students perceive significantly stronger external and sociocultural constraints on their learning. Possible explanations include greater familial oversight, more limited access to enriching extracurricular environments, and persistent societal messaging about the lower status of literary studies constraints, which may translate into feelings of reduced control or capability, reinforcing learned dependence on teacher support and rote strategies.

Taken together, these findings underscore that autonomy is not evenly distributed across academic tracks but is rather shaped by complex intersections of institutional sorting, pedagogical style, social valuation, and learner expectations. To foster autonomy across streams, educators must recognize the structural asymmetries that shape students' agency and accordingly tailor interventions, providing literary-stream students with strategy training, choice-based tasks, and positive framing of their academic identity.

The fourth research question, *what strategies can be implemented to foster greater learner autonomy among EFL learners in high-pressure educational environments?*, was designed not as a purely exploratory addendum but as a pedagogical application of the preceding empirical findings. The statistical patterns reveal autonomy deficits not only in individual learner behavior (M = 2.34 across the dimensions of the Learner-Related domain but also in Teacher-Related (M = 2.28), Resources and Materials (M = 2.30), and Task-Related domains (M = 2.25), which together point to systemic constraints that call for deliberate pedagogical interventions.

Moreover, the disparities by gender and stream suggest that autonomy cannot be enhanced through universalist prescriptions. Instead, targeted strategies are needed to address the specific constraints experienced by different learner subgroups. For instance, for male students, who reported lower autonomy and higher external constraints (Environment-Related M = 4.37; Social and Cultural Background M = 4.38), interventions may include peer accountability structures, male mentorship programs, or parental engagement initiatives that promote self-regulation rather than compliance. Similarly, for literary-stream learners, whose internal autonomy scores lag significantly

behind those of their scientific counterparts, curricular redesign to include more project-based or dialogic tasks could help foster voice, choice, and ownership.

These strategy proposals are not speculative. They are empirically anchored in the patterns observed and theoretically scaffolded by existing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy (e.g., (Basri, 2020; Oxford, 2003)) and autonomy-supportive instructional practices (e.g., (Daflizar, 2023; Vuong & Tran, 2023)). Therefore, the fourth research question is more a bridge between analysis and application than an afterthought.

Building on the conceptual framing in Figure 1, Figure 2 synthesizes the empirical findings into a fuller model, capturing the ways in which individual, environmental, and sociocultural factors dynamically shape learner autonomy in the Jordanian EFL context.

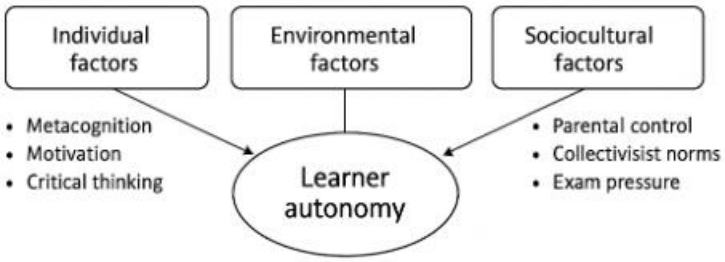

Figure 2. Expanded conceptual model of learning autonomy per the empirical findings in the Grade 12 context.

The expanded model helps illustrate how, from the learners' perspective, autonomy is not merely a matter of motivation or technique but emerges through the interaction of structural access, cultural legitimacy, and ecological support. It clarifies how, according to students' self-reports, the observed disparities across gender and academic stream are shaped less by disposition than by differential exposure to enabling or constraining environments. This framing encourages educators and policymakers to look beyond individual-level solutions and instead reimagine the institutional and sociocultural conditions under which autonomy can genuinely flourish.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study explored the multifaceted constraints on learner autonomy among Jordanian EFL Grade 12 students. The findings reveal that, despite curricular emphasis on self-directed learning, autonomy remains underdeveloped in practice.

While only two domains, Social and Cultural Background (M = 4.06, SD = 0.90; see Table 3) and Environment-Related (M = 4.05, SD = 0.96; see Table 4), were perceived to have a high effect on learner autonomy, these scores reflect perceived external constraints, not autonomy-supportive conditions. All remaining domains, the Learner-Related domain (M = 2.34, SD = 0.83; see Table 2) and its five dimensions (Tables 5–10), Teacher-Related, Resources and Materials, and Task-Related domains (Tables 11–13), were rated as low, suggesting widespread underdevelopment of autonomy. Notably, despite these generally low scores, statistically significant and substantively large differences emerged across gender and academic stream, suggesting that autonomy is experienced unequally based on structural positioning.

Social and cultural background and environment-related factors were perceived as the most significant barriers, while learner-related factors, such as learning strategies, metacognitive abilities, and critical thinking, received lower ratings. Female students and those in the scientific stream reported significantly higher autonomy scores than their male and literary-stream counterparts, suggesting that both social positioning and academic orientation influence learners' engagement with autonomy-related practices.

The analysis revealed that gender- and stream-based disparities in autonomy were not only statistically significant but also substantively large, with Cohen's d values indicating strong effect sizes across internal autonomy

domains. Female students outperformed male peers in all learner-related factors, while male students reported higher levels of external constraints, particularly in environment-related and social and cultural background domains. Similarly, scientific-stream students reported markedly higher scores across internal domains, whereas literary-stream students expressed greater sensitivity to sociocultural and contextual pressures. These findings, based on self-reported perceptions, point to differences in how learners experience institutional and cultural expectations. As such, autonomy is perceived by students not simply as a matter of personal disposition but as closely tied to their reported access to enabling environments, shaped by gendered norms, academic placement, and systemic structures.

In the Jordanian context, Grade 12 represents a pivotal educational and social juncture, dominated by the high-stakes General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (Tawjihi). Although international frameworks increasingly advocate for learner autonomy, its implementation remains constrained by deeply entrenched practices, namely exam-oriented instruction, intensive parental oversight, and a heavy dependence on private tutoring. These practices, while designed to maximize academic achievement, often leave little room for independent inquiry, critical reflection, or self-regulated learning. Within this high-pressure environment, the present study explored how such systemic and sociocultural pressures intersect with individual learner variables, particularly gender and academic stream, to shape students' perceptions and enactments of autonomy.

The findings carry important implications for practice. Fostering learner autonomy in the Jordanian context requires coordinated efforts across pedagogical, institutional, and cultural levels to create conditions that genuinely support learner autonomy. Teachers should be supported in adopting autonomy-promoting pedagogies, including strategy training, reflective tasks, and gradual delegation of responsibility. Curriculum developers must translate policy-level commitments to autonomy into practical, flexible classroom applications. Additionally, parent education programs can help shift familial support from control to empowerment, enabling learners to take greater ownership of their learning. These efforts must be responsive to the specific barriers faced by different learner subgroups, such as providing literary-stream students with scaffolded strategy instruction and reframing their academic identity or addressing male students' experiences of environmental and cultural disempowerment through inclusive classroom practices.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is limited by its reliance on self-reported data from a single educational directorate, which may not fully capture the diversity of learner experiences across Jordan. Future research would benefit from incorporating qualitative methods and longitudinal designs to examine how learner autonomy develops over time and within different institutional and cultural contexts. Comparative studies across gender, stream, and region could further illuminate how structural conditions enable or constrain the emergence of autonomy in high-stakes, collectivist contexts.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.
Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of Yarmouk University, Jordan has granted approval for this study on 21 March 2025 (Ref. No. IRB/2025/712). Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.
Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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