

Research Article

Learner Autonomy in L2 Writing: The Role of Academic Self-Concept and Academic Achievement

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Embracing a learner-based approach in line with a psychological perspective, the present study investigates learner autonomy (LA) in L2 writing with a focus on the role of academic self-concept (ASC) and academic achievement of Iranian English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) university students. The research entailed three interrelated phases: In phase one, the readiness of 69 EFL students in three intact English essay writing classes was measured in terms of certain factors of autonomy in writing. Besides, their ASC was surveyed and the participants were asked to report their overall grade point average (GPA) as an index of their academic achievement. In phase two, a focus group interview was administered. Three emergent themes were derived from their comments, namely, insignificant position of writing, insufficient strategy use, and instructors' unconvincing support for autonomy in writing. The last phase of the study was assigning the findings of phase one to several regression and correlation analyses to investigate the triangular potential relationships of LA in writing, ASC, and academic achievement. The results of the study indicated that, compared with skills and strategy use, EFL university students were most autonomous in their attitudes towards writing, while they did not show a desirable level of ASC. Moreover, ASC and LA in writing proved to have a relatively significant relationship; nonetheless, academic achievement turned out insignificant in relation to them, proving no triangular correlation among the given variables. Implications for EFL teachers and materials developers focused on writing skill will be provided.

1. Introduction

Modern language education is deeply in line with the enactment of learner autonomy (LA) as a significant educational goal. Necessity and relevance of autonomy lie in the growing needs to enhance an equipped learning society, which is ready to be flexible in response to change. To this purpose, it is vital for learners to be autonomous, self-directed, and able to employ personal learning strategies. The concept of LA intends to balance the power in the classroom, respect learners' right to utter their views about the process of learning, and offer choice in learning contents. In fact, it gives language learning process a democratic value, and gives learners the opportunity to take part in planning, monitoring, and assessing their learning [1].

While dimensions and definitions of LA are theoretically and substantially in focus in educational settings, there seems to be a neglected argument that being equally autonomous in all aspects or skills of learning may not happen for all learners. In fact, with the emergence of communication-oriented methods, writing has not received sufficient attention in many EFL contexts [2].

Since writing seems to be a complex skill for both learners and teachers, employing learner autonomy in this area could help them achieve success. To put the constructs of learner autonomy into test, academic self-concept (ASC) might appear an applicable and relevant notion that implies the way students feel about themselves as learners [3, 4] and diverse views about themselves relating to specific academic abilities and perceptions.

Given the need for investigation of LA in different contexts, this study aims to investigate this issue and its potential relationships with ASC and academic achievement among Iranian EFL students.

2. Background of the Study

2.1. Learner Autonomy in Language Learning. Learner autonomy enjoys a growing literature revealing that learners who take responsibility for their own learning gain greater outcomes in acquiring the language [5, 6]. Although there are some obstacles to understanding of LA, there seems to be a general consensus in the definition of LA as learners' taking charge of their own learning [7]. Likewise, LA refers to learners' control over their own learning, which needs their active participation in deciding the time, setting, purpose, or even the methods of the learning [8]. To be more precise, LA can be investigated in terms of 3 different levels of control—namely: control over learning behaviour, psychology of learning, and learning situations [9]. These three levels of control are advantageous in perceiving learners' readiness towards autonomy.

In this respect, it is also evident that learners can show autonomous behaviours in one level more than others. As far as LA is concerned, there are some unobservable dimensions in line with some observable ones. It is also improbable to expect all students to gain control over every dimensions of their learning process and, if not, to consider them nonautonomous [10]. Therefore, it is conceivable to state that LA can be evaluated in terms of learners' degrees of readiness in taking control over their learning.

A number of characteristics for developing LA have been proposed in the past literature. Learners' ability in defining their goals and their out-of-class activities for improving their skills are introduced as two important features of autonomous learners. Their choice of proper strategies that can be modified or adjusted regarding their efficacy is another significant indicative characteristic of LA [7]. Employing metacognitive strategies for boosting LA is an influential factor in helping learners not to lose control over their learning. Some degrees of motivation is required for learners to take part in the decisions regarding the "what" and "how" of their learning. To do so, teachers' role is salient in that they should raise learners' awareness of their learning. For instance, providing learners with online self-access system giving instructions, prompts, and reminders, Reinders [11] observed learners' limited implementation of the materials as well as their lack of sufficient planning, monitoring, and revising due to the fact that learners' were unaware of the contributing role of technology in enhancing their autonomy.

A good context for the operationalization of LA is university in which learners need great deal of academic studies. LA can be a prerequisite for the success of the students in their academic studies since independent learning and self-management are highly suggested. Four steps are provided by Winne et al. [12] as a reasonable starting point for discussing learners' readiness towards employing autonomy. The steps are describing tasks,

arranging objectives and planning, establishing strategies, and metacognitive modification of studying.

There are still essential reasons for enhancing work on writing in EFL classrooms [13]. Specific needs of EFL students including academic study, exam preparation, and making notes persuade them to develop writing skill seriously [14]. Surprisingly, many students are not fully aware of their language needs as well as their weaknesses and strengths [15]. Therefore, they know that their writing ability needs improvement, but they are not aware of the fact that they can simply enhance it with the help and collaboration of their peers. Besides, Everhard-Theophilidou [16] even reported the implementation of peer- and self-assessment in writing skills as successful techniques for enhancing the learners' degrees of autonomy.

Owing to the fact that nurturing autonomy specifically in the realm of writing can be a desirable educational goal among EFL university students, it seems necessary to pay closer attention to writing and LA. Building coherence and cohesion simultaneously makes writing a challenging task in both first and second language. To testify that learners can and do take control over particular aspects of their learning, exploring their readiness in terms of attitudes, skills, and strategy use towards LA in writing can be enlightening. Meanwhile, incorporating ASC, which can serve as a predictor of academic achievement, can lead to more practical implications particularly for EFL university students.

2.2. Studies on Learner Autonomy. Asian countries and Western countries experience autonomy despite the so-called cultural background that can serve as a hindrance in improving autonomy. Collectivism and the acceptance of teacher as the authority, whose face should not be lost, are the two factors that are supposed to obstruct the improvement of autonomy among Asian learners [17]. Acceptance of teacher autonomy cannot be an obstacle in promoting LA, especially when teachers are capable of using simulations for creating influential situations in order to promote language learners' autonomy [17].

Along the rich line of research on LA, Shakeri and Nosratinia [18] examined the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' autonomy and their reading comprehension. Their results revealed that there was not a significant relationship between the aforementioned variables. They claimed that although autonomy may be influential on other skills of language, it does not have an obvious relationship with reading comprehension. In another study, Bagheri and Aeen [19] argued for the efficiency of training autonomy in the writing proficiency of intermediate EFL learners.

Another attempt was made to compare the effects of critical thinking technique and autonomy techniques on EFL learners writing achievement by Mall-Amiri and Sheikhy [20]. They randomly divided 74 homogenized intermediate-level participants into two experimental groups. The results showed a nonsignificant difference between two groups' writing scores, indicating that critical thinking technique and autonomy practice were equally effective on the learners' writing performance.

Autonomy in relation to critical thinking ability and lexical knowledge of Iranian EFL learners was explored through the work of Faramarzi et al. [21]. By administering Pearson's correlation coefficient, an eminent positive relationship between autonomy and lexical knowledge of learners was revealed. They stipulated that learners with high critical thinking ability levels proved to be the most autonomous ones, while learners with high critical ability posited high lexical knowledge.

Abdipoor and Golami [22] tried to discover the practices and strategies autonomous learners pursue. They worked on 60 EFL learners (both autonomous and nonautonomous). Receptive activities were the preference of both autonomous and nonautonomous learners; however, autonomous learners employed activities such as composing emails, writing articles, and chatting with native speakers (productive activities) unlike nonautonomous learners.

In a more recent study, Shen et al. [23] investigated the effects of peer assessment on LA. Seventy English major sophomores from an independent college in China participated in the study receiving traditional teacher feedback versus peer assessment. The results indicate that peer assessment enhanced the students' learner autonomy. Peer assessment significantly reduced learners' dependence on the teacher and boosted the students' confidence in learning ability, while failing to make noticeable improvement in the other aspects of LA.

In another relevant study, Mickwitz and Suojala [1] examined how students develop academic writing skills in two different pedagogical settings of autonomous learning versus a traditional learning environment. Their results revealed that self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs have a greater impact on learning academic writing skills in traditional learning settings than AL settings.

2.3. Academic Self-Concept (ASC) and Academic Achievement. Identifying ASC in terms of two subcomponents of academic confidence as students' feelings and perceptions about their academic competence and academic effort as "students" commitment to and involvement and interest in school work [24] would form an operational definition for ASC. In a similar sense, a major area of attention in line with self-concept is students' past performance experiences. A few models were suggested to determine the relationship between ASC and academic achievement.

The skill development model suggested that although academic achievement affects self-beliefs, self-beliefs do not influence achievement [25]. On the other hand, the self-enhancement model supposed that self-beliefs influence academic achievement, while academic achievement does not affect self-beliefs. Later, a third model claimed that self-concept and academic achievement have a reciprocal relation, reinforcing each other mutually [25]. This so-called reciprocal effects model (REM) argues that former self-concept influences proceeding achievement; a claim that is supported by many studies [3, 26, 27].

Some researchers found that students, who had higher ASC, had higher grades because their ASC helped them to be more autonomous and motivated [28]. A very close connection between ASC and academic achievement has been reported in recent studies [29, 30].

Tamannaifar et al. [31] explored the correlation between self-concept and academic achievement of 400 university students. Overall, no obvious relationship between self-concept and academic achievement of students was seen. An intact EFL intermediate class of 30 students was chosen to determine the relationship between their self-concept and academic achievement by Qalavand et al. [32]. Participants' level of self-concept was uncovered via conducting a questionnaire, and also the correlation of ASC and academic achievement of students was reported as significant.

Meshkat and Hosseini [33] conducted a research on 320 high school students. The students' achievements were measured via an English test and another general test including Persian literature, Arabic, and Theology. A close relationship between academic self-concept and measures of academic achievements (both English and GPA) was found.

Despite the plethora of studies on LA, domain-specificity still remains absent. Therefore, in order to bridge the current gap, this study focused on LA in writing basically within a psychological perspective, considering the probable predictive roles of ASC and academic achievement. As such the following research questions were raised:

- (1) To what extent are Iranian EFL university students autonomous in terms of factors of LA in writing?
- (2) What are Iranian EFL university students' perceptions of ASC?
- (3) Is there any significant relationship among LA in writing, ASC, and academic achievement?

3. Method

3.1. Participants. Sixty-nine male and female Iranian EFL university Bachelor of Arts students majoring in English Translation participated in this study. Using a convenience sampling method, they were members of three intact classes of essay writing courses. Detailed information of participants in terms of age and gender is described in Table 1.

Moreover, six students from the sample, who agreed to participate in the focus group interview voluntarily, were invited to the interview session. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 2.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Questionnaires. Yeung's [34] questionnaire of learner autonomy, which was initially designed with regard to learners' perception of autonomy in writing, was used. Cottrell's [35] learners' readiness for autonomous learning questionnaire was also consulted, and items were borrowed from it. This questionnaire investigates students' readiness for autonomy in writing in terms of attitudes, skills, and strategy use incorporating eleven factors: motivation, self-directed learning, dependence on teacher, self-efficacy, and

TABLE 1: Questionnaire participants.

Participants	Number	Age
Male	14	20–36
Female	55	20–34

TABLE 2: Interview participants.

Participants	Gender	Age
A	Female	31
B	Female	25
C	Female	20
D	Male	22
E	Male	21
F	Male	34

self-regulation (attitudes); seeking peer help and feedback, planning, and revision (skills); and direct strategies for learning writing, metacognitive strategies and knowledge, and social strategies (strategy use).

Thus, 46 items using the Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5 formed this questionnaire. The internal consistency of factors constituting the questionnaire was identified using Cronbach's alpha estimate, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Another questionnaire employed in the study was the original academic self-concept scale designed by Liu and Wang [24]. It consisted of two subscales: academic confidence and academic effort, each including 10 items to collect data on learners' academic self-concept.

3.2.2. Interview. A focus group interview lasting for about 35 minutes was also conducted in a quiet and relaxing environment with six students. The aim of the interview was to obtain an in-depth view of students' reflections on stimulants and barriers of gaining autonomy in writing. In this focus group interview, projective techniques [36] were applied. The focus group interview, conducted in Persian, was recorded and transcribed.

3.3. Procedures. The study was accomplished through three phases in order to reveal EFL university students' readiness in terms of autonomy in writing. To conduct a quantitative survey, two questionnaires of learner autonomy in writing and academic self-concept were administered. Prior to distributing the questionnaires, the researchers won the consent of the course instructors and then the students were informed of the purpose of the study. Subsequently, they were reassured that their information would be kept confidential. Moreover, the students were allowed to use their dictionaries in filling out the questionnaires. Besides, they were requested to report their overall GPA, which was to be used as a measure of their academic achievement.

Upon completion of the data collection, descriptive analyses including mean and SD were administered to measure the participants' level of autonomy in terms of the eleven factors of LA in writing as well as students'

perceptions of ASC with regard to its subscales: academic effort and academic confidence.

For the second phase, in a quiet and naturalistic setting of a classroom, the focus group interview was conducted. The focus group interview was administered in Persian in order to avoid obstacles in revealing the participants' feelings, natural attitudes, and their anxiety regarding their possible oral proficiency problems. An indirect way of exploring the participants' reflections on the stimulants and barriers of developing LA in writing was employed.

Maintaining a lively discussion, the interviewer tried to serve the role of a facilitator, proven by counting the number of words of each interviewee (A: 875 words, B: 509 words, C: 868 words, D: 706 words, E: 434 words, F: 402 words) compared with that of the interviewer (163 words). The interview was recorded, transcribed, and later translated into English by the researchers.

Having administered phases one and two, correlation analyses were employed to investigate potential relationships among LA in writing, ASC, and academic achievement of EFL university students. Afterwards, in order to highlight the likely predicting role of ASC and academic achievement in autonomous learning of writing, regression analyses were utilized.

4. Results

Results of the study are presented in the following manner: First, the findings of the two quantitative surveys will be depicted regarding mean and SD. Subsequently, to gain an in-depth view of EFL students' current situation in terms of LA in writing, some important emergent themes of the focus group interview will be reported. At last, the predictive roles of ASC and academic achievement towards LA in writing as well as their triangular relationship will be investigated to answer the third research question. To do so, the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0 was employed. The raw data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

4.1. Results of Phase One. The first question of this study was "To what extent are EFL university students autonomous in terms of factors of learner autonomy in writing?"

To answer this question, the sample participants were asked about their autonomous writing beliefs and behaviour using a questionnaire. The result showed that our sample was most inclined to have favourable attitudes towards LA in writing (72.1%) followed by their level of strategy use (50.3%); however, they showed the least degree of readiness for the skills related to writing (37.9%). These subcomponents can be broken into smaller elements to facilitate a closer inspection.

From among the factors that make up one's attitudes towards LA in writing, the participants were most ready in terms of self-directedness and self-regulation. They were also least involved in self-efficacy and dependence on teacher. It should be noted that getting low scores on this last point (dependence on teacher) is deemed as favourable and

TABLE 3: Reliability statistics.

Scales	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
Readiness for autonomy in terms of attitudes	0.736	20
Readiness for autonomy in terms of skills	0.709	11
Readiness for autonomy in terms of strategy use	0.807	15
Total	0.817	46

indicates autonomy, while a low level of self-efficacy indicates lack of autonomy. Additionally, low performance on items related to motivation is not desirable because it proves that the learners are uninterested in English writing.

The second component measured in the questionnaire was the learners' readiness in terms of employing the needed skills. Regarding this component, it was shown that the learners mostly employed the revision skill (17.58%); yet they were least ready in their planning before writing (7.22%) that seems to stem from their lack of motivation for writing in a foreign language. Moreover, they were somehow reluctant in asking for peer help (13.12%), which can be due to lack of collaborative techniques among students. Finally, performance on the third component of the questionnaire, i.e., strategy use, portrayed that the participants mostly implemented direct strategies (24.43%) followed by meta-cognitive knowledge and strategies (20.99%) and social strategy use (5.04%). The fact that they represented almost no readiness in using social strategies is an undesirable outcome. Detailed information on eleven factors of learners' readiness towards autonomy in writing is available in Table 4.

The second research question of the study was "What are EFL university students' perceptions of academic self-concept?" The results obtained from the ASC questionnaire are displayed in Table 5. Learners' performance on its two subscales is also presented showing the extent to which the participants had ASC and put effort in their writing activities and projects.

Table 5 reveals that the learners in this study had the same perception of their confidence and effort in academic work because the means for the two subscales were roughly the same. Yet, it is essential to decide whether this level of perception was high enough to be desirable for an EFL university student or not. It is evident that the mean score for the group was not favourable because it is far from the maximum possible mean ($m = 100$). And the mode indicates that most of the subjects received an almost low score on the questionnaire and a middle score on each subsection.

4.2. Results of Phase Two. Having analysed the quantitative data, the researcher described the results of the focus group interview in terms of three themes emerging from EFL learners' transcribed assertions. The themes were reported as follows: insignificant position of writing, insufficient strategy use, and instructors' inadequate support for LA in writing.

Having been asked to mention the most important English skill, EFL students showed no serious interest towards writing. Students D and F posited listening as their first priority. Other students (A, B, C, D, E) chose speaking

TABLE 4: Descriptive statistics for all variables on the LA questionnaire.

Factors of LA in writing	Mean	SD
Attitudes	72.06	6.31
Self-directedness	21.33	2.85
Motivation	12	1.94
Dependence on teacher	10.88	2.31
Self-efficacy	10.09	1.98
Self-regulation	17.75	2.67
Skills	37.91	5.74
Seeking peer help	13.12	3.11
Planning	7.22	1.58
Revision	17.58	2.88
Strategy use	50.32	5.89
Direct strategies	24.43	3.62
Social strategies	5.04	1.92
Metacognitive knowledge and strategies	20.99	3.27

to take precedence over other skills. In this respect student A asserted:

Speaking as a communication tool proves to be the most efficient skill even in EFL context of Iran; therefore, writing is not my first priority among English skills.

While the low significance of writing among the interviewees was obvious, student C acknowledged that she practiced English writing only if she had to. She stated:

I only write my assignments in English. I have never employed English writing via my cell phone or on the Internet and I don't have motivation to achieve writing proficiency, either.

The interviewer tried to direct the discussion implicitly to find out the students' personal tendencies of writing as well as their awareness of general writing strategies. To do so, the interviewees were asked to explain their own tendencies of writing. Student C described her trend as follows:

Depending on the topic, I write whatever comes to my mind. I don't stop myself identifying parts of essay. I just keep writing. Then, I investigate my draft to organize it in an appropriate style by removing some sentences or changing some lexical items in order to fit the components of an essay.

Student F confirmed his classmate's remarks while emphasizing the point that he was unwilling to specify the components of an essay beforehand. He noted:

TABLE 5: Descriptive statistics for the ASC questionnaire.

	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Mode
Academic self-concept	64.51	6.04	50	81	60
Academic confidence	32.06	3.72	23	41	32
Academic effort	32.45	3.84	24	43	35

I often think of a framework for my essay and later I define its parts as introduction, body, and conclusion, but I do all these processes in my mind.

Considering the macro skills of writing, students revealed nothing more than planning and revision, ignoring chances for peer help and feedback. The crucial role of teachers in promoting LA was also pointed out. Teachers can foster LA by supporting students' attitudes towards autonomy, giving proper feedback, and improving students' level of participation in classroom activities as well as valuing freedom of choice. In this regard, student B announced her complaint about some instructors' lack of attention to students' interests in choosing essay topics. She added:

Some instructors merely focused on prefabricated sentences about limited topics and now if I am asked to write a piece of writing I can remember only those pre-determined patterns.

Her remarks reveal an important reality that nurturing students' creativity in the process of producing an essay and support for their independence remain neglected in EFL classrooms. In the same sense, student F pointed to the imposed topics as a barrier in improving LA in writing. He also acknowledged his classmates' remarks, regarding prefabricated sentences as an obstacle in developing writing skill. Student C expressed self-assurance as a prerequisite of LA in writing. She stipulated:

Instructors pose limitations on our work by confining our mind to some strict frameworks of writing. We need more freedom in choosing essay topics as well as handling the process of our writings. These restrictions reduce our self-confidence in writing.

Student E levelled another criticism by mentioning the point:

Instead of practicing writing, our instructors mostly lecture about writing.

Holding a psychological view, student D pointed out:

I am not encouraged enough to write on my own. I suggest group work to prepare a more convenient and motivating atmosphere specifically for weak students in the writing classes.

Student E evaluated their situation as follows:

We are expected to copy our instructors' outlines and prefabricated sentences. We also should stick to teachers' suggested book to achieve a good grade.

4.3. Results of Phase Three. The third research question was "Is there any significant relationship among learner autonomy in writing, ASC, and academic achievement?"

To answer this question, a standard multiple regression was performed between autonomy in writing as the dependent variable and academic achievement and ASC as the independent variables. The sample size ($N=69$) was considered roughly enough for the analysis following Stevens' (1996) recommendation ($N > 50 + 8m$). Analysis was performed using *SPSS REGRESSION* and *SPSS EXPLORE* for evaluation of assumptions. Initially, the data were checked for the assumptions of multiple regressions (multicollinearity, singularity, outliers, and normality). There were two outliers who were deleted from the analysis. No problems were found in the data considering other assumptions.

The correlation between LA in writing and academic achievement was 0.02, which proves that there was almost no relationship between these two variables. The correlation between LA in writing and ASC was 0.38, which is considered as medium. And the correlation between academic achievement and ASC was 0.03, which was too low, suggesting that the two variables were independent and did not affect each other. The coefficients of correlation demonstrate that while one's academic achievement could not be used to predict their autonomy in writing, ASC had that predicting power to a medium extent.

To assess the statistical significance of the results, ANOVA estimates had to be checked. The information provided in Table 6 reveals that, at the $p < 0.05$ level, the contribution of learners' ASC and their academic achievement to their autonomy in writing was statistically significant ($F=0.5.81$, $p=0.005$); and from the correlations among the variables, it is obvious that the one variable that contributed to LA was ASC and not achievement.

To further compare the two independent variables with respect to their predicting power, beta values (β) were helpful indicating that the students' ASC significantly outweighed their achievement in leading to LA in writing. To describe the gains, the variance explained by the other independent variable was controlled.

Since the predicting power of ASC was revealed, it would be interesting to discover which sub-branch of this variable (academic confidence vs. effort) correlated more strongly with autonomy in writing. For this purpose, a Pearson product-moment correlation was calculated, and the results are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 6: Multiple regression of LA, ASC, and academic achievement.

Variables	Autonomy	Self-concept	Achievement	B	Sig
Academic achievement	0.02	0.03		0.01	0.88
Academic self-concept	0.38			0.38	0.001
Means	160.29	64.51	15.79	Intercept = 109.46	
Std. deviation	11.79	6.04	1.40	$R^2 = 0.15$	
				Adjusted $R^2 = 0.12$	
				$R = 0.38$	
				$F = 5.81, \text{Sig} = 0.005$	

TABLE 7: Correlation coefficients for writing and academic achievement variables.

	Academic confidence	Academic effort
LA in writing	0.44	0.17
Significance	0.000	0.15

Academic confidence correlated more strongly with autonomy than did academic effort. While correlation between autonomy and confidence was medium (0.4) and significant (0.000), the one between autonomy and academic effort was low (0.1) and insignificant (0.1).

5. Discussion

Scrutinizing the EFL university students' attitudes towards LA in writing reveals certain strengths and pitfalls of writing courses in the universities. The low extent of dependence on teacher echoes students' satisfactory performance in reaction to the changing environment of learning contexts and paves the way for them to be independent in taking their learning decisions as self-directed learners [37]. Thus, it can be claimed that the low dependence of the learners on the teacher observed in the findings of our study is justifiable because LA is not about the students learning alone, receiving no support from the teacher, rather it is about the teacher transferring the responsibility to the learners and enabling them to set goals for learning, select learning strategies, and evaluate their own learning process [1]. On the other hand, the students' disbeliefs in their capabilities to organize the required actions for their attainments [38] represent acceptable levels of self-efficacy among them. The crucial role of self-efficacy in determining self-regulation attitudes and students' success is acknowledged by several scholars [39, 40].

The low accomplishment of learners in the three factors revealing their readiness in terms of employing writing skills depicted the lowest outcome (37.5%) in comparison with students' attitudes and strategy use. This is in line with undesirable percentages of students' motivation and confirms the learners' obvious reluctance towards writing. Richards [41] referred to this phenomenon as an underestimate of writing by both students and teachers. In fact, the strength of learners' confidence to complete a given task or succeed in a certain learning situation is closely related to their self-efficacy, which, in turn, can be a part of the process of making learners autonomous. Therefore, it can be

suggested that in order to succeed in the cognitively challenging task of writing, learners need to believe in their potentials to reach their goals and succeed; in other words, they need strong self-efficacy beliefs. Hence, our findings stress the importance of this factor in the writing class over students' attitudes and strategy use.

Moreover, acquiring the knowledge about learning processes and themselves as learners or metacognitive knowledge [42] is of paramount significance in the realm of autonomy. Metacognitive learners have the ability to be the most autonomous in terms of taking strategies consciously in the process of learning [1]. In this regard, it can be noted that explicit instruction on metacognitive strategies could develop language learners' metacognition, self-efficacy, and use of learning strategies, hence improving their learning outcomes [43]. This can explain our findings by drawing EFL teachers' attention to the idea that they are expected to provide opportunities for students to practice metacognitive strategies through different forms of reflective practices. Similarly, teachers are advised to provide information about self-assessment and opportunities to practice such metacognitive strategies in learning. The moderate pattern of strategy use among the participants of the study resonates with Liu and Chang's [44] findings. They reported compensation strategies as the EFL university freshmen's most frequently employed tactics, while the social strategies were the least employed ones.

Owing to the importance of autonomy-supportive strategies, instructors' role in developing LA is not negligible. Xu and Xu [45] elaborated on this issue from students' points of view. They argued that even though learners believe in instructors' respective roles as facilitators, inspirers, and peer partners, they expect their teachers to help them develop their strategy use appropriately. Although the actual instructors' practices were not within the focus of this study, the interviewees perceived their teachers' support as unconvincing. In other words, it can be argued that, from the learners' perspective, the implementation of LA in the writing classes in this study was mostly restricted to providing information about certain aspects of LA without providing any opportunity to put it into practice [10].

LA seems inaccessible without the allocation of choice to students. Dexterous teachers are expected to reinforce their learners in making use of the sources and materials independently [7]. Accepting autonomy as a context-specific notion, Nasri et al. [46] suggest that even in the context of Iran where the syllabus and tests are mainly predetermined, autonomy-promoting strategies still provide the instructors

and the learners with an opportunity for negotiating the “how” of learning. To be more precise, their research, unlike this present study, was administered in the rigidly controlled contexts of Iranian high schools. However, it should be noted that university instructors have more freedom in choosing syllabi and supplementary sources in order to add more flesh to their teaching materials as well as their autonomy-supportive tasks. As an illustration, in order not to only lecture about writing, teachers can entangle even disinclined students in the process of essay writing and build positive attitudes and motivation, which are crucial in the process of learning [7, 47]. An acceptable explanation for such a claim is found in the previous literature where Pajares and Valiante [48] reported that students with high writing self-efficacy write better texts and are less anxious about writing than students with low writing self-efficacy. They further argue that students with high writing self-efficacy show low writing apprehension; in other words, they enjoy writing more, whereas students with low writing self-efficacy enjoy writing less and are more apprehensive about writing.

Moreover, Arniaze and Guillen’s [49] results revealing a moderate level of self-concept for EFL university students with different marks are strongly congruent with the result of this study. In investigating the triangular relationship of LA in writing, ASC, and academic achievement, multiple regressions revealed that the correlation between LA in writing and academic achievement was extremely insignificant (0.02). Moreover, the correlation between LA in writing and ASC was medium (0.38), and the correlation between academic achievement and ASC was too low (0.03).

Although many studies displayed the reciprocal relationship of ASC and academic achievement, the results of this research suggested the independent behaviour of these two variables. This can be justified if we consider the fact that ASC, unlike general self-concept, is formed through experiences with the academic environment and is influenced especially by environmental reinforcements and the learners’ knowledge and perceptions about themselves in achieving academic objectives [50]. In essence, ASC is in close relationship with frames of reference or standards against which to judge one’s own traits and accomplishments; hence, social comparison often serves as the most influential source of information for self-concept. It can explain that LA in comparison with frames of reference plays a less significant role in the development of ASC. With regard to educational psychology, ASC can be seen as a huge leap forward especially in motivating learners to promote their academic performance [51, 52], whereas the medium level of ASC in this study, in line with findings of other researchers [4], proved ineffective due to the participants’ unbelievably low levels of motivation (12%). In line with the findings of this study, no significant relationship was found between the practice of autonomy and writing achievements of EFL learners by Mall-Amiri and Sheikhy [20], while in another study Bagheri and Aeen [19] reported that autonomous learners performed significantly better than non-autonomous group in writing proficiency.

Personal construct theory [53] embraces the notion of self-concept, and it is deemed to have a twofold relation with

autonomy while they both support the promotion of each other [54, 55]. Thus, the predicting power of ASC with respect to its subcomponents (academic confidence and effort) portrayed that academic confidence correlated more strongly with LA in writing than did academic effort.

6. Conclusion

Considering a learner-based approach, this study aimed at investigating EFL learners’ readiness in terms of the contributing factors of LA in writing while discovering the role of ASC and academic achievement. The results drawn from the autonomy questionnaire and the focus group interview provide enough evidence to conclude that, in spite of showing acceptable levels of autonomy in their attitudes towards writing, EFL university students are not fully ready to employ strategies and the relevant skills pertinent to writing.

Moreover, the quantitative analysis of ASC questionnaire suggested that although learners hold the same perception of academic confidence and effort, their conception of ASC was not desirable enough for EFL university students. The qualitative analysis revealed the interviewees’ reluctance towards writing, which is in accordance with the results of the autonomy questionnaire indicating the students’ lack of motivation in writing. They were not effectively equipped with writing strategies owing to their instructors’ failure in promoting autonomy.

The poor relationship between ASC and academic achievement and the weak correlation of LA in writing and academic achievement prevent their triangular relationship to be proven. Moderate correlation of LA in writing and ASC and the medium power of ASC in predicting LA in writing were found. The insufficient number of participants does not allow generalizing the findings of the study, but it can have applicable implications for EFL educational policy makers and instructors. They should take students’ and teachers’ considerations into account despite the fact that nurturing LA appears to be challenging. Moreover, teachers can strengthen the students’ LA in writing and their writing self-efficacy by increasing their confidence and allowing them to feel that they have mastered the subject. If learners come to believe that LA is critical to success and added effort will lead to success, they will persist longer and perform better; nonetheless, it must be noted that the goals must be realistic and achievable. Specifically in this study, English essay writing courses need to be revised to remove any external barriers of improving LA. It seems that there is still room for instructors to apply autonomy-supportive strategies as a teaching preference. As Benson [9] mentioned, promoting LA does not necessarily require implicating a new approach of teaching and any practice which enables and encourages the students to take charge of their learning can be considered a tool for autonomy promotion. Moreover, since the teachers’ own autonomous attitudes are likely to influence their classroom exercises towards LA [36], further studies can explore the teachers’ autonomy level and its correlation with students’ conceptions and practices towards LA with a focus on a particular skill. Finally, the existing literature on

LA has not dealt with the potential value of textbooks as a classroom-based approach to the development of LA. Future studies can focus on such issues as promoting autonomy through EFL materials, developing a more accommodative curriculum, and improving teacher readiness to foster LA.

Data Availability

The raw data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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