Saudi female EFL learners' task engagement: the role of agency and self-regulation

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Despite governmental reforms promoting independent learning, Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms continue to use teacher-centered methods that limit learners' autonomy and ability to self-regulate. This study uses a sociocultural framework and a qualitative design that includes semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of first-year Saudi female students enrolled in a university listening and speaking course. It aims to address the lack of qualitative evidence on how learner agency and self-regulation influence task engagement, and to examine how these factors affect student engagement in university-level language classrooms. Thematic analysis (TA) revealed that scaffolded autonomy and emotionally supportive classroom environments were especially influential in reducing anxiety and fostering confidence and independence. Findings show that engagement increases when students are offered structured opportunities to make choices, self-regulate, and learn in emotionally safe environments. Learners demonstrated agency through task choice, role negotiation, and alignment of assignments with personal preferences. Simultaneously, self-regulation was enacted through planning, emotional control, self-monitoring, and adaptive strategies such as peer observation and anxiety management. These findings illustrate that agency and self-regulation are socially constructed processes that flourish through interaction, guided support, and student-centered pedagogy. Addressing gaps in experimental research, the study presents how agency and self-regulation develop in real Saudi EFL classrooms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research underscores that learner agency, autonomy, self-regulation, and personalized strategies play a vital role in enhancing engagement, motivation, and academic success [1]–[4]. These constructs are increasingly recognized not as isolated traits but as interdependent processes that evolve through pedagogical support and social interaction. International studies emphasize that agency is shaped not only by individual capacity but also by social interaction and institutional support [5]. While agency is commonly defined as the capacity to make intentional and informed choices, self-regulation refers to a learner's ability to monitor, control, and direct their own learning processes. Together, these constructs provide the foundation for meaningful engagement in language learning tasks [6].

Closely related is the concept of learner autonomy, described as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" [7]. When autonomy is supported through personalized strategies and adaptive scaffolds, it reinforces agency and cultivates a sense of ownership over learning [1]. While international literature

affirms the significance of these constructs, their development remains underexplored from a sociocultural perspective. In this regard, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [8] offers a powerful theoretical lens for examining how learner agency and self-regulation emerge through guided participation, social interaction, and engagement in meaningful tasks. Central to this framework are the concepts of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding, which both emphasize that learning is most effective when support is tailored to learners' developmental needs and gradually withdrawn as competence increases [9]. While ZPD refers to the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with support, scaffolding is understood as temporary, contingent assistance provided by teachers or peers [10]. More importantly, instruction that fosters autonomy, constructive feedback, and active participation enhances learner engagement.

As van de Pol *et al.* [11] emphasize, extensive research across educational contexts affirms the centrality of scaffolding in promoting meaningful learning and development. However, while prior studies support instructional scaffolding and student-centered learning, most rely on intervention-based, quantitative designs. There remains a notable gap in empirical research exploring how scaffolding specifically facilitates the development of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' oral skills. For example, Razaghi *et al.* [12] highlighted the limited empirical exploration of scaffolding's effectiveness in developing specific components of oral communication, particularly speaking skills like vocabulary, grammar, and interactive discourse. Their study, although intervention-based and quantitative in nature, calls attention to the under-theorization of how scaffolding interacts with learner proficiency and broader classroom dynamics. Complementing these findings, Abdelshaheed [13] demonstrated the value of instructional scaffolding in enhancing Saudi EFL learners' oral proficiency by promoting confidence, ownership, and skill mastery. While not explicitly framed through self-regulation, agency, and scaffolding, findings from these previous studies [12]–[14] implicitly reflect these constructs and underscore the need for further research into how specific scaffolding strategies function across diverse EFL settings. Additionally, growing evidence links self-regulation to adaptability and growth mindset [15] and viewing learners as co-constructors of knowledge [16]. As Bown [17] emphasizes, a student's belief in their own agency is foundational to the development of autonomy, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between self-perception and engaged learning. Collectively, this body of research underscores the value of these concepts in understanding how engagement and independence can be cultivated through socially situated, learner-centered instruction.

However, few studies have explored how agency and self-regulation unfold during real classroom interactions. This gap is especially evident in teacher-centered EFL contexts, where structured support is essential for navigating complex tasks. Existing research often focuses on outcomes or learners' perceptions rather than the interactive processes by which learners develop these capacities in real time. Building on the sociocultural perspective, a qualitative approach is not only appropriate but also necessary, allowing for a deeper exploration of how self-regulation and agency unfold within everyday pedagogical settings. Through the lens of Vygotsky's ZPD, students and teachers co-construct learning through interaction, negotiation, and guided participation. Therefore, this approach aligns with the principles of student-centered pedagogy by prioritizing learners' voices, lived experiences, and emotional engagement.

This study explores how scaffolded autonomy, emotional support, and peer collaboration promote learner agency and self-regulation in authentic Saudi female EFL classroom settings. The contribution is particularly timely within the Saudi educational context, where teacher-centered practices still dominate and limit opportunities for student agency and autonomous learning [18]–[20]. While Saudi learners are expected to develop autonomy and skills such as planning, self-monitoring, and adaptive learning, Alrabai [20] critiques the system's heavy reliance on rote memorization and passive reception of knowledge, arguing for more critical, learner-driven pedagogies. Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi [21] further call for abandoning imported curricula in favor of interactive, locally relevant models. Recent findings by Almarwaey and Al-Hyjji [22] further confirm that Saudi students exhibit only moderate use of self-regulation strategies, pointing to a persistent gap between policy-level aspirations and actual classroom practices. Despite these calls, learner agency and self-regulation in Saudi EFL contexts remain insufficiently explored [19], [21]–[23], particularly in relation to how students navigate emotional and cognitive demands during complex tasks [1], [24].

By applying this perspective to the Saudi EFL context, the study offers fresh insights into educational environments traditionally shaped by teacher-centered instruction. Its primary contribution lies in capturing how self-regulation and agency are socially constructed within classroom settings. Through qualitative methods, including classroom observations and in-depth interviews, the study explores the dynamic interplay between students' expressed experiences and observed behaviors. In doing so, it provides contextually grounded and pedagogically relevant insights that are largely absent from the predominantly experimental literature.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Almarwaey and Al-Hyjji [22] initially hypothesized no significant relationship between self-regulated learning (SRL) and academic achievement, their findings revealed a positive correlation between strong SRL behaviors and higher academic performance. Female students displayed stronger skills in goal setting, time management, and self-evaluation. However, the study also noted that overall academic achievement did not significantly differ by gender. Building on these insights, Alenezi [1] explored personalized learning strategies in Saudi higher education through a mixed-methods approach. The study integrated survey responses from 390 undergraduate students across three universities with qualitative insights from interviews with 18 participants. It aimed to uncover the types of personalized strategies employed, their effects on student performance, and the factors that support their effective use. Findings highlighted the importance of customizing instruction, individual support, and promoting student independence. Although learners appreciated flexible time and agency, adaptive assessments were less commonly applied. The study emphasized that institutions need to provide adequate resources, continuous teacher development, collaborative planning efforts, and regular feedback.

Similarly, Alsawat [25] multiple-case study explored how female Saudi EFL educators and learners navigate classroom engagement, power dynamics, and differentiated instruction (DI). Using interviews, virtual classroom observations, journals, course documents, and questionnaires, the study revealed that teachers' reflective practices and pedagogical flexibility played a key role in shaping students' emotional and cognitive investment. Learner agency was strongly influenced by perceptions of teacher support, task relevance, and emotional safety. The study found that teacher-centered methods limited student agency and led to disengagement, particularly among low-proficiency learners. Emotional barriers—such as anxiety and fear of judgment—further hindered participation. Despite intentions to promote learner-centered instruction, educators lacked the dialogic and scaffolding skills necessary for effective implementation. Most students favored interactive strategies like group work and discussions, while a few demonstrated strong personal agency by actively seeking engagement.

In addition, Alrabai [2] conducted an experimental intervention in Saudi EFL classrooms to examine the impact of autonomy-supportive teaching, grounded in self-determination theory (SDT), on learners' autonomy. The study found that strategies promoting choice, competence, intrinsic motivation, and teacher support significantly enhanced students' perceived autonomy, self-regulation, and engagement. This work highlights the potential of autonomy-supportive practices in shifting Saudi EFL instruction from teacher-centered to learner-centered models. Complementing these findings, Halabi [26] investigated learner autonomy in a Saudi EFL university context and provided valuable insights into both student and teacher perspectives. Using a mixed-methods design, the study found that while both teachers and learners valued autonomy, the former often lacked the practical skills and institutional support to implement it effectively. A notable finding was the mismatch in how autonomy was conceptualized: teachers emphasized responsibility in learning, whereas students associated autonomy with independence and self-expression. The study underscored the value of interactive, collaborative practices in fostering autonomy and identified emotional, linguistic, and structural barriers as major constraints. Furthermore, research by Halabi [26] noted that students' anxiety and lack of communicative opportunities hindered their autonomy, particularly in traditional, exam-oriented classrooms.

Expanding this discussion, a recent qualitative study by Al Sultan et al. [27] examined Saudi female university students' experiences with task-based learning (TBL). Through classroom observations and interviews, the study found that collaborative and interactive tasks fostered increased motivation and engagement. However, challenges such as anxiety, limited vocabulary, and fear of public mistakes were particularly evident at the start of the course. Over time, students developed self-regulatory strategies—including self-reflection, preparation, and peer support—to manage these emotional and linguistic barriers. These findings reinforce the interrelated nature of agency and self-regulation and demonstrate how both constructs contribute to task engagement in language learning contexts.

Furthermore, international literature such as Bown qualitative study [17] emphasizes that autonomy and self-regulation are dynamic, context-dependent processes that evolve within structured environments. As higher education in Saudi Arabia shifts toward autonomous learning models, it is crucial to explore these constructs—especially in gender-segregated EFL classrooms—through qualitative lenses. Although many of the aforementioned studies offer valuable insights, they also reveal key gaps. For example, research by Alsawat [25] found that educators aspired to promote autonomy but often lacked the dialogic and scaffolding skills to align instruction with learner needs, resulting in disengagement and anxiety. Likewise, Almarwaey and Al-Hyjji [22] noted a positive link between SRL and academic success but emphasized the lack of qualitative inquiry into how students implement these strategies. Similarly, Alenezi [1] stressed the importance of personalized learning techniques like goal-setting and learner control in fostering engagement

and independence. These studies highlight the predominance of teacher-centered classrooms and the need for deeper qualitative exploration into learners' lived experiences of agency and self-regulation.

Prior research collectively indicates that students express agency by selecting tasks, adjusting learning pace, and actively seeking feedback, while self-regulation manifests through planning, monitoring, and reflective learning strategies [1], [25]. Emotional safety and teacher support are especially critical in facilitating female student participation, particularly for those who experience anxiety or fear of evaluation. As noted by Alrabai [2], learners with higher self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate consistent engagement and academic success. In parallel, Halabi [26] underscores the need for supportive, student-centered pedagogy to enhance agency and self-regulation, particularly among first-year Saudi EFL learners. Nevertheless, substantial gaps persist—particularly a lack of qualitative research that connects students' beliefs about autonomy to their observable behaviors in classroom settings. Most studies emphasize perceptions rather than lived practices [6], [19]. Bown work [17] supports the current study's approach by highlighting the importance of exploring learners' emotional and cognitive engagement with tasks. However, these findings require contextualization within specific educational environments, such as Saudi Arabia, where higher education is increasingly shifting toward more autonomous learning models. In this context, it is crucial to explore the dynamics of agency and self-regulation—particularly within gender-segregated EFL classrooms and through qualitative inquiry. While rooted in the Saudi cultural and educational landscape, the findings intend to offer broader implications for designing culturally responsive, learner-centered practices that promote autonomy, engagement, and meaningful participation in both local and global EFL settings. The main question guiding this research is, how do Saudi female college EFL learners experience and enact learner agency and self-regulation during task-based activities in a university listening and speaking course?

3. METHOD

3.1. Theoretical framework

The researcher drew on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [8] to explore how learner agency and self-regulation are shaped by students' social and educational contexts. Central to this framework is the idea that learning is mediated through interaction, and cognitive development occurs within the ZPD—the space between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance [28]. In this study, Vygotsky's theory showed how learner agency is not only an internal trait but also a socially constructed process, influenced by peer collaboration, teacher scaffolding, and task design. For first-year Saudi female EFL learners, this perspective highlights the importance of contextual support—such as feedback, emotional safety, and cooperative learning—in helping students develop autonomy and regulate their learning effectively within a supportive environment.

3.2. Research design

Since qualitative research is well-suited for exploring complex phenomena within their natural settings [29], a qualitative approach was employed to investigate how learner agency and self-regulation shape task engagement among first-year Saudi female students enrolled in an EFL listening and speaking course at a Saudi university. Using classroom observations [30] and in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study maintained the flexibility to capture emerging themes and gain a rich understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of students. The study was conducted in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at the researcher's university. All identifying information was withheld for blind review. While this study builds on a previously collected dataset focused on TBL perceptions, it offers a distinct contribution by re-analyzing the data through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. It specifically investigates how learner agency and self-regulation influence first-year Saudi female EFL students' engagement in a university-level language classroom, generating new insights into classroom dynamics and learner behavior.

3.3. Participants

The participants were ten first-year Saudi female EFL students majoring in English language at a Saudi university, aged 18 to 21. All participants were college students, and their marital status was single. Table 1 present participant demographics. They were enrolled in the listening and speaking (1) course, and their self-assessed English proficiency levels were categorized into three groups: low-intermediate, intermediate, and high-intermediate. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures before providing consent. All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. Anonymity is assured. Finally, the researchers interviewed students who were available and willing to participate.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant	Age	English proficiency
Reem	21	High-intermediate
Dua	18	High-intermediate
Maha	19	High-intermediate
Samar	19	Low-intermediate
Sarah	20	Intermediate
Munera	20	High-intermediate
Halah	19	High-intermediate
Habeebah	18	Low-intermediate
Lama	20	High-intermediate
Norah	19	High-intermediate

3.4. Data collection

Data were gathered from the listening and speaking course, a required first-year class for English majors at a Saudi university. The course was conducted over 16 weeks during the second semester of the 2024 academic year. The selected course, a university-level English listening and speaking class, was chosen for its emphasis on language learning and task-based activities—providing a rich context to explore how learner agency and self-regulation influence student engagement. Trained undergraduate research assistants collected the data over eight weeks following instruction in qualitative methods, interview techniques, thematic analysis (TA), data recording protocols, and ethical procedures. Data collection involved 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews and supplementary classroom observations. The 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted in person on the university campus by research assistants between April 22nd and April 29th, 2024. Each interview lasted between 10 and 20 minutes and included 20 open-ended questions addressing participants' backgrounds, learning experiences, classroom engagement, self-regulation strategies, teachers' teaching styles, and challenges. Seven interviews were conducted in Arabic and three in English, with translation provided where necessary. Participants responded in Arabic, English, or a mix of both, enabling them to articulate their thoughts comfortably and authentically.

Participant observations were employed as a complementary qualitative method over eight weeks, beginning at the start of data collection and distributed across various sessions to capture a range of student engagement experiences [30]. Research assistants recorded detailed field notes on participant interactions during class tasks such as presentations, listening exercises, group activities, and classroom discussions. Behaviors and interactions related to learner agency, self-regulation, language use, participation styles, teacher facilitation, and the overall classroom climate were documented. These observations provided contextual insights into how students demonstrated agency and regulated their learning in real-time, enriching and triangulating the data gathered through interviews.

3.5. Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's TA [31] was employed to systematically examine and interpret the data. This qualitative method is effective for identifying patterns of meaning (themes) across participants' responses, offering a nuanced understanding of their perspectives and experiences. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke [31] six-phase framework. Initial familiarization involved reading and rereading interview transcripts and observation notes to gain an in-depth sense of the data before coding. Both descriptive and interpretive codes were generated: descriptive codes reflected participants' own words (e.g., "enjoy", "stress", and "confidence"), while interpretive codes were guided by theoretical constructs such as learner autonomy, self-regulation, scaffolding, and agency. An initial set of 80 codes emerged, with additional codes added during cross-analysis.

Themes and categories were then developed based on patterns within the coded data. Tables, memos, and written field notes were used to organize and compare findings across participants, supporting the identification of connections among themes [32]. During this process, the initial categories "task choice and control" and "navigating individual vs. group tasks" were refined and merged into two broader, more cohesive themes. TA yielded five core themes. While each is analytically distinct, they are deeply interwoven in practice. For clarity, the researcher presents them here in this paper separately while acknowledging their conceptual overlap. Specifically, "supportive classroom environments" and "scaffolded autonomy" both describe external conditions that promote internal regulation and agency. To sharpen the distinction, focus on supportive environments as the emotional and relational climate (e.g., peer support, trust) and scaffolded autonomy as the structured instructional practices that gradually shift responsibility to the learner. To sharpen the distinction between these two themes, supportive classroom environments is understood as the emotional and relational climate that fosters trust and peer support, while scaffolded autonomy refers to structured instructional practices that gradually transfer responsibility to the learner.

TA revealed five significant interconnected themes under the overarching focus on learner agency and self-regulation. First, students demonstrated learner agency in navigating individual versus group tasks. Second, learner agency through task choice and control was evident as students expressed greater motivation and confidence when allowed to select topics and presentation formats. Third, the theme of interdependence between learner agency and self-regulation emerged. Fourth, supportive classroom environments that foster agency and reflection were crucial. Lastly, the data emphasized the importance of scaffolded autonomy, where students appreciated the gradual release of responsibility, balancing freedom with structured guidance to reduce anxiety and build confidence. Table 2 provides a summary of the major themes.

Table 2. Summary of themes related to learner agency and self-regulation

No.	Major themes
1	Learner agency in navigating individual versus group work
2	Learner agency through task choice and control
3	Interdependence of learner agency and self-regulation
4	Supportive classroom environments
5	The importance of scaffolded autonomy

3.6. Researcher reflexivity

The researcher served as the primary instructor of the course, the principal investigator, and the trainer of the undergraduate research assistants who conducted the data collection. These overlapping roles provided deep contextual insight into the pedagogical environment, classroom dynamics, and participant behavior. However, they also required heightened reflexivity to mitigate potential bias and ensure analytical objectivity [33], [34]. To support credibility, data collection was carried out by trained research assistants, while TA involved multiple coders and regular debriefings to ensure consistency and minimize subjective influence. The researcher remained directly involved in the design, interpretation, and reporting of the findings, engaging in continuous self-reflection to examine how her positionality and familiarity with the context could shape meaning-making [33], [34]. These measures, including multiple rounds of analysis and intersubjective review, enhanced the study's trustworthiness by balancing insider knowledge with methodological rigor.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1. Learner agency in navigating individual vs. group tasks

Participants demonstrated flexible and intentional learner agency by adapting their task preferences—choosing between individual or group work—based on their confidence levels, learning styles, and the demands of each task. Participants like Habeebah and Halah preferred working independently, citing control, time management, and the freedom to make personal decisions. As Habeebah noted, "*I like to finish everything. Also, I love to do it by myself*," emphasizing ownership and autonomy. Halah added that group ideas often conflicted with her own, preferring solo work to maintain creative direction. Others, like Sarah, acknowledged that while group work could be enjoyable, it sometimes involved conflict. She stated, "*I prefer to work alone, so I don't depend on anyone*," showing strategic agency. In contrast, Lama valued collaboration, explaining that group work increased her confidence and improved her communication skills.

Six participants, including Reem and Halah, preferred a flexible approach depending on the task. Halah said, "*If it's a big one, yes, I prefer it with a group; if it's small and easy, I prefer it by myself*," reflecting task-specific adaptability. Reem highlighted that group cooperation and shared understanding were key factors in her preference. Similarly, Lama's reflection that group work helped her "improve [her] weaknesses" and made her "excited to participate" shows how peer interaction fosters self-awareness and motivation—key elements of learner agency.

Classroom observations supported these findings. Learners frequently sought peer help, demonstrated leadership during discussions, and engaged more confidently in group settings. The observed moment where a student led the discussion with the phrase "each one can say what she wants" illustrates distributed agency. This student demonstrated leadership as an expression of agency while also fostering a collaborative space where peers could voice their ideas—modeling autonomy and promoting it within the group. The participants' statements and classroom observations strongly demonstrate how group work can promote learner agency and autonomy, especially when students are given the chance to contribute meaningfully and shape the direction of their own learning experiences. In summary, these examples show how collaborative tasks, when structured to allow voice, leadership, and shared responsibility, serve as a platform for both promoting and practicing learner agency and autonomy.

4.2. Learner agency through task choice and control

Participants consistently emphasized that autonomy in task selection and format significantly enhanced their motivation, confidence, and engagement. Reema shared that individual tasks allowing her to choose the topic made her "feel freer", highlighting how control over content fosters empowerment. Similarly, Dua linked her enjoyment and ease in listening and speaking classes to the ability to "express yourself freely", demonstrating that learner agency through self-expression positively influences task engagement. Lama valued tasks that encouraged sharing opinions stating, "*I really like it when everyone expresses their opinion*," and emphasized the importance of "diversity", pointing to a preference for varied, student-driven learning experiences. Lama noted that choosing a personally meaningful topic led to better preparation and a greater sense of readiness, while Halah found that flexibility in topic selection helped improve her speech organization. Likewise, Maha preferred gamified quizzes to traditional formats, indicating that interactive, student-friendly task types reduce anxiety and improve performance. Together, these responses reveal a clear pattern: when students have autonomy over their learning—especially in choosing topics and formats that align with their interests and accommodate their diverse needs—they experience greater engagement. This underscores the importance of designing learner-centered tasks to foster agency and sustained engagement.

4.3. Interdependence of learner agency and self-regulation

Findings revealed a strong interconnection between learner agency and self-regulation, with participants who had more control over their learning also exhibiting strategic planning, emotional regulation, and self-monitoring. Self-regulatory behaviors—such as goal-setting, preparation, and reflection—were often expressed alongside autonomous decision-making. For instance, Reem's choice to speak on "mental health" and present last to be "different" demonstrates both agency in task selection and strategic self-regulation through peer observation and preparation. Similarly, Lama's comment, "*I was able to organize my thoughts when I listened*," reflects metacognitive monitoring developed through repeated exposure to structured input. Dua managed anxiety using self-calming strategies during presentations— "*I don't look at the people... just breathe*"—illustrating emotional regulation. Sarah's statement, "*Each girl knows her role*," highlights how distributed responsibility in group work supports both autonomy and task-focused regulation. Participants also described how control over task format encouraged metacognitive engagement. Maha's reflection illustrates how initial self-doubt was overcome through persistence, self-regulation, and self-evaluation.

> "*We should cover all the information about the topic in three minutes. I felt it was impossible. I can't do it, but after I did it, I really enjoyed it. In the beginning, I faced some difficulties, but later I enjoyed it.*"

This quote reflects a clear instance of self-regulation in action. The shift from doubt to enjoyment suggests successful emotional regulation, which is a critical aspect of self-regulation. This illustrates the interdependence between learner agency and self-regulation—the learner took on the challenge (agency) and managed their emotions and effort to succeed (self-regulation).

4.4. Supportive classroom environments

A total 8 out of 10 participants underscore how emotionally supportive and inclusive classroom environments promote engagement and agency. Classroom observations and interviews highlighted that learners frequently sought peer help and teacher guidance, exhibited leadership during discussions, and demonstrated increased engagement and confidence in group and individual tasks. The observed moment where a student led the discussion with the phrase "*each one can say what she wants*" illustrates distributed agency. This student demonstrated leadership as an expression of agency while also fostering a collaborative space where peers could voice their ideas—modeling autonomy and promoting it within the group.

The inclusive nature of her leadership reflects a learner-centered environment that values participation and voice. Likewise, Lama's acknowledgment that "*each of them changed something in me*," highlights the transformative and co-constructive nature of learning in collaborative settings, aligning with the idea that autonomy can emerge through meaningful social engagement. Participants consistently emphasized the value of a safe and energetic classroom atmosphere. Samar's remark — "*the energy in class that everyone participates in... everyone has energy*" — captures the collective enthusiasm and high participation levels that define such environments. This shared sense of "energy" reinforces the connection between supportive settings, agency, and self-regulation.

4.5. The importance of scaffolded autonomy

The teacher's flexible approach—balancing open-ended and direct prompts—serves as scaffolded support that encourages autonomy while guiding participation. Habeebah's preference for learning "with the doctor" over group work suggests a strong sense of learner agency, as she intentionally chose an independent learning path aligned with her personal comfort and perceived effectiveness. Her emphasis on learning "with the doctor" underscores the importance of guided support—a key element of scaffolded autonomy. Ultimately, Habeebah's comment demonstrates that autonomy and support are not opposites but interdependent, and that learner-centered environments must accommodate diverse needs for scaffolding. Munera noted that repeated listening tasks helped her "organize [her] thoughts," demonstrating how teacher-provided scaffolding builds metacognitive strategies and gradually fosters autonomy. The fact that it "became easier" over time also signals the gradual development of learner autonomy through guided practice, showing how effective scaffolding can develop both confidence and skill-building. The findings also suggest that both teacher-led and peer-based scaffolding were effective, depending on individual learning preferences and the demands of the task. Together, these insights show that learner agency thrives in environments with scaffolded support, including peer collaboration or teacher guidance.

4.6. Discussion

This study explored how learner agency and self-regulation interact to support task engagement among first-year Saudi female EFL learners in a listening and speaking course. Building on a growing body of literature [1]–[4], [13], [21], the findings affirm that learner engagement is shaped by both agency and self-regulation (strategic learning behaviors) and supported by responsive classroom environments. Participants who had more control over their learning exhibited strategic planning, emotional regulation, and self-monitoring. Participants further demonstrated agency by choosing task topics, adapting task formats to their preferences, and navigating between individual and group work based on personal learning styles and emotional comfort. These choices reflect Alenezi [1] emphasis on promoting learner agency by empowering students through goal-setting, self-reflection, and personalized strategies that foster a sense of ownership and deepen engagement. The ability to make meaningful choices not only boosted motivation but also allowed participants to align tasks with their interests and strengths, leading to more active and intentional participation.

Furthermore, the role of self-regulation as a coping mechanism in TBL was evident, particularly in preparation, self-evaluation, and managing emotional stress and task demands. As seen in previous work [22], students showed moderate to strong use of self-regulatory strategies. However, this study offers deeper qualitative insight into how those strategies are practiced, adapted, and supported in real-time learning environments. These behaviors mirror findings by several researchers [6], [17], who argue that effective learners engage in self-directed planning, monitoring, and adaptive strategies to manage both cognitive and emotional demands. Additionally, confidence-building—central to both learner agency and self-regulation—emerged through repeated practice, emotional safety, and structured opportunities for student voice and choice. Some participants strategically observed peers before presenting, regulated anxiety through breathing techniques, or reflected on their performance to improve future outcomes. These strategies not only reflect agency but also show how it is enacted through self-regulation.

Over time, structured guidance—via peer collaboration, task scaffolding, and teacher feedback—proved essential for building confidence and engagement. Unlike Jamal et al. [24] and Alfares [35], whose participants feared peer judgment, this study's participants embraced student-led tasks, adjusting roles based on comfort and task demands. These findings echo previous research [26], [36]. Svalberg [36] emphasis on meaningful tasks, social interaction, mindset, and reflective learning, as well as Alsawat [25] view that agency thrives under structured support. They also align with Alenezi [1], who stressed the value of emotionally supportive classrooms in enhancing learner confidence. Participant reflections highlighted how positive feedback and collaborative "energy" reduced anxiety and boosted motivation. In contrast to previous study by Alluhaydan [37] that reported limited emotional support and interaction in EFL classrooms, the current findings underscore learning environments that were emotionally safe, collaborative, and socially engaging. While Arora et al. [38] intervention-based study also demonstrated the effectiveness of scaffolded instruction in fostering autonomy and language development, the present study extends these insights by illustrating how such outcomes emerge organically within real-world Saudi EFL contexts.

Additionally, the data show that agency and self-regulation are not mutually exclusive but deeply interconnected. For example, students who were free to choose their task formats often planned more strategically, sought feedback more actively, and demonstrated stronger emotional regulation. The effectiveness of SRL is shaped by students' feeling of a sense of control over their tasks and learning processes—a notion also emphasized by Seli and Dembo [39]. The current research contributes significantly to the limited body of qualitative studies in the Saudi EFL context by showing how these dynamics play out in real classroom interactions. It responds to calls from previous scholars [20], [21] for culturally relevant, learner-centered approaches that move beyond rote learning and empower students to become active

participants in their education. The current findings align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [8], emphasizing how social interaction, scaffolding, and mediated support develop autonomy and cognitive growth. Alrabai [2] found that autonomy-supportive teaching fosters learner autonomy, with perceived choice as a key predictor. Similarly, participants in this study emphasized how scaffolded autonomy, teacher feedback, and emotionally supportive classrooms enhanced motivation, reduced anxiety, and encouraged self-regulation. Task choice and control were central to sustaining engagement, reinforcing that ownership and supportive environments are essential for cognitive and emotional growth in Saudi EFL settings [24], [26], [27], [37]. Together, these findings highlight the transformative impact of learner-centered, autonomy-supportive instruction in fostering meaningful engagement, confidence, and sustained SRL among Saudi EFL university students.

These findings align with prior research showing that implementing DI within environments that promote autonomy, collaboration, and personal growth significantly enhances engagement, motivation, and self-confidence [40]. In this study, scaffolded autonomy emerged as a key mechanism through which DI supports learner development—providing structured guidance while gradually allowing students more control. Participants felt their needs and preferences were acknowledged through varied instructional strategies and supportive scaffolding, enabling them to build confidence, cognitive skills, and independent learning behaviors in both individual and group contexts. The findings of this study align with the principles of constructivist teaching (CT), which emphasize learner-centered classrooms where teachers act as facilitators, guiding students to actively construct knowledge through meaningful interaction, collaboration, and the integration of prior experiences [41]. While extrinsic incentives such as rewards may elicit immediate behavioral compliance [41], the current findings emphasize that meaningful and sustained engagement is more effectively fostered through the development of learner agency, self-regulation, and scaffolded autonomy.

This study contributes valuable qualitative insight into Saudi EFL education, where such dynamics are underexplored. It echoes calls by several scholars [20], [21] to move beyond rote instruction and toward culturally relevant, learner-centered pedagogy. Practically, this study supports the integration of CT into EFL teacher education reform in Saudi Arabia to advance learner-centered classrooms, where instructors facilitate active, meaningful learning, and encourage students to express their perspectives beyond textbook-driven instruction [41], [42]. In line with Vision 2030, the study highlights the need for instructional practices that empower students through personalized support, strategic autonomy, and active participation—ultimately fostering greater engagement, confidence, and academic success.

5.   CONCLUSION

This study examined how learner agency and self-regulation influence task engagement among Saudi female EFL learners. TA revealed five interconnected themes: i) students exercised agency in choosing between individual and group tasks, guided by preferences for autonomy or collaboration; ii) task choice and control enhanced motivation and confidence; iii) agency and self-regulation were deeply interdependent, with students engaging in planning, goal-setting, and emotional regulation when given control; iv) supportive classroom environments, marked by constructive feedback and emotional safety, fostered both reflection and autonomy; and v) scaffolded autonomy—balancing freedom with structured support—was critical in building learner confidence and reducing anxiety. Of the five themes, scaffolded autonomy and supportive classroom climate proved most impactful, as they fostered emotional safety and independent learning—key conditions for students to confidently exercise agency and sustain self-regulation.

These findings reinforce that learner agency thrives when paired with self-regulatory strategies and supported by emotionally safe, responsive environments. Students who had a choice over their learning engaged more deeply and strategically, reflecting the reciprocal nature of autonomy and regulation. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of integrating Vygotsky's sociocultural theory—particularly scaffolding, collaboration, the ZPD, and DI—to support learner agency and self-regulation in Saudi EFL classrooms. Implementing CT-informed strategies—such as offering flexible task formats, allowing topic selection, embedding reflective journaling and planning tools, and scaffolding autonomy through modeling and feedback—can enhance agency and self-regulation. As Saudi Arabia pursues learner-centered reform under Vision 2030, these findings offer pedagogical direction for fostering empowered, self-regulated learners. Future research should further explore and validate these approaches across varied cultural contexts, mixed-gender classrooms, and longitudinal or intervention-based designs. Future research could examine how EFL teachers' beliefs, training, and classroom practices influence their capacity to foster autonomy-supportive environments through CT and DI. Longitudinal research may also reveal how sustained exposure to constructivist pedagogy and personalized learning tasks shapes students' development of agency and self-regulation over time.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Hajar Khalifa Al Sultan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

C : **C**onceptualization	I : **I**nvestigation	Vi : **Vi**sualization
M : **M**ethodology	R : **R**esources	Su : **Su**pervision
So : **So**ftware	D : **D**ata Curation	P : **P**roject administration
Va : **Va**lidation	O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft	Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis	E : Writing - Review & **E**diting	

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in this study. Both verbal and written consent were secured prior to their involvement.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the REC of King Faisal University of Saudi Arabia (protocol code KFU-REC-2024-MAR-ETHICS2107, approved on March 20, 2024).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [HKAS], upon reasonable request. Access to the data may be subject to ethical considerations and the intended purpose of use.

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