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Exploring Autonomous Learning in High-Achieving EFL Students: Cases of Success

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Abstract

This multiple-case study explored how high-achieving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students develop and implement autonomous learning practices and how they perceive the contribution of these practices to their academic and competitive achievement. Four students of SMA Negeri 1 Dampit, who were purposively selected, each had an English report-card score of at least 85 in the even semester and a top-three placement or special award in an English competition at university level or at least regency level. Each student was treated as one case. Data came from asynchronous WhatsApp interviews (written messages and voice notes) and document analysis of report cards and certificates, and were analyzed through six-phase thematic analysis with within-case and cross-case comparison. Five themes emerged: developing autonomous learning habits; self-regulated learning strategies; technology-supported autonomous learning; competition-oriented learning practices; and perceived contribution of autonomy. The participants perceived autonomous learning as an important contributor to their success in English competitions and their school performance. However, their learning practices also involved support from family members, teachers, mentors, and school clubs. These findings suggest that autonomous learning among high-achieving students can take different forms and develop alongside support from others.

Keywords: academic achievement, AI tools and social media, autonomous learning, English competition, high-achieving EFL learners

1. Introduction

Autonomous learning has become an increasingly popular option for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to improve their English skills. According to Holec's (1981), autonomous learning refers to a concept where students have the ability to take full responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning process. Benson (2012) defined autonomous learning as the ability of students to control learning management, cognitive processes, and learning materials. In summary, autonomous learning is the ability of students to think critically and manage their own learning strategies (Little, 2022), which is now growing rapidly with the increasing use of digital media (Little & Thorne, 2017).

Many studies have proven the success of autonomous learning in supporting students' English language skills and academic achievement. Alrabai (2021), Marantika (2021), and Daflizar et al. (2022) found that students who carried out autonomous learning had excellent self-regulation skills, motivation, and metacognitive awareness, which influence their learning outcomes. Other researchers, Khoudri et al. (2023) and Jaashan & Alashabi (2025) found that autonomous learning conducted through the assistance of technology, projects, and self-assessment significantly influenced the development of students' abilities in understanding material. This is in line with Ozer & Yukselir (2023), who found that autonomous learning, self-directed learning, and goal commitment were all correlated with English achievement among 248 Turkish English-major undergraduates, and Botes et al. (2025), who examined autonomous learning as a predictor of learner emotions, willingness to communicate, and academic achievement in online language learning. These studies show that autonomy and achievement go together, but they say little about how successful learners enact autonomy in their daily practices.

Recent studies have started to focus on technology and AI. At the university level, Trinovita et al. (2025) found a positive relationship between the use of ChatGPT and self-regulated learning among 100 undergraduate students. The relationship was stronger when students planned their learning, but weaker when they evaluated their learning. They also found that students could become too dependent on AI and think they understood the material when they actually did not. At senior high school level, Keumala et al. (2026) showed that students in three Indonesian senior high schools used ChatGPT in different ways, and using it did not always make them more independent in learning. Other studies in different contexts also reported that AI tools can support self-regulated learning and autonomous learning (Guan et al., 2024; Mohebbi, 2025; Tram et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). Apart from AI, Aulia et al. (2024) documented that senior high school students in Jakarta, Indonesia, learned new English vocabulary through online games such as Mobile Legends and Minecraft.

Research on high-achieving learners in the context of English competitions is still limited, to our knowledge. Novianti (2024) compared one high-achieving and one low-achieving high school student, revealing differences in their learning practices and access to learning materials. Similarly, Mazida et al. (2025) examined two university students who had participated in public-speaking competitions over several years, highlighting improvements in fluency, confidence, time management, and critical thinking. The present study aligns with Novianti (2024) by focusing on high-achieving high school students; however, it extends this line of research by examining four competition winners to explore both their school and competition success. Furthermore, while sharing Mazida et al.'s (2025) view of competitions as out-of-class learning opportunities, this study shifts the focus toward senior high school students and autonomous learning rather than speaking skills. Unlike Ozer & Yukselir (2023), who measured the relationship between variables, this study explores how students practice and understand autonomous learning. Finally, while Keumala et al.

(2026) and Trinovita et al. (2025) investigated AI integration within formal classroom or university settings, this study examines how students independently use AI, social media, and games to support their learning.

Based on the reviewed literature, three gaps remain. First, most studies look at the relationship between autonomous learning and achievement (Botes et al., 2025; Ozer & Yukselir, 2023). However, few studies explain how high-achieving students practice autonomous learning in their daily lives. Second, studies in Indonesian senior high schools mostly focus on classroom learning or compare high-achieving and low-achieving students (Novianti & Yusuf, 2024), and competition success as an out-of-class learning context has been explored mainly at the university level (Mazida et al., 2025).. Third, some studies examine the use of AI and games separately (Aulia et al., 2024; Keumala et al., 2026; Trinovita et al., 2025). However, few studies explain how successful students use different digital resources to learn English independently outside the classroom and how these activities relate to their school achievement and success in competitions.

Therefore, this multiple-case study aims to explore how high-achieving EFL students practice autonomous learning and how they perceive its contribution to their achievement. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do high-achieving EFL students develop and enact autonomous learning practices?

RQ2. How do they perceive the contribution of these practices to their academic and competitive achievement?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Autonomous Learning

The concept of autonomous learning was first introduced by Holec (1981) as the ability of students to take responsibility for their own learning process. Furthermore, Benson (2012) emphasized that autonomous learning was a psychological capacity that involves critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. Bandura (2006) added that students naturally want to guide their own learning, choosing the strategies that work best for them. In relation to EFL, which has limited time to study in class, this concept becomes very important, especially for high-achieving students who want to continue to develop their English skills without being limited by fixed classroom rules.

According to Holec (1981) and Benson (2012), autonomous learning manifests across four dimensions:

1. Goal setting

   Deciding the targets instead of just waiting for the teachers to tell what to do, by choosing what skills or knowledge the students want to gain.

2. Strategy Selection

   The students choose their own study method and materials, including deciding which tools, books, or practice routines work best for their learning style.

3. Self-Monitoring

   Paying attention to progress while the students study, and noticing what is working, then adjusting the habits in real time.

4. Self-Evaluation

   The students judge their own final results after finishing a task, then reflect on whether they actually reached the goal to improve their skill next time.

2.2 High-Achieving EFL Learners

Kashefian-Naeeini & Kouhpeyma (2020) research showed that high-achieving EFL students had structured self-regulation to control their emotions, manage their self-efficacy, and apply metacognitive strategies to remain consistent and resilient in achieving their academic targets. In line with this, Oussou et al. (2024) added that the success of high-achieving students was determined by a positive mindset and mental readiness to take full responsibility for their learning process, which made them proactive in learning independently without relying on instructors.

In the Indonesian EFL context, research conducted by Daflizar (2021) and Wijaya (2022) revealed that students with high levels of autonomous learning were proven to be proficient in foreign languages because self-awareness led them to practice intentionally and consistently. Daflizar (2021) found that Indonesian EFL students who have a positive understanding of the concept of autonomous learning tend to be more proactive in overcoming learning barriers and utilizing various learning resources independently. This finding is reinforced by Wijaya (2022), who stated that EFL learners with a high level of autonomous learning have a greater sense of ownership of their learning process. This trend is in line with the findings of Daflizar (2020), who showed that autonomous learning practices outside the classroom, driven by students' self-awareness, also contributed to the development of their language skills.

The relationship between autonomous learning and language proficiency is also empirically supported by Myartawan et al. (2013), who found a positive and significant relationship between autonomous learning and English proficiency in Indonesian EFL students. The consistency of these findings was further confirmed by Melvina & Julia (2021), who revealed that the technical, psychological, and political dimensions of autonomous learning have a significant influence on students' English language proficiency. Thus, the various studies above consistently confirm that self-awareness and autonomous learning are important factors that encourage Indonesian EFL students to practice language intentionally and continuously, which affects their achievement of foreign language proficiency.

2.3 Factors Influencing Autonomous Learning

There are two factors that influence autonomous learning: internal factors and external factors. Internal factors that encourage autonomous learning include motivation, self-efficacy, metacognition, and personal interest. Kashefian-Naeeini & Kouhpeyma (2020) stated that intrinsic motivation kept students learning for a long period because it came from personal interest and enjoyment, while extrinsic motivation just provided the initial push to get started. This success is supported by high self-efficacy, where confidence in personal abilities makes learners more resilient and brave in facing language challenges (Luo et al., 2024). In addition, Daflizar et al. (2022) declared that metacognitive abilities enabled learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning strategies independently. This entire process is further optimized when the learners explore a culture using their own interest and curiosity.

There are four external factors that influence the students' autonomous learning: teacher's role, learning facilities, social and family support, and peer collaboration. According to Wijaya et al. (2020), the role of the teachers was critically important in guiding students' learning strategies, especially in applying digital technology access for learning spaces outside the classroom. Furthermore, the availability of learning facilities such as physical and digital libraries provides an infrastructure foundation that facilitates autonomous learning, while social and family support and peer collaboration create a positive climate and authentic context for practice (Melvina & Julia, 2021).

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a multiple case study method (Yin, 2018) to observe four high-achieving English students of SMA Negeri 1 Dampit separately. This approach was chosen because it aimed to explore the experiences, journeys, and personal thoughts of those high-achieving English students in learning English. Furthermore, each student was analyzed individually to see their independent learning style, then compared to each other to find patterns or differences. This approach provided stronger and more accurate findings about how four high-achieving English students of SMA Negeri 1 Dampit managed their autonomous learning.

3.2 Participants

The study involved four high-achieving English students from Grades X and XI at SMA Negeri 1 Dampit during the 2025/2026 academic year, and each student constituted one case based on their grade level at the time of selection. At the time of the interviews on 1–3 July 2026, they had moved up to grades XI and XII. Four students were selected purposively (Miles et al., 2014) because they could provide useful information about autonomous learning. The students were recommended by their English teachers and competition coaches. They met two criteria: (1) they had an English score of at least 85 in the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, based on their report cards; and (2) they had won 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place, or received a special award, such as Favorite Winner, in an English competition at university level or at least regency level, based on their certificates. The four students had different grade levels, competition types, and learning backgrounds, allowing the researcher to compare their experiences (Table 1). The researcher received permission from the school to conduct the study. Written consent was obtained from the students' parents or guardians on 25 June 2026, and the students also agreed to take part in the interviews. The consent included permission to report the school's name and the students' competition achievements. To protect their privacy, the students are identified as P1, P2, P3, and P4, and their real names are not reported.

Table 1: List of the participants and the achievements

Code	Grade	English score	Competition focus	Level	Placement	Background in learning English
P1	X	88	Storytelling, news anchor	University (storytelling); Regency (news anchor)	Favorite winner (story telling); 1st winner (news anchor)	Intensive English course; school English Club; private tutoring
P2	X	86	Debate, English AI-tale writing	Provincial	3rd place (debate), 1st place (AI-tale writing)	Self-taught; school English Club; online friends; interest began from foreign culture and music
P3	XI	91	Speech, vlog, debate	Provincial (speech & vlog); regency (debate)	1st place (speech); 1st place (vlog); 1st place (debate)	Raised in an English-speaking environment abroad
P4	XI	90	English Olympiad, debate	University (English Olympiad); provincial (debate)	1st place (olympiad), 3rd places (debate)	Introduced to English early by her mother; school English Club; school organization role

3.3. Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected from two sources: interviews and document analysis. First, data were collected through asynchronous interviews on WhatsApp between 1 and 3 July 2026, after the participants had been promoted to the next grade. The interview guide consisted of 12 open-ended questions based on Holec (1981) and Benson (2012). It covered participants' interest in English and its origins, time management, learning environment and tools, targets, handling difficult material, self-evaluation, motivation, the sufficiency of school materials, who they considered responsible for their success, the relationship between independent study and school grades, and the role of autonomous learning in their competition success. The questions were asked in English with Indonesian translation. Each participant answered the full guide once. Three participants (P1, P2, P3) answered in written messages, and P4 answered in a combination of written messages and voice notes. Participants answered in a mixture of English and Indonesian. Follow-up messages were limited to confirming participants' answers, and no additional probing questions were asked. Written responses were copied from the chat. P4's voice notes (12 minutes in total) were transcribed manually and checked against the audio by the first author. Excerpts originally in Indonesian were translated by the researchers, and the translations were checked by a colleague. The chats were stored on the first author's password-protected device and used only for this study.

Second, document analysis involved four English report cards (semester 2 or 4 for each participant) and nine competition certificates (two to three per participant). A checklist recorded English scores, placements, competition levels, and dates. The students' even-semester report cards for the 2025/2026 academic year were examined to ensure that they met the English score criterion. The documents were used to verify whether the participants met the selection rules and to support their stories about their achievements.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by the data condensation, data display, and conclusion-drawing procedures of Miles et al. (2014). The data corpus consisted of the four participants' responses to the 12-question WhatsApp interview guide (written messages and P4's transcribed voice notes). The report cards and certificates were examined with the checklist described in Section 3.3.

Analysis proceeded in six phases (Table 2) at two levels. First, in the within-case analysis, each participant's responses were coded and summarized in a case summary describing how that participant developed and enacted autonomous learning and how they perceived its contribution to their achievement. Second, in the cross-case analysis, the codes and case summaries were compared across the four cases in a matrix (Table 3) to identify patterns shared by all cases and differences between them. The themes were developed inductively from the data, and Holec's (1981) and Benson's (2012) dimensions of control were used as sensitizing concepts rather than as a fixed coding frame.

To support credibility, participants' accounts were compared with the report cards and certificates, P4's transcripts were checked against the audio, and the translations of Indonesian excerpts were checked by a colleague. Excerpts in Section 4 are labeled with participant codes and question numbers so that readers can distinguish participants' words from the researchers' interpretation.

Table 2: The six-phase analytical progression

Phase	Action	Operational Procedure
1	Familiarization	Reading and re-reading each participant's WhatsApp responses and P4's transcribed voice notes, making initial notes, and checking claims against the report cards and certificates.
2	Initial Coding	Open coding of each participant's responses, question by question, to capture meaningful units (e.g., "daily agenda," "prioritizing competitions," "AI as word-choice validator," "studying past winners," "mother as main supporter"). Coding was done manually in the original language of the responses (English or Indonesian), using a Microsoft Word matrix. Excerpts selected for reporting were translated afterwards by the researchers.
3	Searching for Themes	Summarizing each case (within-case analysis), then clustering codes across the four cases into candidate themes, with Benson's (2012) dimensions of control as sensitizing concepts.
4	Reviewing Themes	Testing candidate themes against the full data set and the documents, and using a cross-case matrix to check that each theme was supported by more than one case and to note differences between cases.
5	Defining and Naming	Defining each theme and naming it so that it has a distinct conceptual identity, and linking Themes 1–4 to RQ1 and Theme 5 to RQ2.
6	Reporting	Presenting the themes with participant excerpts and a cross-case comparison (Tables 3 and 4).

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study on four high-achieving EFL students at SMA Negeri 1 Dampit. To protect their identities, participants are referred to as P1, P2, P3, and P4, and no names or class identifiers are reported (Table 1). Excerpts are labeled by participant code and interview question number (e.g., P3, Q5). Excerpts originally in English are quoted verbatim, including spelling errors, and excerpts originally in Indonesian were translated by the researchers. Five themes emerged in response to the two research questions and are summarized in Table 3; Table 4 shows how each data source contributed to the findings.

Table 3 : Cross-case matrix of themes

RQ	Theme	Pattern across cases
RQ1	1. Developing autonomous learning habits	Early exposure (P3, P4); immersion course (P1); self-sought environment (P2)
	2. Self-regulated learning strategies	Written agenda and daily targets (P1); prioritization and preparation (P2, P4); mood-driven with notes (P3)
	3. Technology-supported autonomous learning	AI as language validator (P1) and creative partner (P3); AI named as a tool (P2, P4); online peers and live sessions (P2, P3); songs (P1); apps, films, games (P2, P4)
	4. Competition-oriented learning practices	Independent searching (P1, P2, P3, P4); studying past winners (P3); feedback from judges and recordings (P1), recordings (P3), mentor teacher (P4), self-reflection (P2)
RQ2	5. Perceived contribution of autonomy	Large perceived contribution (all); 80% (P1), 50–60% (P2); academic spillover (P1, P2, P4); responsibility attributed to self (P1, P2, P3) and to mother (P4)

Table 4. Contribution of data sources

Data source	Contribution
Interviews (WhatsApp messages and voice notes)	Primary evidence for all five themes
Report cards (4)	Confirmed English scores above 85 in the even semester of 2025/2026 academic year for all participants; consistent with Theme 5 claims of maintaining school performance
Certificates (2–3 per participant)	Confirmed placement and competition level; corroborated Theme 4 accounts of competition involvement

4.1 Theme 1: Developing Autonomous Learning Habits

All four participants described English habits that began outside the classroom, but they reached them by different routes. P3 and P4 traced their interest to early exposure. P3 said she had liked English "since I was little" because she grew up in an English-speaking environment (P3, Q2). P4 recalled, "I have liked English since I entered elementary school, or perhaps even before that" (P4, Q2), and added that her mother first introduced her to English and provided her learning tools (P4, Q10). P1's turning point came through an intensive English course: "Because the environment at the course required us to communicate entirely in English, my confidence in daily conversation increased drastically" (P1, Q2). P2 built her own environment. Her interest in foreign cultures began in junior high school but "did not develop much for several reasons, including environmental factors," so she "gradually learned by trying to find an environment that could accept me and give me feedback" (P2, Q1). Early exposure, immersion, and a self-sought environment thus each led to routine English use beyond class hours.

4.2 Theme 2: Self-Regulated Learning Strategies

Participants balanced competition preparation and schoolwork in different ways. P1 used the most formal system: "Every night or at the start of the week, I always make a detailed schedule or daily agenda" (P1, Q3), supported by "specific daily targets" (P1, Q5). P2 and P4 relied on prioritization. P2 explained, "I always make plans and thorough preparation before joining a competition. To make sure the targets are achieved, I practice harder and ask for feedback from my mentor teacher and peers" (P2, Q5), while P4 reduced "less useful activities such as scrolling social media or watching films" when she needed extra study time (P4, Q3). P3 was the only participant who described mood-driven regulation: "i would still do it and click my adrenaline open, make some notes so after i fix my mood, i would comprehend easily" (P3, Q5).

Prioritizing competitions had costs. P3 would "slightly neglect my homeworks" with her teacher's permission to submit late (P3, Q3), and P2 admitted that she sometimes still fell behind in lessons but managed to catch up (P2, Q3). When motivation dropped, strategies again differed: P1 confided in her parents and gave herself rest or a self-reward (P1, Q8); P2 reminded herself of her future goals and what giving up would mean for them (P2, Q8); P3 turned to films, games, and TikTok live "to activate my motivation again to study" (P3, Q8); and P4 used others' achievements "not as a yardstick, but only as motivation to move again" (P4, Q8). The report cards showed that all four kept their English scores above 85 in the even semester of 2025/2026 academic year despite these trade-offs.

4.3 Theme 3: Technology-Supported Autonomous Learning

Technology appeared in every case, but its roles differed. P1 and P3 described AI use in detail. P1 used AI only to validate her word choices: "AI here is purely a tool, while the main analysis remains with my own thinking" (P1, Q6). P3 used Gemini, ChatGPT, and Claude "to help me upgrade some stories i love to write in my phone, and sometimes i have casual conversation with AI" (P3, Q4), and used Gemini's notebook feature to prepare for tests (P3, Q11). P2 and P4 named AI tools (Claude for P2, Gemini for P4) without describing specific uses (P2, Q4; P4, Q4).

Participants also used digital media as real-context practice. P3 hosted TikTok live sessions in which "we debate w each other, giving opinions, and learning together as well" (P3, Q4). P2 learned from online friends who "are also proficient in English, so my English has developed quite well because of them," and from Instagram, Discord, TikTok, games such as Roblox, and apps such as LAFTEL, English Score, English Books, and Vocabulary (P2, Q4). P4 used Duolingo, YouTube, and film-viewing apps (P4, Q4), and P1 analyzed English song lyrics and their translations to build vocabulary (P1, Q4).

4.4 Theme 4: Competition-Oriented Learning Practices

Participants went beyond classroom materials to prepare for competitions. P4 stated, "School materials are very insufficient for competitions like this," and chose extra topics by consulting her mentor teacher or experienced friends (P4, Q9). P2 said the key was to "first know where your shortcomings lie," then study vocabulary and pronunciation intensively (P2, Q9). P1 looked up difficult words in a dictionary (P1, Q6) and supplemented school lessons with the school English Club and private tutoring (P1, Q9). P3 used AI and social media to "do my researchers based on previous winners on the competition and study their strategy" (P3, Q5). The certificates confirmed that all four had competed at university or regency/provincial level.

Evaluation relied on recordings, mentors, and self-reflection. P3 held a principle of "never feel enough," and found small details to fix whenever she watched her previous recordings (P3, Q7). P1 had her performances recorded and re-watched them to correct gesture and articulation, and she asked judges for direct feedback: "objective input from the experts becomes an important note for me to keep growing" (P1, Q7). P4 judged her weak aspects by recalling which ones were slowest to improve and also used her mentor teacher's evaluation (P4, Q7). P2 emphasized that "we must always learn from mistakes" and looked for the areas where she felt lacking (P2, Q7).

4.5 Theme 5: Perceived Contribution of Autonomy to Dual Success

All four participants believed that school lessons alone would not have been enough for competition success, although P3 gave a more mixed account. P3 first said school materials were "enough" because of teacher support (P3, Q9), but later answered that she would not have won competitions with only teachers' materials: "if i just depend the materials just from my teachers, i wouldn't have the chance to dive into more materials that's way more detailed" (P3, Q12). P4 answered "No," because school teaches material but not "how to practice it in the real world" (P4, Q12). P1 said the role of independent learning in her wins "can even be said to reach 80%" (P1, Q12), and P2 estimated "around 50–60%," while still relying on school materials "as a foundation" (P2, Q12). These percentages are participants' own perceptions, not measurements, and P3 and P4 gave no percentage.

Participants also linked independent study with school grades. P1 said her basic English skills became stronger so that good report card scores followed "as a bonus" (P1, Q11); P4 felt better prepared for exams because she could cover material not discussed deeply in class (P4, Q11); and P2 called independent study at home "the main foundation" for good grades (P2, Q11). P3 gave a

different explanation, attributing her scores to being active in asking teachers questions, in addition to using Gemini's notebook and social media before tests (P3, Q11). The report cards support the claim that grades were maintained above 85, but they cannot show that independent study caused them.

On responsibility, three participants emphasized themselves. P3 answered, "Obviously myself, because without my inner intentions, i wouldn't be able to pursue the things I'm able to achieve" (P3, Q10). P1 described teachers, parents, and mentors as facilitators, but said that what determines whether knowledge is absorbed is "the will within ourselves" (P1, Q10). P2 said she was self-taught and sought her own environment, though "behind that" parents and friends, especially virtual and overseas friends, were involved (P2, Q10). P4 differed: "In my opinion, the person most responsible is my mother," because her mother introduced her to English, provided her learning tools, and kept pushing her when she lost motivation (P4, Q10).

5. Discussion

This study explored how four high-achieving EFL students developed and enacted autonomous learning and how they perceived its contribution. Five themes emerged. Each is discussed below in relation to previous studies.

5.1 Different Routes into Autonomous Habits

Participants' habits began through early exposure (P3, P4), an immersion course (P1), or a self-built environment (P2). Similarly, Mazida et al. (2025) described how competitions and learning outside the classroom helped students develop resilience and motivation. Liao et al. (2025) also described a learner who actively used digital resources to learn English outside the classroom. These findings show that students can develop autonomous learning from different starting points. Novianti & Yusuf (2024) reported that both a high-achieving and a low-achieving student were willing to learn independently but still expected teachers to provide materials. In contrast, our participants actively searched for their own learning materials, although P1 and P4 also received support from mentors and the English Club.

5.2 Self-Regulation in Several Styles

P1 used written agendas, while P2 and P4 focused on setting priorities and preparing their study activities, and only P3 studied based on her mood and used notes to support her learning. These findings are similar to Ozer & Yukselir (2023), who found that self-directed learning and goal commitment were related to English achievement, and Mazida et al. (2025), who reported that competition participants developed time management skills. Unlike these studies, our findings show that high achievement is also possible with a more flexible style (P3) and that prioritizing competitions left less time for homework (P2, P3). All participants met the English score criterion at or above 85, suggesting that these choices did not reduce their English achievement. However, we cannot conclude that they did not affect other subjects.

5.3 Selective Use of AI, Social Media, and Games

P1 mainly used AI to validate word choice, while P3 used it to improve stories and chat. These uses are similar to Keumala et al. (2026), who found that independent learners checked AI answers carefully, and Li and Kim (2024), who reported that self-regulated learners used automated feedback critically. However, Trinovita et al. (2025) warned that AI may reduce independent thinking and make learners believe they understand more than they actually do. The available data cannot show whether P2 and P4 avoided these risks because they only mentioned the tools they used. Other studies (Guan et al., 2024; Mohebbi, 2025; Tram et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025; Liu et al.,

2024) also reported that AI can support self-regulated learning and autonomous learning, although most of those studies focused on university students or specific learning programs. Similarly, Wulyani et al. (2024) and Zaim et al. (2025) examined AI use among university EFL learners, providing further context for understanding how AI can be incorporated into English learning. Beyond AI, P2's use of games is consistent with Aulia et al. (2024), suggesting that digital games can also serve as resources for independent English practice. P2 and P3 further described practicing English with online friends and through live sessions. These practices suggest that autonomous learning is not only about using digital tools but also about learning English with other people through online interactions. Overall, the participants used digital resources and online interactions in different ways, depending on their interests and learning habits.

5.4 Competition-Oriented Practices

Competition helped the participants improve their learning in several ways. P3 studied the work of previous winners, P1 and P3 watched recordings of their own performances again, and P1 and P4 asked judges or mentors for feedback. These practices show that the participants used their competition experiences to prepare, receive feedback, and improve their next performances. This finding is in line with Mazida et al. (2025), who found that repeated participation in public-speaking competitions was related to confidence and critical thinking among university students. The present study adds that senior high school students who joined different types of competitions also carefully reviewed their performances and looked for ways to improve, rather than only gaining confidence.

This finding is different from Trinovita et al. (2025), who found that undergraduate students were less skilled at evaluating their learning than at planning it. In this study, external feedback and recordings may have helped participants evaluate their performance because they could see and review what they had done. Competitions also provide clear examples, such as judges' feedback, scores, and the achievements of past winners, which may help students evaluate themselves more easily than through self-study alone. However, this explanation is still tentative because our data cannot show whether the same students would evaluate their learning as actively without taking part in competitions. Nevertheless, this finding is in line with studies showing that self-assessment can support the development of learner autonomy (Jaashan & Alashabi, 2025; Khoudri et al., 2023). It also suggests that competitions can provide a natural setting for students to develop their self-assessment skills.

5.5 Perceived Contribution and Responsibility

Participants described that autonomous learning was very important (P1: 80%, P2: 50–60%). These are their own perceptions, which are in line with Ozer & Yukselir (2023) and Botes et al. (2025), who found a positive relationship between autonomy and achievement. While those studies measured the relationship between variables, the present study shows how successful students explain the role of autonomous learning in their own achievements. This finding also supports earlier studies showing that learners who practice autonomous learning tend to have better self-regulation, motivation, and awareness of their own learning processes (Alrabai, 2021; Daflizar et al., 2022; Marantika, 2021).

The participants also shared different views about who was responsible for their success. Most participants believed that they were responsible for managing their own learning. At the same time, P4 considered her mother's support, while P1 and P4 relied on an English Club, tutoring, and mentors. These findings suggest that autonomous learning does not mean studying independently without help. Instead, students can take responsibility for their own learning while still receiving guidance and support from others. This idea is consistent with Holec's (1981) view of

autonomy as the ability to take responsibility for one's learning and Little's (2022) emphasis on learners managing their own learning strategies.

5.6 Novelty, Implications, and Limitations

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on how high-achieving EFL students develop and practice learning autonomy in both classroom learning and English competitions. The findings show that students use different learning strategies and digital tools based on their needs. In practice, teachers can support student autonomy by helping students set learning goals, use AI tools responsibly, and learn from feedback provided by mentors and peers.

This study has several limitations. It involved only four students from one school, and the data were collected through WhatsApp text messages and voice notes without further questions. In addition, the contribution of learning autonomy to student achievement was based on participants' perceptions rather than direct measurements. Future studies could involve students from different schools, include classroom or learning-activity observations, and follow students' progress over time to explore how autonomous learning develops and relates to students' achievements.

6. Conclusion

This multiple-case study explored how four high-achieving EFL students developed and practiced autonomous learning and how they perceived its contribution to their academic and competitive achievement. The findings show that students developed autonomous learning habits through different experiences, including early exposure to English, immersion courses, and self-created learning environments. They also used different strategies to manage their learning, selected digital tools according to their needs, and asked for feedback from recordings, judges, and mentors to improve their performance in competitions.

The participants viewed autonomous learning as helpful in maintaining good school grades and achieving success in English competitions. However, learning independently did not mean learning without support, as their families, teachers, mentors, and school clubs also played important roles in learning. Overall, the study highlights that autonomous learning can take different forms and can develop alongside support from others.

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