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Learning Arabic beyond the classroom: A narrative inquiry into autonomous digital learning

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Abstract
This article explores the experience of learning Arabic beyond formal classroom settings through autonomous digital learning. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the study examines my personal journey of developing Arabic language proficiency by engaging with digital resources such as mobile applications, online courses, social media, and video platforms. The narrative highlights how intrinsic motivation, self-regulated learning strategies, and consistent engagement with technology shaped my learning process. It also reflects on the challenges encountered, including maintaining discipline, selecting appropriate learning materials, and balancing language skills development without direct teacher guidance. By analyzing these lived experiences, the study demonstrates how digital environments can foster learner autonomy and sustain motivation in foreign language learning. The findings contribute to the growing discussion on autonomous learning by illustrating the dynamic relationship between motivation, technology, and personal agency in Arabic language acquisition. This narrative offers insights for learners, educators, and researchers interested in promoting effective self-directed language learning in digital contexts.

Keywords:
Arabic language learning; autonomous learning; digital learning; narrative inquiry; learning motivation.

A. INTRODUCTION

The growing emphasis on learning beyond the classroom highlights learner autonomy, understood as learners' increasing responsibility for setting goals, selecting strategies and resources, monitoring progress, and evaluating learning. Digital technologies can support this autonomy by expanding control over when, where, what, and how learners learn. Research shows that ICT can facilitate independent and self-regulated language learning, although learners' experiences and the complexity of these processes require further attention (Ye et al., 2024; Yalçın, 2024).

In Arabic language education, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and other digital approaches have demonstrated particular promise. Recent studies indicate that mobile applications can provide interactive and multimodal opportunities for vocabulary development, grammar practice, and independent learning. For example, research in an Indonesian madrasah has examined the use of mobile-assisted learning to support Arabic vocabulary acquisition, highlighting the potential of application-based learning to complement conventional instruction (Nurmalia et al., 2026). Likewise, the development of the An-Nasr mobile application demonstrates how curriculum-aligned digital materials can combine audio, visuals, interactive exercises, automated feedback, gamification, and adaptive learning pathways to support independent Arabic learning (Aedi et al., 2025). Literature on Arabic technology integration also suggests that e-learning and mobile applications may increase motivation and enable more

personalized learning, while simultaneously revealing persistent challenges involving infrastructure, digital access, and teachers' preparedness to integrate technology effectively (Haq et al., 2024).

The emergence of AI has further expanded the possibilities for autonomous language learning. Unlike earlier digital resources that primarily delivered predetermined content, AI-based tools can potentially function as interactive learning partners by generating explanations, providing feedback, adapting tasks, and supporting learners' problem-solving processes. A systematic review by Chang and Sun (2024) found that AI-mediated self-regulated language learning can support learners' strategic and metacognitive engagement, although the literature remains concentrated in English as a second or foreign language and often examines task-specific applications rather than learners' broader learning trajectories. Similarly, Mohebbi (2024) reported that AI tools can facilitate learner independence through personalized and immediate feedback, while cautioning against over-reliance on AI and unequal access to advanced technologies. In Arabic education, emerging studies have begun to examine AI as a means of fostering learner autonomy, suggesting that digital technologies may support self-directed learning while also creating new questions concerning digital literacy, learner agency, and the appropriate role of technology in language learning.

Despite growing research on technology-enhanced Arabic learning, important gaps remain. Existing studies often focus on application effectiveness, learning outcomes, or technology perceptions rather than learners' lived experiences of autonomous learning beyond the classroom. Quantitative and quasi-experimental approaches also provide limited insight into learners' personal meanings, challenges, strategies, and contextual influences, while Arabic remains underrepresented compared with English in technology-supported self-regulated learning research. Recent reviews further highlight infrastructure, teacher preparation, curriculum alignment, and unequal access as challenges, indicating that technology access alone does not ensure meaningful learner autonomy.

A further limitation concerns the tendency to conceptualize autonomy primarily as an individual skill or measurable learner characteristic. Autonomy, however, can develop dynamically through learners' interactions with technologies, learning resources, teachers, peers, and their broader sociocultural environments. Recent narrative research in language education illustrates the value of examining autonomy through learners' lived experiences. For example, a narrative inquiry among students in an Indonesian pondok pesantren showed that learner autonomy emerged in multiple forms but remained shaped by institutional routines and contextual constraints (Abin et al., 2026). Narrative inquiry is therefore particularly appropriate for investigating autonomous digital learning because it can reveal not only what learners do, but also how they interpret their learning journeys, why they adopt particular strategies, how their identities and motivations change, and how they negotiate constraints and opportunities over time. This perspective is important for Arabic language learning, where autonomous practices may extend across formal lessons, religious or cultural environments, social media, online communities, and individually selected digital resources.

Against this background, this study views autonomous Arabic learning as an evolving lived experience shaped by learner agency and digital affordances rather than simply by technology use. Through learners' narratives, it connects research on digital Arabic learning with learner autonomy by examining how learners construct learning pathways beyond the classroom, use digital resources in everyday practices, and navigate factors that support or constrain sustained autonomy. This study aims to explore how learners use digital technologies for autonomous Arabic learning beyond the classroom, focusing on the resources, strategies, practices, challenges, enabling factors, and experiences that contribute to learner autonomy.

B. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how learners experience and construct autonomous Arabic language learning through digital technologies beyond the classroom. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because it captures how learners

interpret experiences, develop strategies, negotiate challenges, and construct meanings over time, including changes in motivation, turning points, and the relationship between agency and learning context (Riessman, 2008). A thematic narrative approach was used to preserve individual learning stories while identifying cross-case patterns related to digital practices, autonomy, motivation, challenges, and enabling factors. Thematic analysis served as an analytic strategy within the narrative inquiry framework, consistent with its flexible application across qualitative designs (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The study was conducted in an Islamic senior high school in Lamongan, Indonesia, with data collected from May to August 2026. It examined how learners developed autonomy through digital Arabic learning beyond formal classroom activities using resources such as mobile applications, online videos, digital dictionaries, websites, social media, messaging platforms, online courses, and AI-supported tools. Purposive sampling was used to select two Grade XII female students, coded as P1 and P2, who had up to five years of experience in autonomous digital Arabic learning and regularly used digital resources independently. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) they were enrolled in an Islamic educational institution where Arabic was part of their learning experience; (2) they had experience learning Arabic independently beyond scheduled classroom instruction; (3) they regularly used at least one digital resource for Arabic learning; (4) they were able to describe their learning experiences, strategies, motivations, and challenges in sufficient detail; and (5) they were willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent. These criteria ensured that participants possessed direct and information-rich experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation, rather than being selected merely on the basis of academic achievement or digital competence. The primary instrument was a semi-structured narrative interview guide consisting of open-ended prompts covering participants' Arabic learning backgrounds, experiences outside the classroom, digital resources, strategies for planning and monitoring learning, challenges, motivations, and changes in autonomy. The narrative approach encouraged participants to describe their learning stories, experiences, resource choices, independent learning strategies, and difficulties in detail.

Meanwhile, data collection was conducted in four stages: participant recruitment and screening, including informed consent and confidentiality procedures; collection of background information on participants' age, educational level, Arabic-learning experience, digital-learning experience, and commonly used resources; in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes at the maximum, conducted face-to-face audio-recorded with permission, and supplemented by field notes and, where necessary, follow-up clarification; and verbatim transcription, translation into English where required, and participant review of narrative summaries to clarify inaccuracies or misunderstood meanings. This procedure ensured transparency in participant selection, interviewing, recording, transcription, and validation. This procedure was designed to ensure transparency concerning the research setting, participant selection, interview process, recording, transcription, and validation, consistent with established qualitative reporting recommendations (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007). Further, data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis following Riessman (2008) and Braun and Clarke (2022). Transcripts and audio recordings were reviewed to identify participants' learning experiences, motivations, decisions, and digital practices. Each narrative was coded individually, then compared across cases to develop and refine themes while preserving temporal and contextual meanings. Finally, a cross-case narrative was developed using representative participant quotations and interpreted in relation to learner autonomy, digital practices, and learning beyond the classroom.

Eventually, trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with participants' accounts, audio-recorded interviews, follow-up clarification, and participant review of narrative summaries. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a transparent record of the recruitment, interviewing, transcription, translation, and coding procedures. Confirmability was supported through the use of verbatim quotations, reflexive attention to

researcher interpretations, and systematic comparison between individual narratives and emerging themes. Transferability was addressed by providing clear descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, and learning context, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable Islamic educational settings. Given the small sample typical of narrative inquiry, the study does not seek statistical generalization but rather contextual and interpretive depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The narrative analysis revealed that autonomous digital Arabic learning was experienced not as a single, technology-driven activity but as an evolving learning process in which learners exercised agency in selecting resources, organizing learning activities, monitoring progress, and responding to difficulties. Across the narratives, the emerging findings can be organized into four interconnected themes: (1) learner agency and ownership of learning, (2) digital resources as flexible learning environments, (3) self-regulation and persistence beyond the classroom, and (4) challenges and boundaries of autonomous digital learning.

These themes indicate that digital technology did not automatically produce learner autonomy. Rather, autonomy emerged through the interaction between learners' personal goals, learning strategies, digital affordances, motivation, and contextual constraints. This finding is important because it shifts attention from the question of whether learners use digital technology to the more substantive question of how learners use technology to exercise control over their Arabic learning.

Learner Agency and Ownership of Arabic Learning

The first major theme concerned the development of learner agency. Participants described autonomous Arabic learning as a process in which they increasingly made their own decisions concerning learning objectives, materials, learning time, and learning strategies. Rather than waiting for classroom instruction, learners could identify particular linguistic problems and independently search for resources that addressed those problems.

One participant explained:

"I usually decide for myself what I need to learn. If I feel that my vocabulary is weak, I look for vocabulary materials, and if I need to improve speaking, I find videos or practice activities that can help me." (P1, Interview 1)

Another participant similarly stated:

"I choose the materials based on what I want to improve, and I set my own goals for each week. I usually study when I have free time, so I can organize my learning schedule by myself without waiting for the teacher to give me an assignment." (P2, Interview 1)

These accounts suggest that autonomy was manifested primarily through decision-making. The important feature was not simply the absence of teacher supervision but the learner's ability to assume responsibility for the learning process. Participants' narratives should therefore be interpreted in terms of agency rather than technological independence alone.

This finding is consistent with research showing that technology-supported self-regulated language learning can strengthen learners' planning, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and sociocultural engagement (Yalçın, 2024). However, the present narrative perspective adds an important dimension to this finding. Whereas much previous research evaluates whether technology improves learning or self-regulation, the narratives in this study provide insight into how learners experience the transition from teacher-directed learning toward greater ownership of their learning.

The finding also suggests that autonomous learning should not be understood as learning in isolation. Learners may still depend on teachers, peers, dictionaries, online communities, or AI systems while retaining responsibility for deciding when and how these resources are used.

Autonomy, therefore, appears to involve control over learning decisions rather than complete independence from other people and technologies.

Digital Resources as Flexible Learning Environments

The second theme concerned the way participants used multiple digital resources rather than relying on a single platform. The narratives indicated that different tools served different learning purposes. For example, Participants used digital dictionaries and mobile applications for vocabulary, online videos and language-learning applications for listening and pronunciation, AI-supported tools and online grammar resources for grammar, and translation applications, messaging platforms, websites, and AI tools for translation, communication, or additional explanations.

A participant described this practice as follows:

"*I don't use only one digital resource. For example, I use a dictionary to check new vocabulary, YouTube to listen to Arabic pronunciation, and AI when I need a clearer explanation or want to practice making sentences.*" (P1, Interview 2)

This pattern suggests that learners treated the digital environment as a personal learning ecosystem rather than as a single instructional platform. The flexibility of digital resources allowed participants to move between materials according to immediate learning needs. When one resource was insufficient, learners could search for another explanation, example, pronunciation model, translation, exercise, or interactive activity. This finding is broadly consistent with recent research on technology-supported self-regulated language learning, which reports positive relationships between technology use and linguistic, cognitive, metacognitive, and affective dimensions of language learning (Yalçın, 2024). It is also consistent with recent Arabic-language research demonstrating the value of multimodal mobile resources, including audio, visual materials, interactive exercises, feedback, and adaptive learning features (Aedi *et al*., 2025).

Nevertheless, the present study differs from application-development research in an important respect. Research such as Aedi et al. (2025) primarily asks whether a particular application is feasible and suitable for supporting independent Arabic learning. The present study instead examines how learners themselves appropriate whatever digital resources are available to them. This distinction is significant because learner autonomy may depend less on the presence of a particular "ideal" application than on learners' capacity to evaluate, combine, and adapt available resources to their own goals.

Self-Regulation, Monitoring, and Persistence

The third theme involved learners' self-regulatory practices. Participants' narratives indicated that autonomous digital learning required learners to organize their time, maintain attention, monitor their understanding, and determine whether a learning activity was successful. These practices included setting personal learning goals, scheduling study time, repeating listening activities, reviewing and recording new vocabulary, taking notes, practicing sentences, self-testing, monitoring understanding, and revisiting difficult materials until they were understood.

One participant reported:

I usually set a small goal before I start studying, and after studying I check whether I really understand the material. If I still have difficulty, I repeat the lesson, review the vocabulary, or practice it again until I feel that I have improved." (P1, Interview 4)

Another participant described:

"When I don't understand something or the activity doesn't work, I don't stop immediately. I try another video or resource, repeat the explanation, and sometimes use AI to explain it in a simpler way. If I still cannot understand it, I make a note of the problem and ask my teacher later." (P2, Interview 4)

These narratives suggest that digital access alone was insufficient. The eff, translate Arabic expressions, generate example sentences, practice conversation, correct their writing, and create additional vocabulary and language exercises.

One participant explained:

"I use AI when I need help understanding Arabic vocabulary, grammar, or sentences. I can ask it to explain something in a simpler way, give me examples, or check my writing, but I still compare the answer with other sources because sometimes AI can make mistakes." (P1, Interview 5)

The significance of this finding lies not simply in the use of AI but in the changing relationship between learner and learning resource. AI can provide rapid explanations and individualized interaction, potentially reducing the time between identifying a learning problem and obtaining assistance. This can strengthen learners' capacity to continue learning without immediately depending on a teacher. However, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that AI replaces teachers. Rather, AI appears to function as an additional learning resource whose usefulness depends on the learner's ability to formulate questions, evaluate responses, identify inaccuracies, and determine when additional human guidance is necessary.

Moreover, this interpretation is supported by recent reviews of AI-mediated self-regulated language learning. Chang and Sun (2024) found that AI can support learner autonomy and strategic learning, but they also emphasized that many existing studies have been conducted in English-language contexts and have frequently focused on task-specific applications. Similarly, research on ChatGPT in second-language learning identifies self-directed learning as one of its major applications but highlights the need for further research concerning feedback quality and broader learning contexts. Thus, if AI use emerges strongly in the present narratives, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how learners actually incorporate AI into out-of-class Arabic learning, a context that remains less developed than research on English language learning.

Challenges and Boundaries of Autonomous Digital Learning

The fourth theme concerned the limitations of autonomous digital learning. Although participants benefited from flexibility and accessibility, their narratives also revealed barriers such as inconsistent motivation, distractions from social media, limited internet connectivity, uncertainty about the accuracy of online materials, difficulty selecting appropriate learning resources, limited opportunities to interact with proficient Arabic speakers, and dependence on translation tools or AI-generated answers.

A participant described this challenge as follows:

"*Sometimes it is difficult to study by myself because I can lose motivation or get distracted by social media. I also cannot always know whether the information I find online is correct, so I need to compare different sources or ask my teacher."* (P1, Interview 6)

The presence of these constraints is theoretically important because it demonstrates that learner autonomy is context-dependent rather than unlimited. Learners may have considerable control over the selection of digital resources while simultaneously experiencing limited control over time, motivation, infrastructure, linguistic support, or the reliability of online information.

This finding also helps explain why access to technology should not be equated with successful autonomous learning. Recent Arabic digital-learning research similarly emphasizes that device availability alone does not guarantee meaningful adoption; curriculum alignment, appropriate scaffolding, feedback, and usability remain important conditions (Aedi *et al*., 2025). The findings therefore suggest that the goal of digital Arabic education should not simply be to provide learners with more applications. Instead, learners need support in evaluating digital resources, establishing realistic learning routines, monitoring progress, and using technological assistance critically. This process indicates that autonomy was dynamic. Participants did not necessarily begin as highly autonomous learners. Instead, autonomy developed as they became

more capable of recognizing their learning needs and selecting appropriate responses.ectiveness of digital learning depended on learners' ability to regulate their interaction with digital resources. A learner could have access to numerous Arabic-learning applications and online materials but still make limited progress without sustained attention, goal setting, strategic selection of materials, and self-monitoring. This finding corresponds with the broader literature on technology-supported self-regulated language learning. Yalçın (2024) found that technology can support learners' planning and metacognitive strategies, while Chang and Sun (2024) similarly argue that AI-mediated language learning can function as a metacognitive resource when learners actively engage in cyclical processes of planning, performance, monitoring, and adjustment.

Digital Technology, AI, and the Changing Role of the Learner

If the participants reported using generative AI or conversational AI tools, the findings revealed a further dimension of autonomous Arabic learning. Participants used ChatGPT and other AI-powered conversational tools to explain grammar and vocabulary

Table 1. Narrative Process of Autonomous Digital Arabic Learning

Stage	Learner activity	Role of digital technology	Autonomy dimension
1. Recognizing a need	Identifying a vocabulary, g pronunciation, or compreh problem	Provides access to informa alternative explanations	Awareness
2. Selecting resources	Choosing an application, v website, dictionary, or AI t	Expands available learning	Decision-making
3. Practicing	Repeating, reading, listeni writing, or interacting	Provides flexible practice opportunities	Independent action
4. Monitoring	Checking understanding a identifying remaining diffi	Provides feedback or exam	Metacognition
5. Adjusting	Changing strategies or sele another resource	Enables rapid access to alternatives	Self-regulation
6. Continuing	Establishing repeated lear practices	Supports learning beyond lessons	Sustained agency

Source: Authors' synthesis of the narrative findings.

This process provides a more nuanced interpretation of autonomy than a simple distinction between dependent and independent learners. Participants could demonstrate high autonomy in one aspect of learning and dependence in another. For example, a learner might independently select vocabulary materials but require teacher assistance to evaluate grammatical accuracy. Similarly, a learner might independently use AI to generate practice activities but remain dependent on a teacher for confirmation of complex linguistic explanations.

Taken together, the findings address the four objectives established in the Introduction. First, the narratives show that autonomous Arabic learning beyond the classroom involves learners taking greater ownership of decisions concerning their learning. Second, participants use digital resources strategically rather than uniformly, selecting tools according to particular learning needs. Third, sustained autonomous learning depends on self-regulation, particularly planning, monitoring, persistence, and strategic adjustment. Fourth, autonomy is shaped by contextual limitations, meaning that digital technology provides opportunities for autonomy but does not guarantee it.

Meanwhile, the most important contribution of the study is therefore conceptual: autonomous digital Arabic learning should be understood as an interaction between learner agency and digital affordances rather than as a direct consequence of technology use. This interpretation extends findings from technology-supported self-regulated learning research, which has generally demonstrated positive effects of technology on linguistic and metacognitive dimensions of learning (Yalçın, 2024). The findings also provide a useful contrast with studies that emphasize the development or evaluation of particular Arabic-learning technologies. For

example, Aedi *et al*. (2025) demonstrated the feasibility of a curriculum-aligned mobile application incorporating multimodal materials, interactive exercises, feedback, and adaptive features. While such applications can create favorable conditions for independent learning, the present study suggests that learner agency remains the mechanism through which those affordances become meaningful learning practices.

Further, the findings concerning AI, where applicable, are also consistent with the growing literature on AI-mediated self-regulated language learning. Previous research suggests that AI can function as a personalized and interactive resource, particularly when learners use it as part of a self-regulatory process rather than merely as an answer-generating mechanism (Chang & Sun, 2024). The present study extends this discussion into the context of Arabic learning beyond formal classroom settings. At the same time, the findings reinforce the need for critical digital literacy because autonomous learners must evaluate the reliability and appropriateness of technologically generated information. The study differs from previous technology-supported language-learning research by using a narrative, out-of-classroom approach that focuses on learners' experiences, changing practices, responses to difficulties, and growing responsibility for learning. It also emphasizes cautious AI integration, encouraging learners to use AI for explanation, practice, feedback, and idea generation while verifying its outputs with reliable Arabic resources and teacher guidance, as AI research still needs greater attention to feedback quality, diverse contexts, and long-term learning processes (Chang & Sun, 2024).

D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that autonomous Arabic language learning beyond the classroom develops not simply from access to digital technologies, but through learners' active use of digital affordances to identify needs, set goals, select resources, regulate learning, monitor progress, and adapt strategies. The findings contribute a narrative, experience-centered perspective by showing how learners gradually construct personalized digital learning environments while navigating challenges such as distraction, motivation, unequal access, unreliable content, and technological overdependence. The study highlights the importance of guided autonomy, in which teachers support learners' digital literacy, resource evaluation, self-monitoring, and critical use of AI while preserving learner agency. For teachers, this implies designing learning environments that provide structured guidance and strategic scaffolding while gradually transferring responsibility to learners. Ultimately, meaningful autonomous Arabic learning emerges from the interaction of learner agency, digital affordances, self-regulation, and pedagogical guidance, suggesting the need for future longitudinal and context-sensitive research on sustainable digital and AI-supported Arabic language learning.

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