











right answer. Big questions should be above the level of learners and have no easy direct answers so they stimulate collaborative work that always leads to collective answers and results in deep critical conversations among students [17]. Furthermore, ‘a good big question will connect more than one subject area: What is an insect? For instance, does not touch as many different subjects as what would happen to the Earth if all insects disappeared?’. Therefore, the main researcher carefully went through current level four syllabus used in the English Language centre where the study took place. He generated questions that have the qualities of big questions explained above and made sure that those generated questions would serve the purpose of the study. Those big questions were presented to the original SOLE designer for approval. Completing these tasks is part of the planning stage of PAR which comes right after the reconnaissance stage. Some examples of big questions raised are the following:

- How does our gender affect our identity? This question was generated to cover unit one in the listening and speaking book.
- What would happen to the Earth if all primates were extinct? This question was generated to cover unit one in the reading and writing book.
- How would our life be without the discovery of DNA? This question was generated to cover unit two in the reading and writing book.
- What would happen if migration was banned? This question was generated to cover unit four in the listening and speaking book.
- How do you think natural hazards would affect our world in the next thirty years? This question was generated to cover unit four in the reading and writing book.

These are just examples of some of the big questions that were raised during the SOLE sessions in cycle one. After the planning stage which included planning SOLE sessions, the implementation stage of PAR started by conducting SOLE sessions, subsequently the involvement of participants in this study began and they remained involved until the end of cycle two. Each session started by giving students a big question and clarifying any unclear aspects of it for five minutes. Then students were asked to search for around forty minutes and at the end they were given approximately fifteen minutes to present their findings in the SOLE toolkit. During each session, the teacher left students unsupervised for some time as suggested by Mitra [17]. As part of the evaluation stage of PAR, while present in the SOLE, the main researcher took notes of everything happening including notes about participants, events and

conversations which are crucial for any PAR research. Participants were also asked to reflect after each lesson on the learning experience in their diaries, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant one week before the end of cycle one and two focused group interviews were conducted at the end of cycle one. All these methods were used so that participants and the researchers could reflect immediately on the experience. They are also used, as mentioned above, for the evaluation stage of PAR in order to evaluate the intervention which is SOLEs and make any necessary changes for cycle two.

At the end, the researchers reflected and evaluated the whole experience. Participants’ diaries, semi-structured interviews, field notes and focus group data throughout cycle one were also analysed as it was an ongoing process. The rich data that were collected helped the researchers to make decisions about changes to be made especially those suggested by participants and stressed a lot in students’ diaries, interviews, focus interviews and the researchers’ field notes and evaluation; it is very important in PAR to involve participants throughout the research.

### 3.4. Methods

Four research methods were used to collect data which are semi-structured interviews, focus groups, diaries and the researcher field notes. It is worth mentioning that this is a purely qualitative study so using four methods ensure the trustworthy and authentic of the study as emphasized by Guba and Lincoln [cited in 10] who assert that in order for any qualitative study to be rigorous, it has to be both trustworthy and authentic.

### 3.5. Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for this study to analyse data stemming from diaries, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and the researcher’s field notes. ‘Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ [20] (p. 79). The thematic analysis approach is very much used and acknowledged in qualitative research studies, it is seen and considered to be an essential foundational analytic tool [20]. The researchers adopted thematic analysis because it is considered essential and effective due to its flexibility that leads to not only rich deep data analysis but also a rigorous one (ibid). Not only that but it is also ‘a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society’ (ibid, p. 81). Additionally, thematic analysis is also important for qualitative researchers because it helps to theorize participants’ experience within the

studied sociocultural context and not simply focus on their psychologies (ibid).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Students' autonomy increases

The findings of this study revealed that students' autonomy increases in SOLEs. This theme was highlighted in the researchers' reflections and was confirmed by the participants. It was observed by the researcher and confirmed by participants that students were happy for the room provided by this environment to choose what to do and how. This environment helped to create autonomous learners. Participants mentioned many tasks that they completed in according with their own decision making. They mentioned that they were also able to express their opinions freely without limitations. The principal researcher noticed that students demonstrated autonomy in many actions in the SOLE environment. They chose which website to surf, how to tackle each task, how to set goals, who to consult and many other autonomy-generated decisions. Testimonies that demonstrate and confirm autonomy are detailed below.

Students highlighted that this environment gives them the room to complete activities the way they like, that is it gives them more freedom to tackle tasks according to their preference:

*We do things that we like and the way we like* (S2, students' interviews).

*This way of learning gave the freedom for students to say their opinions whatever they are* (S4, students' interviews).

*Here students have more room to use their skills. Here students have options. Here students can choose any way to reach the answer* (S20, focus groups).

The field researcher also noticed that SOLEs led to students becoming more autonomous in their learning as they started doing tasks the way they like and according to their own decision making:

*Some students said it is good that we search in any website, it is our choice* (the research field notes).

*Students discussed how to search and do the task according to their preference* (the research field notes).

### 4.2. The approach in SOLEs motivates students

Findings also showed that the approach of SOLEs motivates students. SOLEs motivate students to learn and work hard. Thirteen students mentioned that they felt motivated due to the availability of the Internet, social media, the reinforcement they receive, the

uniqueness of SOLEs, the fun within SOLEs and additional reasons as shown in the extracts below:

*This environment has motivated me to learn via the internet and social media. It has given us the motivation to be better in using programs* (S3, students' interviews).

*It Motivates students to like English language. This environment gives motivation for students to improve English skills, improve this language, and acquire new skills. It motivates us* (S10, students' interviews). *This environment motivates us and changed the routine of our education* (S8, focus groups).

*This environment increased my desire to learn because we learn in groups* (S14, focus groups).

*I like searching so I felt motivated by this environment* (S15, focus groups).

*I think this environment motivates students to study hard and to attain high marks* (S4, students' diaries).

*Some students in all groups said 'let's work hard let's search in many websites'.* This shows that they are very much motivated (the research field notes).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Students' autonomy increases

The first theme which is students' autonomy increases was highlighted in the researchers' reflections and was confirmed by the participants. The researchers found that SOLEs help students to choose what to do and how, this finding was confirmed by some students, such as S2 who stated that 'we do things that we like and the way we like'. Students in this research made choices in how to answer questions, how to divide roles, how to present their outcomes and how to learn. This environment helped to create autonomous learners which is very important, as Thanasoulas [9] asserts, autonomous learners should take greater responsibility for their learning. Participants mentioned that they have more opportunities in SOLEs to make decisions. S20, for example, held that 'here students have more room to use their skills. Here students have options. Here students can choose any way to obtain the answer'. Giving students the opportunity to carry out some tasks according to their preferences is very important, this is in accordance with Little [8] who asserts that learners should be able to make decisions in terms of their own learning and to be able to take independent action that is congruent with their preferences, learning style and strategies. Some students in this study felt for the first time in their lives that they could control their own learning and make decisions during classes. 'Transferring some level of responsibility for learning to students...was in fact exceedingly motivating' [18] (p. 49). It was also emphasised that students felt that they could express their opinions freely without limitations. This is highlighted by S4

who said that ‘this way of learning gives students the freedom to state their opinions whatever they are’. This reflected positively on their attitude and emotional state towards learning English as evaluated and confirmed by the researchers. This is in congruence with the assertion by Little [8] (p. 81) that autonomy is linked to ‘learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning’.

The researchers noticed that students were autonomous in many tasks they performed. They chose which website to surf, how to tackle each task, how to set goals, who to consult and many other decisions. The field researcher noted all of these facts in his notes, writing ‘some students said it is good that we search any website, it is our choice’ and ‘students discussed how to search and perform the task according to their preference’. This freedom given to students to choose which strategy to adopt is important, Harmer [15] asserts that students can become autonomous learners when they are able to make decisions on their best learning strategies. One way to help students become autonomous is to provide them with technology [2] and SOLEs provide computers connected to the Internet all the time which, according to this research, significantly assisted in helping to create autonomous learners. Computers formed a main factor that led to autonomy as it is a tool that provides students with a significant amount of freedom. It is their choice which website they surf and which articles and information they research. It is also their choice whether to use PowerPoint or another method to present their findings, all are accepted in SOLEs. Studies on autonomy agree on the importance of fostering learners’ autonomy and this is supported by the European Language Portfolio among the objectives of it is “to promote learner autonomy” [7] (p. 3). Benson [2] in his book ‘Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning’ provides techniques to create autonomous learners. He believes that learner autonomy can be fostered if students are given independent interaction with learning materials and technology, if the importance of their behavioural changes is stressed and if they are supported by teachers in fostering their autonomy. SOLEs were found to support students in all these ways and, as a result, enhance student autonomy. Interaction with learning materials and technology is high in SOLEs and students’ behavioural changes linked to their improvement in terms of personality and knowledge is acknowledged in this environment.

## 5.2. The approach of SOLEs motivates students

Motivation in the EFL literature is viewed as a core and essential element that can facilitate learning in general and new language learning in specific [12]. Moskovsky et al. [6] also assert that in the language

learning field there is a lack of consensus among scholars on almost all issues except for the importance of motivation. Gardner [12] defines motivation as the love, desire and positive attitude towards acquiring and learning a new language. SOLEs have been found to motivate students to learn and work hard in this study; thirteen students mentioned that they felt motivated for various reasons. Several students felt motivated due to the availability of the Internet and social media, as S3 stated ‘this environment has motivated me to learn via the Internet and social media. It has given us the motivation to be better in using programs’. Likewise, S15 stated that ‘I like searching so I felt motivated by this environment’. This study stresses that learning environments that meet students’ expectations and, most importantly, meet the requirements of their era help to motivate them. Students felt that this environment belonged to them, it is contemporary and suitable for their era. The researchers noticed the impact of SOLEs on students’ motivation in many sessions, and noted that ‘Some students in all groups said ‘let’s work hard, let’s search many websites’. This indicates a high level of motivation. Additionally, improvement in their use and level of English proved to be motivating factors, as evidenced by S10 ‘SOLEs motivate students to like English language. This environment provides motivation for students to improve their English skills, improve this language, and acquire new skills. It motivates us’. In the same way, S4 said that ‘I think this environment motivates students to study hard and to attain high marks’. Watt [14] argues that there are non-cognitive factors that affect students’ motivation including the learning environment. This research confirms that SOLEs as learning environments function well in terms of motivating students. This finding is corroborated by the work of Ellis et al. [5] (p. 9) who found that students ‘are being motivated in this process by the freedom to learn which SOLEs offer’. Therefore, students ‘exhibited greater motivation’ (ibid, p. 10). The teacher who trialled SOLEs in their study also expressed that ‘the SOLE method appeared to energise the students’ (ibid, p. 10). S8 who felt motivated due to the nature of SOLEs which breaks students’ routines stated that ‘this environment motivates us and changes the routine of our education’. Many students in this study felt motivated due to the element of enjoyment in SOLEs that is different from all of the routine classes to which they are accustomed. Others felt motivated by the group work which is a main pillar of SOLEs, as S14 stated that ‘this environment increased my desire to learn because we learn in groups’. The researchers found that group work leads to confidence and this confidence leads to motivation. It has been found that students’ motivation decreases as they mature [16;14]. Therefore, the ability of SOLEs to motivate adults in this study is a significant element of interest for this approach, since it helps to retain motivation



and re-motivate older students. This study confirmed the motivational element of SOLEs that was revealed by the previous literature on this learning environment, it was highlighted that initial observation shows that children find SOLEs more interesting and engaging compared to traditional education [17]. Rix and McElwee [18] (p. 40) also found that ‘initial enthusiasm...showed a move away from the passivity and apathy’. The validity of the results of this study is ensured as many tools were used, because the researchers explored the change in students’ motivation during the period of a complete academic semester and also from different aspects. Moreover, these results highlight the factors that are present in SOLEs and which act as motivational drivers.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore SOLEs impacts on students. The researchers offered SOLEs as an intervention and then explored students’ experiences in learning English using Self-Organized Learning Environments. SOLEs were chosen due to their supposed qualities emphasized by Mitra et al. (2016). They demonstrate that in SOLEs, students gain confidence, become capable, learn information ahead of their age, and enjoy activities.

The SOLE approach was implemented during the foundation year due to the importance of this pedagogical stage as it is the year in which students learn English intensively and prepare for their future specialization the following year. The objective that guided this research: to investigate whether SOLE pedagogy is able to positively influence Omani EFL college students.

This problem was addressed using participatory action research (PAR) because it helps researchers in both generating new knowledge and improving existing practices and situations [10]. Furthermore, action research allows researchers to act while researching by the use of interventions, which in this study were SOLEs. Another advantage of utilizing action research is that it is both participatory and collaborative [10], which means that the thinking, reflection, decisions and planning are all collective. In this study, the results of analyses were achieved after the analysis of collective views, reflections and evaluations by both the researchers and participants. Results revealed that in this study, students’ autonomy increases, and approach of SOLEs motivates students. The researchers believe that future studies should

examine SOLEs influence on students’ attainment through appropriate mixed methodology studies.

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