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**Research Paper**

# Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Autonomy Through Dialogic Tasks: Gender and Levels of Proficiency as Mediating Factors

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**Abstract**
This study investigated the effects of dialogic tasks on Iranian English as Foreign Language learners' autonomy considering the mediating effects of the learners' gender and levels of proficiency as well. A total number of 213 male and female Iranian EFL learners within the age range of 15-26 were selected through convenience sampling from three language schools in Fars, Iran. The Oxford Quick Placement Test was run to ensure homogeneity, and choose learners at two levels of proficiency (upper vs. lower intermediate), later assigned to experimental and control groups. Then, a translated version of learner autonomy questionnaire was run as the pretest and posttest. The treatment was dialogic tasks operationalized through storytelling and picture description tasks. Three-way ANCOVA was conducted to compare the autonomy posttest scores of the male and female learners in the two experimental and control groups at the two proficiency levels of lower- and upper-intermediate. The results of data analysis showed that dialogic tasks had a significant effect on increasing the autonomy among EFL learners. Nonetheless, levels of proficiency and gender did not have any significant mediating effects on the autonomy of the learners under investigation. The study will provide robust implications for language teachers and learners.
***Keywords*:** Dialogic tasks; Learners' autonomy; Gender; Task-based language teaching; Proficiency levels

**ارتقای خود اتکایی زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی از طریق فعالیتهای دیالکتیک: با بررسی جنسیت و سطوح مهارت به عنوان عوامل تعدیل کننده**
این پژوهش با در نظر گرفتن اثرات واسطه ای و تعدیل کننده ی جنسیت و سطوح مهارتی زبان‌آموزان، تأثیر فعالیت های دیالکتیک را بر خود اتکایی زبان‌آموزان انگلیسی ایرانی به‌عنوان زبان‌های خارجی مورد بررسی قرار داد. تعداد 213 زبان آموز انگلیسی پسر و دختر ایرانی در محدوده سنی 15 تا 26 سال به روش نمونه گیری در دسترس (آسان) از سه آموزشگاه زبان در فارس انتخاب شدند. آزمون تعیین سطح سریع آکسفورد برای اطمینان از همگنی زبان آموزان اجرا شد و زبان آموزان در دو سطح مهارتی بالای متوسطه و زیر متوسطه انتخاب شدند که بعداً به گروه های آزمایش و کنترل اختصاص یافتند. سپس نسخه ترجمه شده پرسشنامه خوداتکایی زبان اموزان به عنوان پیش آزمون و پس آزمون اجرا شد. فعالیتهای دیالکتیک به عنوان درمان (روش آموزشی جایگزین) از طریق داستان گویی و توصیف تصویر اجرا شد. روش آماری سه طرفه ANCOVA برای مقایسه نمرات پس‌آزمون خود اتکایی زبان‌آموزان دختر و پسر در دو گروه آزمایش و کنترل در دو سطح مهارتی بالای متوسطه و زیر متوسطه انجام شد. نتایج تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها نشان داد که فعالیتهای دیالکتیک تأثیر معناداری بر افزایش خوداتکایی زبان آموزان انگلیسی دارد. با این وجود، سطوح مهارتی و جنسیت هیچ اثر تعدیل کننده ای که قابل توجه باشد بر خود اتکایی زبان اموزان این پژوهش نداشت. این مطالعه نتایج کاربردی برای معلمان و زبان آموزان ارائه خواهد داد.
**کلید واژه ها:** اموزش زبان فعالیت محور، فعالیتهای دیالکتیک،خوداتکایی زبان آموزان، سطوح مهارتی، جنسیت

## Introduction

The principle of task-based language teaching (TBLT) is that an educational shift has occurred from teacher-oriented classes to students-oriented classes. TBLT proves to be more successful than other methods and approaches because of its meaningful, stress- free, and low anxiety nature. It focuses on pragmatic meaning rather than semantic meaning and form-focused activities and this moves students to a more dialogic aspect of language (Ellis, 2003). Since dialogic classes focus on pragmatic meaning and negotiations of meaning through interactions of the learners, it seems to be a good model combining with appropriate tasks in English classes.

Although the concept of learner autonomy has been widely investigated in SLA studies and ELT circles throughout the past few decades, there is still no consensus among researchers about its best definition. In one of the earliest definitions of autonomy, Holec (1981) referred to it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). He further explained that taking charge meant being responsible for deciding learning management and organization, including setting up learning objectives, having the right to decide learning content and progress, selecting suitable learning methods, monitoring acquisition procedure, and making an evaluation on what had been acquired.

Little (1991) argued that learner autonomy is "essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning—a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p. 4). Within this perspective, learners are expected to have some psychological preparations for their learning process and learning content, as Benson (2011) has also agreed that this definition assumed "the capacity to manage one's own learning depends upon certain underlying psychological capacities" (p.23). Moreover, Little (1994) claimed that autonomy is also associated with learners' enjoying freedom in their learning, but this freedom is restricted by other factors, because as social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence.

In a more recent definition, Morrison (2011) has defined autonomy by focusing more attention on the necessity of support from teachers or peers in the language learning process. In Morrison's view, learner autonomy need "not be a solitary experience but rather one in which the learner, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decision necessary to meet the learner's needs" (p. 31). In fact, the literature on autonomy shows that it is widely accepted that autonomous learners should be responsible for analyzing their learning needs, selecting appropriate approaches to achieve them, monitoring the whole learning process and evaluating learning outcomes. Nonetheless, Morrison (2011) emphasizes that accepted levels of autonomy cannot be possibly achieved without teachers' or peers' assistance. This is in line with Nunan's (2003) relevant statement that: "Teachers who are committed to the concepts of learner-centeredness and autonomy must therefore help their learners to develop this knowledge and skills" (p. 94).

Although the definitions of learner autonomy vary, they have some widely acknowledged common characteristics, including that autonomy is not an inborn ability but can be acquired; autonomy requires learners' willingness to take charge of their own learning; autonomy asks for learners' psychological preparations; autonomy is learners' political rights and freedom to learn for themselves; autonomy can be interpreted from the individual dimension as well as the social dimension; and the promotion of autonomy cannot be separated from teachers' support and assistance.

## Literature Review

The review of literature on learner autonomy shows that it is rooted in humanist psychology, constructivist theory of learning, and developmental psychology (Davison, 2011). Similarly, Hadi

(2012) argued developmental learning, constructivism, humanist learning theory, and experiential learning have laid the solid theoretical foundation for learner autonomy. Hogan (2012) put forward that learner autonomy stemmed from cognitive psychology and constructivism. In another attempt, Wang (2014) has summarized the theoretical foundation of learner autonomy as humanist theory, constructivist theory, and metacognition. Ouyang (2017) has suggested that the theoretical foundations of learner autonomy were humanist learning theory, constructivist learning theory, and metacognitive learning theory.

**Humanist Psychology**

Humanistic psychology places much emphasis on learner-centeredness in the whole learning process, because it identifies learners' personal identity, meets their various learning needs, encourages them to make their own decisions, and treats them as integrated person. According to humanistic psychology, it could be claimed that learners' emotional factors, including language learning belief, language learning motivation, and language learning anxiety, counted a lot in their autonomous learning. This being so, English language teachers are expected to pay closer attention to their students' emotional factors so as to promote learner autonomy, i.e., to develop students' positive beliefs about language learning, to enhance students' language learning motivation, and to help students successfully overcome language learning anxiety (Cui, 2011).

**Constructivist Learning Theory**

Learner autonomy can also be interpreted within the constructivist theory which dwells heavily on the active and constructive process of learning. Thanasoulas (2000) argues that constructivist theory was a kind of learning philosophy whose premise was "by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in" (p.12). Likewise, Erben et al (2009) have asserted that "in constructivist pedagogy, all learning is active and not passive" (p, 63). Such claims about the nature of constructivist theory coincide with the connotations of autonomous learning, because autonomy "is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning" (Little, 2007, p.7).

Thus, it can be claimed that an individual learner has his/her own way of interpreting and constructing the target language throughout the learning process, suggesting that language learning is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. Furthermore, concepts such as creativeness, cooperation, and engagement with the target language are of great relevance in the process of constructing the target language (Thanasoulas, 2000). In sum, one can safely claim that when learners actively participate in their language learning, i.e., setting up learning objectives, making study plans, monitoring learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes, they will be able to learn a foreign language more efficiently and effectively (Little, 2007). Moreover, students should cooperate with others in the process of autonomous learning, for their construction of knowledge cannot be separated from the social context. In this regard, EFL teachers are expected to assist their students to develop learner autonomy through to helping them develop strong language learning motivation, providing them with some training on language learning strategies, helping their students manage language learning anxiety, and designing group activities for students so that group members could cooperate and interact with each other.

**Cognitive Psychology**

Learner autonomy draws upon cognitive psychology, which emphasizes learners' mental process and mental system in learning. More specifically, it is claimed in cognitive psychology that learning is a mental process in which learners could change and adapt their organism to various learning situations (Bruner, 1996). Moreover, Broady (1996) argued that when students

combined the knowledge they had acquired or the knowledge they were going to acquire and their experience together, their learning would become more efficient and effective. Similarly, Crabbe (1993) contended that learners would learn better if they took responsibility of their learning. Thus, it can be seen that cognitive psychology is another theory closely linked with learner autonomy. More precisely, among the main psychologist's theories, Ausubel's meaningful language learning theory and Bruner's "cognitive discovery" are closely related the learner autonomy (Xu, 2007, p. 38). Bruner (1996) has also claimed in his theory of "cognitive discovery" that learners should be stimulated to find rules and principles on their own through the active participation of experiments. According to Bruner, the ultimate aim of teaching a student is to make the learner think in his/her own way and participate the process to acquire knowledge. In fact, cognitive learning theory has offered some important notions in students' autonomous learning.

Drawing upon the previous section, it can be claimed that humanist psychology dwells on the emotional factors in learners' autonomous learning such as language learning belief, learning motivation, and learning anxiety; constructivist learning theory places emphasis on learners' active construction of knowledge in foreign language acquisition, and learners also need to cooperative with outside world in their learning process; and cognitive psychology emphasizes students' meaningful learning and meaningful practice of the target language, and explains why students need to utilize some language learning strategies. The next section will explain factors affecting learner autonomy.

**Studies on TBLT and Autonomy**

In a related study, Ghodrati, Ashraf, and Motallebxadeh (2014) focused on improvement of Iranian EFL learners' autonomy through task-based speaking activities. As such, the goal of their study was to investigate whether using task-based speaking activities had any effects on autonomy of the learners. In this experimental study, Learner's Autonomy in Language Learning Questionnaire was used as the pretest and posttest. The results suggested the fact that task-based speaking activities had positive effect on improving learners' autonomy in the experimental group.

Lee (2016) investigated the effectiveness for autonomous learning in a fully online learning environment involving the implementation of task-based instruction. This being, four-skill-integrated tasks and digital tools were incorporated into the coursework. Data were collected using midterm reflections, post-surveys and final interviews from two online elementary language courses. Her results revealed that the types of tasks and digital tools utilized fostered learner autonomy in different ways. More precisely, she claimed that structured tasks enabled students to work independently to create content, whereas open-ended tasks allowed them more freedom in exploring the understanding of a particular topic through social interaction. The researcher concluded that personal commitment to the coursework and cognitive engagement with the learning material contributed to the degree of learning autonomy and the level of social interaction in fully online language learning.

In another study, Vieira (2017) investigated the effects of a TBLT program ran by two student teachers in an autonomy-oriented action research project. In fact, his study aimed at unveiling the significance of TBLT within an inquiry-based, autonomy-oriented approach to the practicum in ELT, and it was based on a retrospective analysis of two student teachers' narratives of experience: project portfolios and reports. The results of the study confirm the positive effects of TBLT on learning autonomy among EFL learners. Nonetheless, Vieira claims that if TBLT is to promote students' autonomy as language users and learners, teachers need to adopt not only a

communicative approach but also a view of education that integrates learner empowerment, a view that runs counter to dominant traditions of schooling.

In another study, Khomeijani Farahani, Kavianpnah, and Naseri (2019) examined the effect of task type on autonomous EFL learners' interactive negotiation in synchronous computer-mediated communication context. They participants took partin three types of tasks, including Decision making, Jigsaw, and Opinion gap tasks via Telegram Desktop. Their results indicated that the learners tried to utilize different frequencies of appropriate moves to achieve the goals of the specific task. Practically, their study presented a revised model that can be used as a frame work for designing suitable task types to promote greater learner autonomy.

In a recent study, Alrabai (2021) in a longitudinal empirical investigation examined the actual practicality of certain strategies that have been theoretically acknowledged as having potential positive effect on EFL learner's autonomy. Strategies targeting learners' self-determined learning in the classroom in terms of satisfying learner basic psychological needs (BPNs) of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as well as their choice of tasks, were implemented in a treatment group for 12weeks. A classroom observation was used to evaluate teachers' autonomy-supportive teaching and a student self-report measure, and an observation were used to assess learners' autonomy. The findings revealed that the experimental intervention led to statistically significant increased EFL autonomy for learners in the experimental group. Learner perceived choice, autonomy support, competence, and intrinsic motivation mediated the relationship between teacher autonomy-supportive teaching and learner autonomy; with perceived choice being the strongest predictor of learner autonomy. Such obtained results acknowledge the vital role of teacher autonomy-supportive teaching in promoting EFL learner autonomy.

The following research questions were formulated to examine the effects of dialogic tasks on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy:

**RQ1.** Do dialogic tasks play a significant role to increase Iranian EFL learners' autonomy?

**RQ2.** Does proficiency levels of learners significantly mediate the probable effects of dialogic tasks on EFL learners' autonomy?

**RQ3.** Does learners' gender significantly mediate the probable effects of dialogic tasks on EFL learners' autonomy? and

**RQ4.** Are there any significant interaction effects between levels of proficiency and gender considering the probable effects of dialogic tasks on learners' autonomy?

## Methodology

A quantitative pre-test-treatment-post-test quasi-experimental design was used in this research. A quasi-experimental design, based on Mackey and Gass (2005) is a design which has elements such as experimental group, control group, treatment, placebo, pretest, and posttest, but lacks random selection of the participants. The learners in the present study were pretested on autonomy which served as the dependent variable of the study, and after the intervention they received a posttest on this variable. While the independent variable was employing dialogic tasks, the participants' gender and proficiency level were chosen to be examined as the moderator variables in this study. Moreover, this study was conducted during the spring term in 2019-2020 educational year in three English Language Institutes (ELI) located in Khafr, Fars province, Iran. These three institutes were chosen because we could obtain their consent and permission to conduct this study in their EFL classes.

### Participants

Arranging with officials in these institutes, a total number of 213 male and female Iranian EFL learners within the age range of 20-26 were selected through convenience sampling out of 287 available students in three language schools. In spite of the schools' criteria for determining

the learners' level of proficiency, the researchers ran the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) in order to ensure the proficiency levels and select the 213 participants. Consulting OQPT's scoring criteria, the learners were divided into two main levels of proficiency (upper vs. lower intermediate) and they were assigned to experimental and control groups. The details regarding the grouping of the participants could be seen in the following table:

**Table 1**

*The Number of Participants in Each Group and Subgroup*

| Groups | Proficiency | Gender | *N* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Experimental Group | Lower-intermediate | Male | 25 |
| | | Female | 29 |
| | | Total | 54 |
| | Upper-intermediate | Male | 27 |
| | | Female | 25 |
| | | Total | 52 |
| | Total | Male | 52 |
| | | Female | 54 |
| | | Total | 106 |
| Control Group | Lower-intermediate | Male | 28 |
| | | Female | 26 |
| | | Total | 54 |
| | Upper-intermediate | Male | 26 |
| | | Female | 27 |
| | | Total | 53 |
| | Total | Male | 54 |
| | | Female | 53 |
| | | Total | 107 |
| Total | Lower-intermediate | Male | 53 |
| | | Female | 55 |
| | | Total | 108 |
| | Upper-intermediate | Male | 53 |
| | | Female | 52 |
| | | Total | 105 |
| | Total | Male | 106 |
| | | Female | 107 |
| | | Total | 213 |

As it could be seen in Table 1, there were 106 learners in the experimental group (EG henceforth) and 107 learners in the control group (CG hereafter). The total number of lower-intermediate learners was 108, and there were 105 upper-intermediate participants in this study. In order to train the teachers participating in this project, one of the researchers held an educational session of about two hours to clarify the detailed rules and principles of the prescribed teaching in this project. He introduced key points of dialogism and task-based instruction briefly.

## Instruments

### Placement Test

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was run in order to ensure learners' homogeneity and select 213 participants at two proficiency levels. Those learners who scored 30-39 were labeled lower-intermediate and the ones who scored from 40 to 47 were considered to be upper-intermediate. The OQPT had 60 multiple-choice questions of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. The test has been validated before and widely used by researchers all over the globe.

### Learners' Autonomy Questionnaire

The Participants' autonomy was measured with a 21-item questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004). The participant responded to each item by choosing one of the five choices following each item. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the questionnaire in this study was revealed to be .836. As well as reliability, the content validity of the questionnaires was checked by a board of university professors teaching at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza branch, and three certified teachers in Iranian Education Department, and the necessary changes were made.

### Data Collection Procedure

Initially, a total number of 213 student participants, who were filtered out from OQPT took part in the study. Among these participants, there were 108 lower-intermediate participants (53 males and 55 females) and 105 upper-intermediate participants (53 males and 52 females). At the outset of the study, learner autonomy pretest was administered and the learners were asked to answer questionnaire in order to measure their entry amount of autonomy before launching the dialogic treatment program.

A week after administering the pretest, the treatment phase of the study began. In this study, the researchers designed and utilized dialogic tasks through which students could interact meaningfully not just mechanically. This being so, the main dialogic tasks was storytelling which had two parts; the first was controlled story-telling in which the teacher selected some of the new phrases and grammars and students were asked to share their related experiences and meaningful sentences with the class accompanying with the teacher and peers' agreements or disagreements. The second was uncontrolled story telling in which, the teacher chose a related topic in order to propose a dialogic discussion line in class. Students were supposed to think for some minutes as well as to take note if they needed. Then, they shared their stories with class. Peers and teacher commented on and sometimes challenged their stories. The teachers asked thought-provoking questions in order to make them think and challenged other students. After the completion of the treatment phase, once more the learner autonomy questionnaire was administered to the participants to measure their levels of autonomy after being exposed to dialogic task treatment.

## Results

Due to having an independent variable and two moderator variables, a three-way ANCOVA was conducted to compare the autonomy post-test scores of the male and female learners in the two groups of EG and CG and at the two proficiency levels of lower- and upper-intermediate. The results of descriptive statistics for this analysis are presented in Table 2:

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Autonomy Posttest Scores of the Learners*

| Groups | Proficiency | Gender | Mean | Std. Deviation | *N* | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EG | Lower-intermediate | Male | 85.12 | 2.991 | 25 | .34 | 1.32 |
| | | Female | 85.07 | 4.705 | 29 | .65 | .76 |
| | | Total | 85.09 | 3.968 | 54 | .51 | .93 |
| | Upper-intermediate | Male | 85.56 | 3.856 | 27 | -.69 | -1.02 |
| | | Female | 85.44 | 4.273 | 25 | .84 | .45 |
| | | Total | 85.50 | 4.022 | 52 | .11 | -.33 |
| | Total | Male | 85.35 | 3.441 | 52 | 1.32 | .69 |
| | | Female | 85.24 | 4.472 | 54 | .87 | .75 |
| | | Total | 85.29 | 3.981 | 106 | 1.03 | .73 |
| CG | Lower-intermediate | Male | 77.25 | 4.926 | 28 | -.61 | 1.02 |
| | | Female | 77.31 | 3.159 | 26 | .94 | .45 |
| | | Total | 77.28 | 4.132 | 54 | .17 | .74 |
| | Upper-intermediate | Male | 78.81 | 4.176 | 26 | 1.42 | -.23 |
| | | Female | 78.81 | 3.375 | 27 | .28 | .67 |
| | | Total | 78.81 | 3.752 | 53 | .85 | .26 |
| | Total | Male | 78.00 | 4.605 | 54 | .56 | 1.48 |
| | | Female | 78.08 | 3.327 | 53 | -1.15 | 1.03 |
| | | Total | 78.04 | 4.005 | 107 | .34 | 1.22 |
| Total | Lower-intermediate | Male | 80.96 | 5.697 | 53 | .47 | -.29 |
| | | Female | 81.40 | 5.603 | 55 | .14 | .87 |
| | | Total | 81.19 | 5.627 | 108 | .32 | .31 |
| | Upper-intermediate | Male | 82.25 | 5.236 | 53 | 1.24 | 1.27 |
| | | Female | 82.00 | 5.057 | 52 | .56 | -.65 |
| | | Total | 82.12 | 5.125 | 105 | .92 | .49 |
| | Total | Male | 81.60 | 5.484 | 106 | -.34 | 1.52 |
| | | Female | 81.69 | 5.328 | 107 | -.25 | .86 |
| | | Total | 81.65 | 5.393 | 213 | -.31 | 1.26 |

With respect to autonomy posttest mean scores of the learners, the total mean scores for male and female learners were found to be slightly different from one another (81.60 vs. 81.69). Moreover, it was revealed that upper-intermediate learners ($M$ = 82.12) were, by and large, more autonomous than lower-intermediate learners ($M$ = 81.19). In addition, the EG learners ($M$ = 85.29) turned out to enjoy higher levels of autonomy vis-à-vis the CG learners ($M$ = 78.04). Table 4.3 also shows all the mean scores and standard deviations of the gender and proficiency subgroups of the EG and CG.

In addition, the skewness and kurtosis values provided in Table 2 indicate no violation of the assumption of normality for the autonomy post-test distributions of male and female learners in the lower- and upper-intermediate subgroups in EG and CG. As the assumptions of homogeneity of variances ($p$ = .46 > .05) and homogeneity of regression slopes were also met, the researcher could proceed with conducting the three-way ANCOVA, the results of which are displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Three-way ANOVA for Autonomy Post-test Scores of the Learners*

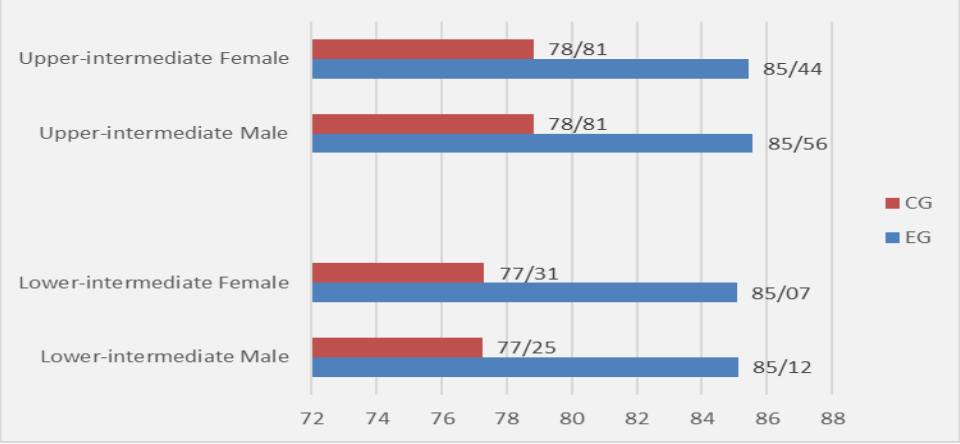
| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | *df* | Mean Square | *F* | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Corrected Model | 6156.259 | 8 | 769.532 | 15192.604 | .000 | .998 |
| Intercept | 10.180 | 1 | 10.180 | 200.982 | .000 | .496 |
| Autonomy Pretest | 3285.897 | 1 | 3285.897 | 64872.295 | .000 | .997 |
| Groups | 2635.477 | 1 | 2635.477 | 52031.290 | .000 | .996 |
| Proficiency | .036 | 1 | .036 | .718 | .398 | .004 |
| Gender | .008 | 1 | .008 | .168 | .683 | .001 |
| Groups * Proficiency | .214 | 1 | .214 | 4.222 | .041 | .020 |
| Groups * Gender | .004 | 1 | .004 | .082 | .775 | .000 |
| Proficiency * Gender | .002 | 1 | .002 | .034 | .853 | .000 |
| Groups * Proficiency * Gender | .009 | 1 | .009 | .173 | .678 | .001 |
| Error | 10.333 | 204 | .051 | | | |
| Total | 1426105.000 | 213 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 6166.592 | 212 | | | | |

As it could be seen in Table 3, there was a significant difference between the EG and CG learners in this study because the relevant *p* value appeared to be lower than the .05 level of significance ($p = .000 < .05$). The magnitude of this difference was found to be very large as the effect size value (under the Partial Eta Squared column) turned up to be .99. Proficiency and Gender, however, did not have significant effects on the autonomy of the learners under investigation. Regarding the interaction effects between/among the independent variables, only the interaction effect of Groups and Proficiency was of statistical significance ($p < .05$), and all the other remaining interactions (including the interaction effect of Groups * Gender, the interaction effect of Proficiency * Gender, and the interaction effect of Groups * Proficiency * Gender) did not reach statistical significance. The results obtained above are also graphically shown in the bar chart in Figure 1:

**Figure 1**

*Autonomy post-test mean scores of the learners*



This bar chart shows that there is a considerable difference between the learners in the EG and the CG, but the difference between the male and female learners in each group is very tiny. Additionally, the upper-intermediate learners are not that different from their lower-intermediate counterparts.

## Discussion

The main research question of the study investigated the potential effects of dialogic tasks on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy. More precisely, within this main research question of the study, the mediating effects of the learners' level of proficiency and their gender were also examined. To address and answer the aforementioned research questions, a three-way ANCOVA was conducted to compare the autonomy posttest scores of the male and female learners in the two groups of EG and CG and at the two proficiency levels of lower- and upper-intermediate. The results of data analysis showed that dialogic tasks had a significant effect on increasing the autonomy among EFL learners. Nonetheless, level of proficiency and gender did not have significant effects on the autonomy of the learners under investigation. In other words, there were no significant differences between male and female as well as lower and upper-intermediate learners with regard to the effects of dialogic tasks on learner autonomy.

The findings of the present study lend further support to the findings of previous researchers who claim that TBLT in general and dialogic tasks in particular can have significant effects on increasing learner autonomy in ESL/EFL classrooms (Benson, 2011; Gokgoz, 2008; Wasik & Hindman, 2014; Alrabai; 2021 ). Such claims, in line with our findings, show that, integrating language and content, dialogic tasks make the use of English more 'real', interesting and meaningful, by offering a variation to the language-driven approach, as well as by giving the learners the opportunity to use English as a tool to investigate and describe (Zhang & Li, 2004). Furthermore, dialogic tasks have been reported to enable social, cognitive, psychological and emotional development by involving higher levels thinking skills (ability to make hypotheses, predictions and observations). Thus, a justification for our findings can be attributed to the fact that dialogic tasks improve learning since they encourage learners in completing task activities in collaboration, which leads to development regarding their performance in a more independent and learner-centered context (Wasik & Hindman, 2014).

Our obtained results regarding the effects of TBLT on learner autonomy are also in line with the findings of Vieira (2017) and Ellis (2009) who assert that if TBLT is to enhance students' autonomy as language users and learners, teachers should employ not only a communicative approach but also a view of education that integrates learner empowerment, a view that runs counter to dominant traditions of schooling. In other words, learner autonomy has been associated with TBLT in many studies, including ours, because learner-centeredness has been basically related to enhancing situated, communicative language use, which is a main objective of the communicative approach in general, and to enhancing learners' engagement in authentic communication as a means to develop their linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, and intercultural competences (Savignon, 2007; Vieira, 2017). Such learner-centeredness advocated in integration of tasks in L2 teaching can bring out higher levels of autonomy among EFL learners as shown in this study.

Moreover, our findings comply with those of Lee (2016) who investigated the effects of TBLT in an online teaching environment on improving autonomous learning. Her results showed that the types of tasks and digital tools utilized fostered learner autonomy in different ways. More specifically, she argued that structured tasks enabled students to work independently to create content. The researcher concluded that personal commitment to the coursework and cognitive engagement with the learning material contributed to the degree of learning autonomy and the

level of social interaction in fully online language learning. These claims can also explain our findings on the effectiveness of dialogic tasks for autonomous learning because in TBLT learner is perceived as a language user and a social communicator, and the teacher is deemed as a facilitator of communication, a skillful communicator, a provider of language input and feedback, and a mediator of students' language development (Ellis, 2009; Van den Branden, 2009, 2016). Nonetheless, according to Jimenez Raya et al. (2007), learner-centeredness needs to go beyond promoting students' autonomy as language users, entailing also their autonomy as language learners. In essence, as shown in our results such tasks can help EFL learners boost their competence to become self-determined, responsible, and critical actors in educational settings.

In line with the findings of this study, in two recently conducted studies, Khomeijani Farahani, Kavianpnah, and Naseri (2019) and Alrabai (2021) have also reported the effectiveness of TBLT on increasing autonomous learning among EFL learners. The fact that the experimental intervention in those studies as wells as in ours led to statistically significant increased EFL autonomy for learners in the experimental groups can be explained by taking into account the notion of learner autonomy on a broader level. As argued by Van den Branden (2016), autonomy draws mostly on experiential learning philosophy, emphasizing learner engagement, learning how to learn, cooperative and self-directed learning, self-evaluation, learner voice, and empowerment.

In general, the findings on the main objective of this study corroborated the findings in the previous literature that stress the effectiveness of TBLT for improving autonomy among learners (Ghodrati, Ashraf, and Motallebzadeh, 2014; Lee, 2016; Viera, 2017; Alrabai, 2021). The aforementioned conclusions are reasonably justifiable if it is born in mind that lack of autonomy-supported teaching can lead to traditional teacher-dominated classrooms that will produce a clash between teachers' and students' agendas and affect task effectiveness, thus implying that decisions regarding tasks can be negotiated so that students build a sense of task ownership (Van den Branden, 2009). He further argues that task development and task performance in L2 classrooms should allow for interactional negotiation, which will result in enhancing symmetrical discourse patterns and learner discourse power. Such claims acknowledge the vital role of teacher autonomy-supportive teaching in promoting EFL learner autonomy, which can be achieved through dialogic tasks as feasible L2 teaching strategies.

## Conclusion

A concept that has received considerable attention in ELT circles is learner autonomy which has been proven to play a key role in TBLT as well. Different scholars have claimed that learner-centeredness is an indisputable characteristic of TBLT; nevertheless, this kind of learner-centeredness goes certainly beyond promoting students' autonomy only as language users, entailing also their autonomy as language learners; in other words, autonomous learning will require their competence to become self-determined, responsible, and critical actors in educational settings and beyond (Jang & Jimenez, 2011). This is in line with how theoretical foundations of TBLT link it to learner autonomy within experiential learning philosophy, emphasizing learner engagement, learning how to learn, cooperative and experiential learning philosophy, self-directed learning, self-evaluation, learner voice, and empowerment (Nunan, 2004).

To enhance the above-mentioned form of learner autonomy in communicative L2 classrooms, teacher-student dialogue is central to language teaching process because it not only functions as a linguistic exchange between teacher and students but also creates a community of speakers and listeners who use the target language purposefully. In essence, previous research has shown that dialogic teaching – an effective teaching approach that allows teachers and students to interact collaboratively and actively build on each other's ideas – can increase classroom engagement and

enhance children's language development (Alexander, 2008; Haneda & Wells, 2008). As such, the role of dialogic teaching in general and dialogic tasks in particular seems to be of even further significance in improving FL speaking among learners.

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