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## Self-Directed and Autonomous Learning Concerning Using Technology-Based Activities in Distance Learning

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Soraya Raeisi\*

Department of English Language Learning, Velayat University, Iranshahr, Iran

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### Abstract

Nowadays, technology is an inseparable part of modern life and is closely related to learning a new language in every context. This study investigates the self-direction and autonomy of Iranian EFL university students in distance learning after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This questionnaire-based study was conducted on 76 EFL students using three close-ended questionnaires to assess the students' technology-based activities (TBA). In addition, ten students were randomly selected and interviewed about their attitudes toward the role of TBA in distance learning and their improvement in English proficiency. The results revealed that listening to the teacher's recorded voice (score: 4.81), 2) using dictionaries or translators (score: 4.55), 3) listening to English music (score: 4.10), 4) using English language software and applications (score: 4.02), and 5) joining an English group through a social networking application (score: 3.90) were the most frequently used TBA by EFL university students. In addition, there is a positive correlation between self-direction and the use of TBA ( $p$  value < 0.01) and between TBA and autonomous learning ( $p$  value < 0.01) (OR: 0.551). It can be concluded that teachers should provide access to technology-based resources, applications, and social media; make activities with technology motivating and fun, and teach strategies for using TBA outside and inside the classroom.

**Keywords:** technology-based activities (TBA), self-direct, autonomy, the Covid-19 pandemic, the distance learning

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the availability of online technologies, along with ever-growing advances in technological devices and gadgets, has ensured that a wealth of language input is more accessible than ever. Technology has impacted every area of education. The use of online content for English language instruction is one of the most significant impacts of improved technology. According to (Selwyn, 2006), technology has given everyone almost everywhere in the world the ability to learn more independently. As (Richards, 2015) points out, the Internet and technological devices provide free access to any materials, applications,

programs, or platforms that learners need to improve their language skills.

Since the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, it has been decided worldwide to seal off many cities, ban social activities, and close educational institutions and public places to maintain social distance and stop the outbreak of the disease. As a result, most educators have voluntarily or involuntarily adopted the distance learning method and moved to online learning and teaching. There are some opportunities and challenges for distance learning: the accessibility of online education, the time and money savings, and the availability of different types of content, anywhere and

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\*Corresponding Author's Email:  
[s.raeisi@velayat.ac.ir](mailto:s.raeisi@velayat.ac.ir)

anytime. But we cannot ignore the challenges of distance learning. Some of them are on English as a foreign language (EFL) the challenges of teaching writing and phonetics, or more general drawbacks such as poor Internet connection, lack of high-quality equipment, and so on.

In recent years, a growing number of studies have examined the impact of combining different technologies in EFL contexts (Benson, 2011; Golonka et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2016; Lee, 2012; Rassaei, 2017). Technological activities outside the classroom have also shown an important role in promoting language proficiency (Fathali & Okada, 2016; Lai & Gu, 2011).

Language learning is a complicated process that requires active practices and extensive engagement both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, technology can help learners by encouraging them to learn and improve their skills in a more autonomous and self-directed way. In this distance learning setting, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, language improvement is limited by students' reliance only on face-to-face classroom learning. The use of technology and technological activities reduces this limitation by allowing them to practice their language wherever they want (Richards, 2015).

There is a relationship between technological capabilities, self-direction, and autonomy in learning. Technology as a tool for education and instruction supports student-centred instruction where discovery learning, autonomy, and learner self-direction emerge (Erben et al., 2008). Consequently, practical knowledge of technology and assessment of digital technology-based activities (TBA) are a necessity for today's language learning process. Meanwhile, experts and teachers need to understand each learner's strategies when using technology for learning (Fotos & Browne, 2013).

Autonomy and self-direction are two main characteristics that help learners regulate and control their learning process. (Holec, 1979) defines learner autonomy as "The ability to take charge of one's learning, which has specified as to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of

this learning". It is a skill that helps learners monitor, control, and regulate their actions in the language classroom. On the other hand, (Garrison, 1997) defined autonomous learning as "an approach where learners are motivated to assume personal responsibility and collaborative control of the cognitive (self-monitoring) and contextual (self-management) processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes.". From these two definitions, it is clear that autonomous learning is a complementary and supportive characteristic that accompanies self-directed learning. If we follow (Nunan & Richards, 2015) statement, he believes that self-direction is "the outside classroom dimension" of autonomy in learning. Since distance learning eliminates the traditional face-to-face classroom interaction, these two features seem crucial. Although there is a well-established and growing body of research on the effects of self-direction and autonomy in EFL classes, less is known about the relationship between the use of TBA and self-direction and autonomy in distance learning. Exploring the relationship between these two variables and the use of TBA in distance learning can help teachers and learners benefit from this era of using technology for teaching and learning, overcome this imposition of pandemic, and reduce the unforeseen effects of this change in education. The main objective of the present study is to investigate the relationships between the use of TBA and self-direction and autonomy in distance learning in an underdeveloped area in Iran.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Technology-based activities in distance learning*

In recent years, there has been an increase in the popularity of and interest in the use of technology, primarily due to technological devices and gadgets. As (Benson, 2011) stated, this provides language learners with countless opportunities to engage with other language courses and contexts rather than directly and face-to-face in traditional classes. It gives students the opportunity to participate in lessons that can be accessed remotely, anytime, any-

where. Nowadays, learners can learn without going to traditional classes and use technological activities from various technological sources.

Studies have shown that successful learners actively engage with the context of their target language. They use the information they find in authentic materials by listening to podcasts, watching videos and movies, reading online materials about the target culture, etc. (Uzun, 2012). In another study, the Internet, media, and computer games are additional tools that help learners improve their learning skills and provide opportunities for more social connections and networking (Kuure, 2011). (Peters, 2018), in a study of adolescent speakers in Denmark, found that exposure to television shows and movies without subtitles, printed texts, and the Internet improved their vocabulary knowledge. This exposure has a stronger effect than the length of the instructions.

In a study of the impact of mobile device use for distance learners, (Demouy et al., 2016) found it to be a primary tool for language learning, especially among upper-level students. After cell phones as the primary language learning tool, iPads and tablets were second, and iPods and MP3 players were third. (Khabbaz & Najjar, 2015) examined the impact of specific distance learning platforms (Moodle) on language learning strategies (LLS) and assessed the impact of technology. They found that there were no relationships between LLS and language performance in Moodle-based distance learning. They found that Moodle-based instructional materials hindered language learners' autonomy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of technological devices, so most people are using cell phones and other electronic devices more than ever before. As a result, they are accessing online language courses, podcasts, YouTube videos and audio files. According to researchers, these are the most common TBA for improving language skills among many learners worldwide. Yet, there is little on everyday TBA for the context of this study, Iran.

### ***Self-directed learning***

Self-directed learning is a learning process that can give the impression that it is independent

learning; however, it has more to do with taking responsibility for one's own learning. In self-directed learning, the level of interest, personality traits, self-regulation, and motivation are the determining factors (du Toit-Brits & van Zyl, 2017; Jennett, 1992).

(Knowles, 1975), one of the pioneers of research on self-directed learning, described it as a process that helps learners diagnose their learning needs and then identify the resources they need. This allows them to plan their learning goals, select their learning strategies, and evaluate their learning process. Students cannot act alone in this process. Much research points to the effectiveness of technology in improving self-direction in online or distance learning. (Yang, 2017) showed in his study of students in Taiwan that students' self-direction improved when they used online materials to learn English. In another study in Hong Kong, recommending helpful technological resources improved students' technology-enhanced self-directed language skills (Lai et al., 2016).

### ***Autonomy***

Learner autonomy is an essential element of academic achievement. Researchers and educators widely agree on the benefits of promoting learner autonomy (Hurd et al., 2001). Autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning, take responsibility for their learning, share their goals with other learners, plan their path, and ultimately have the ability to assess their progress (Little, 2003). On the path to "autonomization" (Little, 2003), learners need the help of a teacher to relinquish responsibility for their learning. In distance learning, the contribution of the teaching/learning materials to autonomization is greater than that of the teacher, and learners can gradually "know how to learn" and practice autonomy to become more autonomous learners.

Distance learning allows learners to choose the time, pace, content, and location. In recent years, the use of ubiquitous technologies has promoted learner autonomy and given them numerous opportunities for self-directed learning (Benson, 2001). In a study in Turkey conducted with learners at EFL University, blogging contributed to their autonomy development

(Arikan & Bakla, 2011). (Hurd et al., 2001) examined the tension between learners' autonomous behaviour and the constraints of distance learning and found that it was problematic for some distance learners and caused them to bypass their autonomy.

As shown in the previous studies, the use of technology in language learning has a great impact on improving language learners' skills. It helps them to take control of their learning in a self-directed and autonomous way. This review shows that little is known so far about TBA in distance learning and their relationship with learners' self-direction and autonomy. The present study investigates the types of TBA that influence learner characteristics (self-direction and autonomy) in the context of distance learning in the COVID-19 outbreak. The present study aims to determine the primary TBA used by Iranian university students. Secondly, the relationship between TBA and learners' self-direction and autonomy in distance learning on the pandemic is investigated. To achieve these objectives, the researcher posed the following research questions:

*Q1. What are the primary TBA used by Iranian university students in distance learning?*

*Q2. Is there a relationship between TBA and learners' self-direction?*

*Q3. Is there a relationship between TBA and learner autonomy?*

*Q4. How do the learners of EFL view the contribution of TBA in distance learning and the improvement of their English proficiency?*

## METHOD

This study is an exploratory, descriptive research that examines the impact of the most pervasive and ever-growing phenomenon in human life, technology, on one of the most important human concerns, language learning. For this study three close-ended questionnaires were used. The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed to determine the frequency of TBA and to investigate the relationships among the main variables of the present study, including self-direction and learner autonomy in distance learning.

## Participants

This study was conducted at the University of Velayat in Iranshahr, Iran. This university is located in a city far from the capital city of Tehran, and the economic level of the people in this city is poor. After the pandemic, the academic environment around the world changed, and students were forced to switch from traditional education to distance learning, whether there were bases for it or not. Many universities around the world implemented technology-enhanced learning during the COVID-19 outbreak, but in the context of this study, this presents some challenges for participants.

The sample of this study included 76 university undergraduate students majoring in English, none of whom had prior experience with distance and online learning. Participants' language proficiency levels ranged from beginner to advanced. Their current academic level represented the students' language proficiency level. Male and female students were considered separately in this study.

## INSTRUMENTS

Three closed-ended questionnaires were used in this study. To evaluate the TBA used by the students, the author developed this questionnaire. This questionnaire contains items that take into account the new TBA that most learners worldwide use to learn the language. It contains 12 questions on a five-point Likert scale. This instrument adopted some items from the (Hyland's, 2004) English Learning Activities Questionnaire (ELAQ), and some items are from the (Honarzad & Rassaei's, 2019) study.

In this study, the Self-Directed Learning Questionnaire (SDLQ) (Demirtaş, 2010) was used to assess students' self-direction. It included 28 items that could be answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The third questionnaire was the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ), which assesses and formulates learner autonomy (Zhang & Li, 2004). It includes 11 questions (see Appendix C) in the form of a Likert scale.

Several studies have used this questionnaire to assess autonomy in language learning. (e.g. (Dafei, 2007; Nematipour, 2012).

The last part of the data collection concerned qualitative data. The data was collected through interviews with some of the students randomly selected by the researcher. The interview question was the final research question on the topic of "What are the views of the learners of EFL on the contribution of TBA in distance learning and their improvement in English proficiency?" The researcher analyzed the participants' responses in the results section of this study.

To determine the TBAs most frequently used by learners, a frequency analysis was performed. In addition, the statistically significant relationship between TBA and the variables of the present study (self-control and autonomy) was determined by applying the Pearson product correlation coefficient to the data of the study.

## RESULTS

The following table (Table 1) shows the average student score for each activity. The scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale

**Table 1**  
*The mean score of students' points on technology-based activities*

	Technology-based activity	Mean score
1	Listening to English music on a computer or cell phone	4.10
2	Joining English groups and channels on WhatsApp, Telegram, or a similar application	3.90
3	Searching in English via google, yahoo, or similar search engines	2.77
4	using dictionaries or translators on computers or cell phone	4.55
5	Watching movies and TV series without subtitles	3.10
6	Surfing the Internet in English with electronic devices	2.22
7	Using YouTube and similar video portals to watch videos online.	1.82
8	Using English-language software and apps. on a computer or mobile device.	4.02
9	Reading the news in English over the internet on a computer or mobile device.	2.01
10	Listening to the recorded voice of the teacher(s) after the class	4.81
11	Writing in English on Instagram, Facebook, and similar apps	0.76
12	Calling native English speakers on WhatsApp, Skype, or similar apps	0.58

The mean scores in Table 1 show that the five most common TBA used by EFL university students are 1) listening to the recorded voice of the teacher(s), 2) using dictionaries or translators, 3) listening to English music, 4) using English language software and apps, and 5) joining an

English group via social networking apps. The last item in this table is calling native English speakers via WhatsApp, Skype, or similar apps.

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficient between technology-based activity (TBA) use and learner differences based on self-direction.

**Table 2**  
*Correlation coefficient between self-direction and autonomous learning and the use of technology-based activity*

	Technology-based activities	Self-direction	Number of students
TBA	1	0.431**	76
SDLQ	0.431**	1	76

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).and autonomy

In the table (Table 3), a positive correlation coefficient can be seen between learners' use

of technology-based activities and their autonomous learning.

**Table 3**  
*Correlation coefficient between autonomy and the use of technology-based activities*

	Technology-based activities	Autonomy	Number of students
TBA	1	0.551**	76
LAQ	0.551**	1	76

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

To collect the qualitative data of this study, the open-ended question "What do you think about the contribution of TBA in distance learning and your improvement in English proficiency?" was used in interviews with ten randomly selected students as a tool for the quantitative data in the last part.

## DISCUSSION

This study shows that technology is an effective tool to accelerate and facilitate the learning of a new language in today's world. It provides learners with the opportunity to develop their EFL skills and access different programs, applications, platforms, and social networks designed for learning or practicing English. In all these different technological resources, many activities can help learners improve their skills. The descriptive statistics of this study show that the most common technology-based interests are in the area of receptive skills and most students focus more on these passive activities in TBA, a strong inclination to receive information rather than give it, and this is said to be a social/political factor tied to cultural issues (Hyland, 2004).

The present study showed that students are more dependent on teachers. They most often listen to teachers' voices to improve their language skills. They prefer traditional face-to-face instruction rather than other TBA. This is mainly due to the low language proficiency level of the participants in the present study and their low familiarity with the use of technology in their learning process. Although the filtering of some popular social networks such as Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook is little used in Iran. The pandemic caused by distance learning has been a great challenge for learners.

The experience of the researcher, who has been teaching English for 10 years, shows that the main burden of education lies with teachers. So it is the responsibility of teachers to

encourage and persuade learners to engage in more independent and productive activities, such as using mobile applications, social networks, and technology-driven programs. Teachers can help learners follow an expected path for English language learning by using technology and developing receptive and productive skills.

The findings of this study are almost consistent with those of other previous studies. (Alyaz & Genc, 2016) pointed out that cell phones, tablets, and other electronic devices are mainly used for using dictionaries, watching movies, and listening to music, which is considered passive learning activities.

According to the findings, there is a moderate correlation between using TBA and learners' self-direction. Using technology increases students' self-directed language learning practices as a significant predictor (Lai et al., 2016). In the present study, the participants' less use of tech-based activities causes lower self-directed learning. (Lai, 2013) argued that persuading students toward self-directed use of technology is imperative to maximize their technology utilization behavior in EFL.

This study also shows that learner autonomy is positively related to the use of TBA (Lai, 2018). (Honarзад & Rassaei, 2019) pointed out that Iranian students who have become accustomed to traditional teacher-dominated classrooms only have the chance to take charge of their learning and develop autonomous knowledge through TBA outside the classroom. Many researchers have confirmed the positive effect of using technological devices and activities on English language learners' autonomy (Kim et al., 2019; Meri, 2012).

The interview data underscore the importance of using technology-based activities to improve language skills. However, many respondents indicated that the lower use of technology-

based activities was primarily due to limited knowledge of how to use them. (Dastjerdi, 2011) pointed out that in all technology-based language learning programs, such as distance learning, language learning strategies in general and metacognitive strategies, in particular, were integrated into the teaching-learning program. As a result, for the current distance learning program, students need technology-based activities for academic purposes to help them improve their self-direction and autonomy.

## CONCLUSIONS

There are fundamental differences between developed and underdeveloped countries in the implementation and management of critical situations such as the Covid 19 pandemic. In underdeveloped or less developed areas, crises always have more severe consequences. During the pandemic, the education system in Iran faced a serious challenge because it was not prepared for the situation. Meanwhile, students were the main sufferers. Under these conditions, they had to continue teaching differently, through technology-enhanced learning. This was a shock. Many studies indicated that incorporating technology into language instruction promoted self-directed and autonomous learning. However, the results of this study showed that this largely depends on the structure of instruction, students' familiarity with technology-enhanced activities and strategies for using them, and students' language level (Dafei, 2007). The participants in the present study were beginners and participants with pre-intermediate language levels.

In addressing the challenges of pandemic distance learning, teachers have the primary responsibility of guiding students through this crisis. They can provide access to technology-based resources, apps, and social media, or make activities motivating and fun by using technology and teaching strategies to use technology-based activities outside and inside the classroom. Teachers need to match students with technology-based productive activities to enhance their autonomy and self-direction for a successful and enjoyable language learning process.

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### Biodata

**Soraya Raeisi** is a university lecturer, with 9 year of teaching experience. She is interested in psycholinguistics as well as different language teaching issues.

Email: [s.raeisi@velayat.ac.ir](mailto:s.raeisi@velayat.ac.ir)

