



The Effect of Negotiated Syllabus on Autonomy of ESP Students: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

Autonomy as an essential factor contributing to successful second language learning has been extensively studied in recent decades. Despite the importance of autonomy, the casual effect of the negotiated syllabus on enhancing learner autonomy through empirical studies is understudied. Few studies have attempted to document ESP learners' experience with the negotiated syllabus. Therefore, this study methodologically contributes to the body of knowledge in autonomy by addressing the gaps mentioned above. This mix-methods research used a quasi-experimental design in the quantitative phase to investigate the effects of the negotiated syllabus on Iranian ESP learners' (N = 71) autonomy. The experimental treatment was carried out with 32 students in the experimental class over eight weeks. The treatment comprised class-time exposure to a negotiated syllabus co-constructed through negotiation of purposes, contents, methods, and evaluation. The control group used a pre-designed syllabus. *T*-test analysis showed a significant increase in the autonomy level of the experimental class in comparison to their counterparts in the control group. Qualitative data collected through semi-

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structured interview and student journal also confirmed the results. The compelling evidence on the positive effect of negotiated syllabus has different implications for different stakeholders including policymakers and teacher trainers.

Keywords: Autonomy; ESP learner; Mix-methods; Negotiated syllabus

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, learner autonomy as an ultimate goal of education has attracted the attention of different scholars (Ma & Gao, 2010; Ng, Confessore, & Abdullah, 2012). Learner autonomy is reported as a key for language achievement, motivation, active participation and responsibility (Doğan & Mirici, 2017; Ramírez Espinosa, 2015). Educational programmers have attempted to give more learning responsibility to learners and make them more autonomous to meet the demands of modern life (Ng et al., 2012).

This idea of enhancing learner autonomy has been prevalent since the social constructivist theory became popular. This theory supports self-directed learning where teachers encourage learners to explore and construct their knowledge than to act as a knowledge-giver. The essence of constructivist theories of learning suggests that learners should discover and transform complex information independently if they intend to adopt it as their knowledge and mix it with their internal schemes. Little's (1995, p.4) principle that "all genuinely successful learning is, in the end, autonomous" reflects the critical idea that autonomy in language learning has borrowed from constructivism. Almusharraf (2018) and

Satariyan and Mohseni (2014) mentioned that limited second language interaction could cause language learning difficulty. Collaboration makes learners enhance their plans through joint effort and have the chance to come to a new horizon through the give-and-take of interaction (Allahyar & Nazari, 2012; Vygotsky, 1980).

Though autonomy has been defined through different lenses such as psychology (Little, 1990), politics (Pennycook, 1997), cognition (Ponton & Rhea, 2006), there is a consensus that autonomy is a matter of enhancing learner willing to work independently and in collaboration with peers, to be a responsible student (Ma & Gao, 2010).

Scholars highlighted that not encouraging students to decide their learning may transfer this idea to them that they cannot do so and this lack of involvement might also diminish students' achievements and learning motivation (Boon, 2011; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). They have warned that learners who conform to the pre-determined decision are much at risk of not being autonomous (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). However, as Reinders (2010) highlights, autonomy requires time because it develops gradually and requires an environment where students reflect on their language learning role. Similarly, (Satariyan & Reynolds, 2016)

pointed out that reflection could help individuals better feel their personal experiences.

Several scholars have proposed different strategies to foster learner autonomy, such as developing a pedagogy based on language learner needs and interests, fostering the attitude necessary for lifelong learning or providing a supportive environment (Benson, 2013; Nguyen, 2011; Reinders, 2010). Regardless of the bulk of studies on enhancing learner autonomy, in the Iranian context, after 12 years of studying, many ESP students are still teacher dependent (Ghodrati, Ashraf, & Khalil, 2014).

ESP students believe that their needs are ignored (Eslami, 2010), and their role in syllabus designing has been marginalized.

Some scholars have encouraged the implementation of the negotiated syllabus (Benson, 2013). (Montazeri, Fekri, & Hamidi, 2015; Sprenger & Wadt, 2008). According to Breen and Littlejohn (2000) “a classroom-based upon negotiated knowledge and procedures allows the learner autonomy on an equal footing with others in the group and as a contribution to the good of the learning community” (p.22). Negotiated syllabus refers to a syllabus in which the teacher and his or her students decide on education (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). Few causal-effect studies have been conducted to foster autonomy in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners. Available studies have focused on effects of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Kimaz, 2019) , strategy-based teaching

(Karimi & Dastgoshadeh, 2018), learning conditions (Pershukova, Nikolska, & Vasiukovych, 2020). No causal studies have attempted to examine the effect of the negotiated syllabus on the autonomy of ESP students. Existing studies in Iranian literature has mainly focused on ESP teachers’ perspectives (Atai & Khazaei, 2014; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018) rather than students’ outcome and students’ perceptions. This study drew upon social constructivism to examine how implementing a negotiated syllabus in the language classroom can help learners develop their autonomy. We hope that intentionally using a negotiated syllabus to address the concerns mentioned above can assist instructors to have a guideline in promoting autonomy.

The present study attempts to examine the impact of the negotiated syllabus on the development of the autonomy of ESP students by answering the following questions:

RQ1: *Does negotiated syllabus have any significant effect on ESP students’ autonomy?*

RQ2: *How can negotiated syllabus improve ESP students’ autonomy?*

Literature Review

The term syllabus is defined as accomplishing an education plan by choosing and grading its content (Nunan, 1988). The differences in the selection and gradation of the content have resulted in different syllabi (e.g. structural syllabus, task-based syllabus, etc). What

differentiates negotiated syllabus from other syllabus is its concern about how the syllabus is made than what it should contain (Öztürk., 2013).

In comparison to pre-determined or product-oriented syllabuses, the content of negotiated or process-oriented syllabus was completely unknown before its development (Clarke, 1991) and its development is an on-going process occurring through negotiation between teachers and students and depends upon their joint decisions about education (Azarnoosh & Kargozari, 2018; Ma & Gao, 2010). This meaning focused program is responsive to the wants and needs of the learners and engages them in the process of learning and decision-making and this involvement makes them more motivated, creative and committed to the course. Learners must learn and use language creatively to develop beyond the rudimentary stages (Marashi & Khatami, 2017). Learner centered settings can be fruit of the self-regulated learning principle (Mohseni & Satariyan, 2017). In a pre-determined syllabus, the teacher is the only one deciding about different aspects of the syllabus and the disadvantages of being aware of students' needs is warned to negatively affect the language learning process and affect motivation (Boon, 2011; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). However, implementing the negotiated syllabus is not easy because teachers should yield authority to learners, and students need to be competent. More importantly (Nation & Maclister, 2010), some learners may be reluctant to negotiate (Nation & Maclister,

2010). In the following section, the empirical studies on negotiated syllabus and language autonomy are discussed and their limitations have been identified.

Negotiated syllabus and Language learner autonomy

Literature shows that researchers have attempted to examine different ways, for example, resources (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019; Littlejohn, 1997), technology (Lan, 2018), classroom activities (Natri, 2007) and teacher strategies (Nguyen, 2011), through which language learners can develop their autonomy,

However, the effect of a negotiated syllabus on improving learner autonomy through empirical studies is understudied. This is surprising because there is a consensus among researchers that the negotiated syllabus results in learner autonomy. For instance, according to (Sewell, 2005), one of the major advantages of a negotiated syllabus is autonomy, which gives students more control over their learning. (Kenny, 1993) also adds that the negotiated syllabus can foster self-direction because students have a key role in its development. (Richards & Schmidt, 2010) state that language autonomy by its definition requires encouraging students to shoulder more responsibility for what they learn and their method of learning and this is one of the main concerns of the negotiated syllabus. They maintain that negotiated syllabus can develop students' autonomy as it is developed based on students' interests and preferences. The number

of empirical studies on fostering learner autonomy is quite limited. The four relevant studies are reviewed. Each of the studies is discussed and their limitations have been identified.

Ma & Gao (2010) practised negotiated syllabus in a speaking and listening course for Economics and Management students in China. They attempted to see how a negotiated syllabus can improve the autonomy of language learners. In their study, students were given a chance to negotiate purposes, contents, methods and evaluation related to the course. According to the results, the negotiated syllabus made learners feel more motivated to learn. Moreover, giving the power to students made them feel more accountable for their own learning.

In another study conducted by Jing (2006) on the tertiary level in China, Chinese students were taught to be responsible for their own learning. This study attempted to show that giving a voice to students can help teachers develop their students' learning autonomy regardless of constraints (e.g., language teaching methodologies and institutional constraints). The teaching occurred through teacher-student and student-student collaboration. To this purpose, volunteer students were interviewed and shared their own experiences, difficulties of the course, and strategies they used to deal with difficulties and supervisor-supervisee relationship. Moreover, 30 students supervised by their teachers were observed. According to the results, fostering learners' autonomy is a matter of teachers' willingness to negotiate

different aspects of teaching (e.g., goal, content, etc.). However, Jing believes that one of the significant prerequisites of learner autonomy is establishing companionship and cooperation where both teachers and students take responsibility regarding teaching and learning.

Ennis and Prior (2020) carried out action research in Italy to see how actively engaged students in the decision-making processes on an ESP syllabus can promote students' autonomy. Quantitative data were collected to understand students' needs and any problems they had encountered in their ESP course. Quantitative data were triangulated with the qualitative data collected from teachers on the learners' problems. Data analysis indicated that learners had significant problems in speaking and writing. The syllabus was modified accordingly to address the learners' needs and improve their productive skills. Due to limitations imposed by the university, students were allowed to negotiate the content of and procedures for speaking and writing in the ESP course using a portfolio. This approach to syllabus design helped students to improve their skills as well as their autonomy.

The studies mentioned above have high external validity because they have been carried out in natural environment. However, establishing the cause and effect relationships requires the manipulation of variables.

In a mixed-methods study, Almusharraf (2018) examined how Saudi Arabian learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning changed as the result of implementing a negotiated syllabus. This study was conducted with

learners studying engineering. This study showed that negotiated learning design scaffold students practice digital literacy and solve the problems they had during web searching and data gathering for their school learning. The quantitative data indicated the enhancement of learning autonomy too.

We have identified only two studies in China and the USA and the researchers' knowledge, no studies exist on fostering autonomy through negotiated syllabus in the Iranian context.

METHODS

Participants

The sample of the quantitative phase included a teacher (i.e. the first researcher in this study) who held 10 years of experience teaching ESP and 71 postgraduate students in psychology (25 males and 46 females) selected conveniently from Islamic Azad University in Semnan province. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 40. The sample of the qualitative phase consisted of seven students. As the purpose of the qualitative phase was to collect in-depth data, the number of participants was limited to seven (Creswell, 2009). As suggested by (Stake, 2000) she purposively selected students based on their willingness to communicate and availability.

Materials

The syllabus developed for this ESP group included 8 units and included a wide range of topics in psychology. Each unit was co-constructed based on the participants' needs and interests. To this purpose, in designing the material, negotiation occurred in four areas: The objectives and content of the course, teaching method, and the evaluation of learners' performance. Following the negotiation, students were grouped to design the tasks (Designing required the students to use the dictionary, refer to the texts, familiarize themselves with different reading strategies). In all the procedures of designing, they were under the teacher's guidance. The evaluation of their tasks was negotiated with the teacher and the whole class.

Instruments

The quantitative data were collected through OPT and Autonomy questionnaire, and the qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and student journals.

OPT

Oxford Placement Test (2001) was administered to all learners in the pretest and posttest phases of the study. This test includes 60 questions on vocabulary, cloze passage and grammar. It took the students 45 minutes to complete the test. The total score is the sum of the subset scores. The reliability calculated for this instrument through the Kuder-Richardson (KR-21) formula was .81.

Autonomy questionnaire (pretest, posttest)

For measuring the degree of learner autonomy, the questionnaire designed by (Zhang & Li, 2004) was utilized. This instrument includes 21 questions on 5- point Likert scale. The questionnaire has proved to have high content validity and reliability (Dafei, 2007; Farivar & Rahimi, 2015) The reliability indices for the pretest and posttest of autonomy in this study were .84 and .80 respectively. The items were translated into Persian to avoid the effect of respondents' limited language knowledge.

Back-translation procedure was used to enhance the validity of the translated version. Following the guidelines of Beaton et al. (2000) two bilingual English–Persian separately translated the instrument then two versions were compared and a final version was agreed upon. Then back translation was carried out by another bilingual translator who did not know the instrument. The translations were evaluated by a team of experts including backward and forward translators. The final version was prepared and piloted.

Semi-structured interviews

In order to understand how negotiated syllabus helped students foster their autonomy, individual interviews were carried out with seven students involved in the quantitative phase. From the students involved in the quantitative phase, seven were purposefully chosen for the qualitative phase because they

were willing to communicate and had enough time to participate.

The interview included nine questions. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The interview questions were developed based on the literature and modified by three EFL PhD holders in language education. The first author translated them into English, and two colleagues, who were qualified translators working as part-time teachers, back-translated, revised and validated the translation.

The Participants' Journal

All students were also asked to keep journals and share their experiences about the negotiated syllabus. The journal helped us gather more in-depth data without imposing any constraints through specific questions (Mackey, Gass, & Margolis, 2005, 2006). Moreover, learners had a chance to reflect on their feelings and ideas (Chirema, 2007). As students were not familiar with journal writing, the first author taught them how to keep the journal. In this study, each student was supposed to write at least three journals in the beginning, middle, and the end of the course and then email them to the teacher. The journals were supposed to include their learning experience, challenges they faced in the negotiated syllabus- based classrooms, reasons they found the course interesting or boring, and their recommendations. There was not any limitation on the number of journal entries and the number of words. Students were encouraged to keep the journal in Persian.

Data collection procedure

Data collection for this study started in 2018 and finished in 2019. Before conducting the study, the board of the university was informed about the purpose and scope of the research. Following permission from the university authorities, participants were informed about the study's risk and benefits. Before starting the intervention, all participants were asked to take OPT test and complete the autonomy questionnaire. This helped us to be sure about the homogeneity of the learners according to their language proficiency and level of language autonomy. The participants in experimental group received eight reading comprehension lessons for one semester. Based on (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000), negotiation cycle, the teacher (the first author) and students negotiated about the goals, their expectation, the materials of interest, tasks design and evaluation in the first session through oral discussions. Training the experimental group about the nature of negotiated syllabus, designing tasks and their evaluation started before the course. In the experimental class, students were divided into groups of five and were asked to design tasks which was guided by the teacher. For guiding students to design tasks for these passages, the teacher gave them some sheets with an example (as prompts). Each group was given a responsibility to design one of the following tasks: cloze, word matching, gap fillings, and multiple-choice comprehension questions for the selected texts through negotiation with their teammates and

presenting it to the whole class to receive the teachers' and others' feedback. This required the students to use the dictionary and familiarize themselves with different reading strategies presented by the teacher like skimming, scanning, inferencing, referencing and guessing the meaning from context. The teacher walked among the groups and consequently all the groups received teachers' help and her guidance. The designed tasks were shared using an opaque projector and then the teacher and students reflected on each task and those tasks which were appropriate for the class were chosen by poll and finally were edited in the class by the help of the teacher. The students were repeatedly evaluated according to their participation in-class activities. Each student was evaluated by their group members and the whole class. The materials prepared in the experimental class were given to the control group and this group of students were not allowed to decide about any aspects of syllabus in this class.

During the intervention, the instructor was observed by an English teacher to examine whether the teacher was practicing the negotiated syllabus. Following the treatment, the experimental and the control groups filled out the autonomy questionnaire.

Design and Data analyses

This study employed a sequential explanatory design in which the priority was given to quantitative data (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative phase of this study was carried out



to view the effect of the negotiated syllabus on learner autonomy, and the qualitative phase was conducted to give voice to students to share their experience about the negotiated syllabus. For the design of the quantitative phase, a quasi-experimental pretest posttest intact group was adopted because the participants were not randomly assigned to groups but rather belonged to intact classes. For the qualitative part of the study, an exploratory case study was used (Yin & SAGE., 2003). The quantitative part of the present study which was related to research questions 1 was analyzed using the Statistical Package of Social Science software (SPSS) version 22. Independent t-tests were run to compare the experimental and control groups' means on the posttests of autonomy. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and journals. The data were transcribed in a verbatim fashion and typed in MS Word. The analysis was carried out manually. The first author used codes to capture the essence of each chunk based on the meaning

that emerged from the data. The segments with irrelevant information were discarded. Then codes with similar properties were placed under bigger subcategories which formed categories. Codes were frequently compared across the data, and their frequencies were counted manually and reported. The analysis of qualitative data resulted in the following themes. A total of 112 codes were identified.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

To examine whether negotiated syllabus has a significant positive effect on autonomy, the following hypothesis was tested.

The participants were chosen from among 100 students based on their scores on the OPT test. As shown in Table 1, these students were selected according to their mean of 28.13 plus and minus one standard deviation of 15.33.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics; OPT Test (Subject Selection)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
OPT	100	28.13	15.336	235.205

For comparing the experimental and control groups' means on the OPT, An independent *t*-test was run for proving that they had the same level of general language proficiency before the main study. Based on the findings indicated in

Table 2, it can be claimed that the experimental (M = 28.63, SD = 7.30) and control (M = 26.74, SD = 9.37) groups had close means on the OPT test, that is, their level of language proficiency was not significantly different.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics; OPT by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
OPT	Experimental	32	28.63	7.308	1.292
	Control	39	26.74	9.377	1.502

The independent t-test ($t(69) = .927, p > .05$, 95 % CI [-2.16, 5.93] (Table 2) represented that there was no significant difference between the two groups' mean scores on the OPT. Therefore, it can be claimed that they showed the same level of general language proficiency.

The negative 95 % lower bound confidence interval of -2.16 showed that the difference between the two groups' means on the OPT

could have been zero. Therefore, the above-mentioned statement as no significant difference between the two groups' means was correctly stated. Furthermore, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's $F = 2.16, p > .05$). That is why the first row of Table 3, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

Table 3
Independent Samples t-test; OPT by Groups

Levene's Test for Equality of Means of Variances								
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.167	.146	.927	69	.357	1.881	2.030	-2.1685.931
Equal variances not assumed			.950	68.841	.346	1.881	1.981	-2.0705.833

For comparing the experimental and control groups' means on the pretest of autonomy, an independent t-test was run in order to show that

they were at the same level of autonomy prior to the administration of the treatments. According to the results indicated in Table 4.

we can say that the experimental ($M = 35.06$, $SD = 7.18$) and control ($M = 35.41$, $SD = 7.41$)

groups had had close means on the pretest of autonomy.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics; Pretest of Autonomy by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest of Autonomy	Experimental	32	35.06	7.188	1.271
	Control	39	35.41	7.419	1.188

The results of the independent t-test ($t(69) = .199$, $p > .05$, 95 % CI [-3.13, 3.82], Cohen's $d = .040$ representing a weak effect size) (Table 4) showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups' mean scores on the pretest of autonomy. Thus, it can be claimed that they had the same level of autonomy prior to the main study.

The negative 95 % lower bound confidence interval of -3.13 represented that the difference

between the two groups' means on the pretest of autonomy could have been zero. Therefore, the above-mentioned statement as no significant difference between the two groups' means was correctly stated. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's $F = .109$, $p > .05$). That is why the first row of Table 5, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

Table 5

Independent Samples t-test; Pretest of Autonomy by Groups

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
							Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	.109	.743	.199	69	.843	.348	1.745	-3.134	3.829
Equal variances not assumed			.200	67.071	.842	.348	1.740	-3.124	3.820

For comparing the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of autonomy, an independent t-test was run to probe the null-hypothesis. According to the findings shown in Table 4 it can be claimed that the experimental group (M = 74.25, SD = 10.42) had a higher

mean than the control group (M = 61.95, SD = 8.79) on the posttest of autonomy.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Autonomy by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest of Autonomy	Experimental	32	74.25	10.420	1.842
	Control	39	61.95	8.796	1.408

The results of the independent t-test (t (69) = 5.39, $p < .05$, 95 % CI [7.75, 16.85], Cohen's $d = 1.30$ showing a large effect size) (Table 7) represented that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on

the posttest of autonomy. Therefore, this null-hypothesis as "negotiated syllabus had no significant effect on ESP students' autonomy" **was rejected**.

Table 7

Independent Samples t-test; Posttest of Autonomy by Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Difference	Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	.746	.391	5.39569		.000	12.301	2.280	7.752	16.850
Equal variances not assumed			5.30560	69.870	.000	12.301	2.319	7.664	16.938

The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's $F = .746, p > .05$). That is why the first row of Table 7 i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

Qualitative results

The negotiated syllabus was found to help students promote self-independence in different aspects of language learning (Journal, interview)

As you know, this class is controlled by us. I mean we are the ones who decide about the texts and activities. We are the ones who make multiple choices or cloze tests. We are the ones who evaluate tasks. What I want to say is that we need to do everything. This means that we need to stand on our feet (interview)

Negotiated syllabus provides me a tool for learning which helps me increase my comprehension on my own without a teacher and it is the most rewarding thing I got from this class. Teach a man to fish...;" "[t]his is a great boost to my confidence. I can continually enhance my language skills with self-study. (Journal)

The aspects are detailed in the following section:

Improving the ability to set goals for learning

During the interview, more than two-third believed that the ability to set goals for learning for those who were coming from a traditional teaching system seemed quite threatening. Moreover, they had no idea how to develop

specific plans to meet the objectives of the course and their interests (Journal) but over the course, they managed to do so.

Perhaps, one of the outcomes of negotiated syllabus was helping us to learn how to set a goal for ourselves and not to be so much dependent on others.

Enhancing self-assessment competency

Apart from setting the goals, 80 % reported that they built up their confidence in learning by the passage of the time and learned how to develop their self-assessment competency (Journal).

Since I am a kind of syllabus designer I have to evaluate my work repeatedly to have minimum errors. Everything looked very scary but now I know I do not need to be worried. Today, I asked myself what if you make a mistake. Nobody will kill you. Today I made a funny mistake.... I started laughing and everyone did the same but I realized I have made good progress in language learning (journal)

Some reported that in negotiated classes, self-evaluation of their learning skills was important because they were to be responsible for some tasks in their group and such monitoring often helped them feel satisfied and improve their intrinsic motivation (Interview). Being engaged in self-assessment was reported to reinforce a sense of independence (Journal).

Self-assessment, I can say, by its nature pushes you to be more independent and to see how you are close or far from the goals. If I am far, I have to keep working. This is the way,

negotiated syllabus makes an independent learner out of me (interview)

Promoting a sense of responsibility for self and group learning or performance

Sixty percent stated that negotiated syllabus taught them to accept more responsibility for the learning of themselves and their peers in their group because they knew that the group performance rather than personal performance was being measured (Interview and Journal). During the interview, one of the students said:

Compared to traditional classes, I am more active in the sense that I am always trying to help my friends understand what to do and how to do or correct their grammatical mistakes.

Another one reported:

Negotiated syllabus is an opportunity to understand that learning is not just a matter of your performance but also the matter of your group's performance. If your friends fail, you will fail. I always tell my friends that our score is determined by what the group does. (journal)

Journal analysis also showed that they preferred to see the teacher in the role of expert and knowledge provider and were happier to take notes and read the materials as guided by their teachers.

DISCUSSIONS

This mixed-methods study was the first to empirically test the causal effect of a negotiated syllabus on ESP students' autonomy. Available studies in the literature have used cross-sectional data and have not implemented a

negotiated syllabus to foster learner autonomy. This experimental study was conducted to address this gap. The result of this study on 71 participants showed that those who were given the authority to decide about the purposes, contents, methods, and evaluation of the negotiated syllabus increased their learning autonomy.

The results were according to previous research who claimed that the negotiated syllabus is considered beneficial for promoting learning autonomy (Kenny, 1993). The reason was related to engagement opportunities provided by the negotiated syllabus. This is one of the main concerns of the negotiated syllabus which is drawn upon constructivist theories of learning. This theory emphasizes the idea of discovery by students and transforming knowledge and integrating it into their internal schemes (Vygotsky, 1980). This is keeping in with the results of (Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018) who reported that ESP students complained about their marginalized role in syllabus designing and their overlooked interests and needs

The result related to the first question also substantiates previous empirical findings in the literature. (Ma & Gao, 2010) practiced the negotiated syllabus in a language class to examine its effect on the autonomy of language learners. Negotiating the purposes, contents, methods, and evaluation related to the course made students feel more motivated to learn and more accountable for their learning. Similarly, another study by (Jing, 2006) on Chinese students at the tertiary level showed that fostering learners' autonomy is related to

negotiating different aspects of teaching. This finding is in good agreement with findings of (Almusharraf, 2018; Ennis & Prior, 2020).

Qualitative data also confirmed that the negotiated syllabus helped learners improve self-independence in different aspects of language learning by setting goals for their learning and being engaged in their self-assessment and taking responsibility for the learning of their peers in their group. The negotiated syllabus allowed students to practice more responsibility for their own learning and their peers 'learning because the students realized that their personal performance influenced group performance. Monitoring their learning skills raised their awareness of their progress and often made them feel satisfied with learning. This improved their intrinsic motivation and reinforced a sense of independence.

Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) argue that the relationship between autonomy and motivation is complex and added that in many cases autonomy is the product of motivation. These findings were in contradiction with previous results reported in the literature. (Pershukova et al., 2020) found that opportunities to choose educational materials or to set goals of their learning not necessarily result in autonomy and some students may not use opportunities to be autonomous. An explanation for lack of autonomous action was reported to be associated with the Ukrainian education system where students are spoon-fed. (Spratt et al., 2002) found a significant relationship between students' perceptions of their own and their teacher's responsibilities,

which may prevent some learners from being autonomous. In contrast, the result of this study showed that though Iranian learners are reported to be dependent (Ghodrati et al., 2014), they are willing to be autonomous when they are given a role in syllabus designing (Eslami, 2010). However, as the qualitative results showed, the process of gaining power could be threatening in the beginning and requires a teacher's guidance.

CONCLUSION

From this study, we can conclude that negotiated syllabus can foster ESP learners' autonomy in Iran and provide opportunity for learners to learn how to be independent in different aspects of learning for example, setting goals for their learning and being engaged in their self-assessment and taking responsibility for the learning of their peers in their group. The results highlight that learners need to have an opportunity to hold responsibility. Engaging students in monitoring their learning skills will help them see how far they are from their goals and encourage them to stay motivated and work towards their goals.

According to the findings of this study, it is suggested that teachers share their power with students in practice and encourage them to get involved in making decisions about their syllabus and enjoy more democratic education. The advantage of the negotiated syllabus is being open to constant revision and modification. This helps teachers to hear learners' voice and project it into the syllabus and provide them more opportunities to learn

about students' language knowledge, personal interests and needs. To facilitate learner autonomy, authorities in higher education need to set a platform for teachers and students to negotiate different aspect of learning (Peyvandi, Azarnoosh, & Siyyari, 2020).

This study has some limitations. This research took place over 8 weeks. The recruitment of ESP participants in the quantitative phase was carried out through convenience sampling, subject to bias. Only students of psychology were available for recruitment. Data for the qualitative phase were collected through semi-structured interviews and students' journals than observations. Researchers can collect data through observation methods to see if there are any discrepancies between students' perceptions of their autonomy and students' action. Some studies can also examine any discrepancies between teachers' actions in promoting autonomy and students' perception of teachers' actions. Future researchers can study students with different demographic features from different disciplines and investigate how such individual differences can facilitate or slow down the learner autonomy process. Future research can also examine the effect of a "pure" version of a negotiated syllabus in which students make all decisions about the syllabus.

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