

Original Article

Iranian EFL Learners' Spiritual Intelligence and Their Language Learning Autonomy

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Abstract

Learning a second/foreign language is a complicated process involving many factors and elements to occur effectively. It requires an investigation of variables and issues related to EFL learners in the process of learning. A limited number of studies have been performed concerning student-related factors to realize EFL learners' spiritual intelligence and its relation to language learning. The study helped fill this gap by exploring the correlation between EFL learners' Spiritual Intelligence (SI) and Learner Autonomy (LA). A total of 365 EFL students were chosen from different branches of Islamic Azad University. Two validated and reliable questionnaires on SI (Azadi et al., in press) and LA (Dixon, 2011) were distributed among the participants. The SI questionnaire is a 27-item self-report measure consisting of four main factors, and the LA questionnaire contains 38 questions covering six factors. The correlation between the two variables was determined through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results showed a significant relationship between SI and LA.

Furthermore, two of the constructs, learning English for personal, social, and educational benefits ($r=.93$, $p<.05$) and learning English to promote religious values ($r=.82$, $p<.05$), were considered significant predictors of autonomy. These findings revealed that paying attention to the correlation between SI and LA is particularly important. The study recommended implications for practitioners, professionals, academics, theorists, and teacher training centers. Awareness of SI and its impact on EFL education and student-related factors can provide opportunities for improving EFL learners' performance and ability.

Keywords: EFL Learner, Learner Autonomy, PLS-SEM, Spiritual Intelligence

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a complicated process that includes several factors and aspects that effectively influence the process (Benevene et al., 2020). It entails a combination of variables and matters related to teachers and students. One of the most critical drivers of language learning is taking students' intelligence and its different types into account (Ma & Wang, 2022). Therefore, education should be based on learners' cognitive, emotional, and social abilities (Arnold & Fonseca, 2004). Additionally, educators generally believe learners may use different types of intelligence to different degrees based on their learning styles. This idea is in line with Gardner's (1983) concept of Multiple Intelligences (MIs), who proposed different intelligences for learners. MI have dominated research in the field of language for decades, particularly their influences and correlations with other language learning variables and student-related factors (Elhambakhsh et al., 2018).

Drawing on MI theory, Zohar and Marshall (2001) proposed a new intelligence known as spiritual intelligence that is unique to humans and is shaped based on the awareness and relationship of each person with self, other persons, the educational environment, and religious values in personal, collaborative, environmental, and transcendental domains (Wigglesworth, 2006). Based on Gardner's definition of intelligence, Emmons (2000b) defined SI as encompassing intellectual, emotional, physiological, sacred, social, and ethnic components that can help individuals solve their everyday problems and attain their goals. Moreover, Emmons added that SI could be considered an ability that enhances the quality of life and improves well-being. As stated by Denny et al. (2008), SI can create a learning environment in which students can reach and benefit from their full capacities.

Similarly, Zohar (2010) believed that education based on the principles of SI empowers learners' mental aptitude, which can develop their achievements and foster their enthusiasm for learning in the academic context. Having a spiritual attitude in any educational setting will make the learning process more accessible, and the learner's autonomy, confidence, self-esteem, and empathy will increase (Galeh & Dorcheh, 2015). Al-Salkhi (2019) stated that spiritually intelligent learners are more confident, self-developed, and self-actualized. Moreover, they have feelings of integrity, interest, contentment, and pleasure.

Among the many factors that affect the complex language learning process, vital student-related factors must be investigated. Therefore, the second variable in this study is

Learner's Autonomy (LA), which is the capacity to take responsibility for the learning process (Holec, 1981). Dickinson (1995) defined LA as the situation in which learners use their own objectives to select the proper learning methods and techniques. When learners identify and set their goals and participate in decision-making, more focused and purposeful learning occurs in the language classroom (Benson, 2001). Benson (2001) added that when learners are allowed to determine the course's time, place, and pace and control the classroom activities and materials, they will be self-confident.

SI and LA are two features of EFL learners that can promote learning and predict EFL learners' performance (Kırkgoz, 2012). The available literature is admittedly thin on empirical research on the relationship between SI and any characteristic of EFL learners in the process of language learning. Developments of applied linguistics and language learning pedagogy, enriched with research into SLA in general and factors related to learners in particular (Benson, 2001). LA has been noticed considerably in language education (Benson, 2001; Ezzi, 2018), and some researchers have considered autonomy essential for successful and practical learning (Benson, 2001; Chan, 2001). Due to the information explosion and the emergence of lifelong learning, individuals need to take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2001). In addition, more attention has been given to learner autonomy worldwide due to the change in the focus of education from considering the teacher as an authority to considering students as a more active and influential factor in a learning context (Benson, 2001; Liu, 2012). The number of studies with different perspectives related to autonomy has multiplied. Many studies have stated that LA positively correlates with academic success (Benson & Huang, 2008; Dam & Legenhausen, 2010).

Besides, fostering SI in language learning and teaching programs is essential for several reasons. Firstly, SI facilitates everyday problem-solving and goal achievement (Emmons, 2000a). Secondly, by developing SI, learners improve their abilities and skills. It may empower learners, develop their confidence, and lead them toward self-development and self-actualization (Al-Salkhi, 2019). Thirdly, spiritual intelligence influences vocational and official education (Turi et al., 2020). Therefore, the possible correlation between LA and SI, two learner characteristics types, is an important area of investigation and discussion. In fact, by exploring the correlation between SI and LA, this study focuses on a new dimension of empowering EFL learners and improving the quality of educational settings in Iran.

2. Literature Review

Among the crucial issues raised concerning intelligence and its different types, the notion of SI has achieved significance. Spiritual Intelligence (SI) is a human ability that differentiates humans from other creatures (Gardner, 2000). Using Gardner's definition of intelligence, Emmons (2000a) argued whether spirituality should be considered intelligence. He stated it might be helpful to suppose spirituality and all it encompasses as a set of specific capabilities. He believed this type of intelligence could help people solve their problems and reach their objectives in their daily lives. According to Amram and Dryer (2008), SI was one's ability to promote self-understanding, self-regulation, deep comprehension of life meaning, thoughtfulness, growth in peace, connecting with others, and mental health. Vaughan (2002) defined SI as a human mental capacity related to spirit and world, based on profound perception and the consciousness of existential questions.

Zohar and Marshal (2001) believed SI reinforces IQ and EQ. SI supports individuals to achieve higher meanings, values, and fundamental objectives, thereby supporting a more creative life. They also added that SI helps individuals evolve, takes them into the unknown, and pushes them to grow and develop. SI is a transformative intelligence that allows people to break old paradigms and invent new ones. By recontextualizing problems and situations, a spiritually intelligent person can see them from a broader point of view. Additionally, King (2008) defined SI as a series of mental abilities that develop one's consciousness, assimilation, and adaptive usage of the spiritual and divine side of an individual's life. Finally, from Wigglesworth's (2006) point of view, spiritually intelligent people behave with compassion, kindness, and wisdom while remaining calm in any circumstances. It should be mentioned that numerous studies have developed questionnaires for SI (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2008; Amram & Dryer, 2008; Azadi et al., in press; King, 2008; Wigglesworth, 2006) to investigate the relationship between SI and influential factors in learning.

2.1. SI and Education

Many researchers believe that spirituality should accompany education because of the benefits to students and teachers equipped with SI. According to Kırkgoz (2012), foreign language curricula and textbook materials should be developed and designed for different types of intelligence. Educational curricula based on intelligence-based programs can foster

students' motivation, critical thinking, and problem-solving ability (Denny et al., 2008). Zohar (2010) said that an equipped education empowered by SI encourages students to examine their former expectancies and values and be open to new experiences. Therefore, educational settings based on SI can see evaluation from a broader point of view and effectively use learners' potential. Spiritually intelligent students gain more educational achievements and develop their interest in learning in the academic environment.

Moreover, some studies reveal that spiritually intelligent learners achieve personal, social, and academic success by learning English (Al-Kadi & Ahmed, 2018; Al-Salkhi, 2019). Many valuable relationships between language learning and SI have been investigated. Many studies have reported successful language learning outcomes, like taking advantage from learning the English language (Al-Kadi & Ahmed, 2018), developing intercultural competence and communicative ability (Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019; Peng et al., 2005; Pourakbari et al., 2018; Rahimi & Soltani, 2010;), promoting religious values (Balraj et al., 2020), making more use of Cognitive, metacognitive strategies (Liyanage, 2004; Liyanage et al., 2010; Macaro, 2001); and gaining more occupational and academic opportunities (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2020).

2.2. Learner Autonomy

Autonomy encourages learners to act appropriately in different instructional and social contexts based on their culture, values, and beliefs (Amroun, 2008; Chan, 2001; Lustig, 2006; Mirdehghan et al., 2011; Pennycook, 1997; Wekesa, 2001). LA improves the quality of language learning and prepares learners for long-term learning. In this way, learners can benefit from learning opportunities in and out of the classroom (Rao, 2006). The results of studies on LA indicated that autonomy helps learners to attain higher levels of confidence, reach their goals in education (Zarrinabadi et al., 2019), communicate individual meanings in authentic contexts, be responsible for their own learning and use relevant strategies, support the formation of their emotional intelligence, be successful in the recognition and comprehension of their learning abilities and cope with the challenges of language learning (Benson, 2007), and attain academic success in foreign language learning (Benson & Huang, 2008; Dam & Legenhausen, 2010). Other studies have reported the challenges of promoting LA and the lack of a correlation between academic success and LA (Ezzi, 2018; Gunes &

Alagozlu, 2020) due to a deficiency of proper material, qualified teachers, and out-of-class activities (Alibakhshi, 2015; Liu, 2012; Mansooji et al., 2022; Nasri et al., 2017).

Critical factors limiting LA in Iran are the local educational system and government. The educational system in Iran is centralized, and the ministry of education makes all the decisions about various aspects of a curriculum, such as the materials and evaluation system (Alibakhshi, 2015). Moreover, the other factors that limit fostering LA among students were considered the educational equipment, learners' characteristics, types of activities, and teachers' experiences and beliefs. The development of LA is a long-term process and needs fundamental reforms in the educational system (Azin et al., 2019). In fact, in learning English as a foreign language, as the one learners may experience in Iran, learners need to be autonomous and independent and make a conscious effort to learn. Thus, investigating a factor that promotes LA must be considered an essential issue for language learning (Sedighi & Hadidi Tamjid, 2016).

As mentioned before, developing SI and LA of EFL learners may result in personal, social, and educational benefits. Combining these two opens a new world of possibilities in education by activating different learner potentials. Further research needs to be performed in the field of LA, SI, and the relationship between them. As a result, SI may be recognized as a contributing factor to the autonomy of language learners. The present study filled the gap in the literature on the relationship between learners' SI and LA by providing a detailed representation of the SI components and their relationship with autonomy. For this purpose, the following research question was asked:

1. Is there any significant correlation between Iranian EFL learners' spiritual intelligence and its subscales (learning English for intercultural communication; learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement; learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits; and learning English to promote religious values) and their autonomy?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

This descriptive-correlational study investigated the correlation between EFL learners' spiritual intelligence (SI) and learner autonomy (LA). Different branches of Tehran's Islamic Azad University made up the context of the study. The data were collected through an SI questionnaire developed and validated in a previous study (Azadi et al., in press) and a LA questionnaire developed by Dixon (2011).

About 365 EFL learners simultaneously answered the two questionnaires to investigate the relationship between SI and LA. Then, the obtained data were compared to answer the study question and determine if there was a significant relationship between the constructs of SI and LA in an Iranian context.

3.2. Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select 365 Iranian EFL learners from different branches of the Islamic Azad University for this study. As the most common type of sampling, convenience sampling, the participants can be selected based on the ease of access and having particular characteristics related to the purpose of the study (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2010). Besides, a widely used minimum sample size estimation method in PLS-SEM is the ‘sample-to-item ratio’ (Hair et al., 2022), which builds on the assumption that the sample size should be 10 to 1 ratio. The participants were university students from undergraduate (N= 177) and graduate (N= 188) levels. The sample consisted of male (N= 172) and female (N= 193) students aged 18 to 50. English was considered a foreign language, and Persian was their native tongue. The EFL learners responded to both questionnaires, which were then analyzed to see if the answers correlated. The questionnaires were developed as Google forms and sent out via email, Telegram, and WhatsApp, and some students completed print copies. Two TEFL experts checked the content validity of the developed questionnaire. Additionally, 50 EFL learners responded to the same questionnaires twice in the pilot phase to ensure test-retest reliability.

Table 1.

Demographic Background of the Participants

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| No. of Students | 365(177 Undergraduate & 188 Graduate) |
| Gender | 193 Females & 172 Males |
| Native Language | Persian |
| Major | TEFL, Translation |
| Universities | Different branches of Islamic Azad University |

3.3. Instruments

To find the correlation between SI and LA, data were collected through a language learner autonomy questionnaire (Dixon, 2011) and a spiritual intelligence questionnaire (Azadi et al., in press) that was previously developed in a more extensive study. The SI questionnaire was developed based on a review of the relevant literature and interviews with 22 EFL learners and then distributed among 360 EFL learners. The SI questionnaire consists of 27 items. By running Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), four different factors emerged

for the SI scale, factor 1 (learning English for intercultural communication); factor 2 (learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement); factor 3 (learning English for personal, social, and educational benefits); and factor 4 (learning English to promote religious values).

The second instrument (LA), developed by Dixon (2011), consists of 38 items and six factors, linguistic confidence, information literacy, social comparison, locus of control, metacognition, and self-reliance. The viability and reliability of two questionnaires were checked. Consequently, Face validity, content validity, and construct validity were considered in the current study. The face validity of each questionnaire was checked by using a good and orderly layout (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2010). Moreover, content validity was confirmed through experts' judgment. Finally, to meet the last type of validity, EFA was employed to check the construct validity of each questionnaire (Pallant, 2013). Five-point Likert scales measured the Statement-type items, with the options ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 6=strongly agree). The SI and LA questionnaires were distributed to EFL learners in their first language. To discover any possible relationship between autonomy and different sub-constructs of SI, a conceptual model was devised, and PLS path modeling was exploited.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The two questionnaires were used to gather the required data. The SI (Azadi et al., in press) and LA (Dixon, 2011) questionnaires were distributed electronically or in print to the participants. Both questionnaires consist of two main parts: The first relates to the participant's demographic information, and the second relates to the attitudinal questions that investigate the respondents' attitudes about the concepts. Initially, two questionnaires, one on SI and the other on LA, were piloted to EFL learners majoring in ELT at Islamic Azad University, Tehran branches by the researcher to reveal any probable problems before the main study was conducted. These participants had almost the same characteristics as the target sample. The Cronbach alpha of each questionnaire was above the threshold of 0.7. Moreover, the construct validity of two questionnaires was checked by running EFA and devising a conceptual model. In the next step, the two piloted questionnaires regarding SI and LA were distributed among participants. Both questionnaires were administered to the same participants. They were told to write down their names on the answer sheets to make

it possible to compare their responses. In the final step, all of the questionnaires were analyzed.

Two questionnaires were on a Likert-formed scale, and Five-point Likert scales measured the Statement-type items, with the options ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. The respondents were asked to select the option close to their opinion, bearing in mind that there were no right or wrong answers. The two questionnaires in collecting data were in the participants' first language (Persian). It should be mentioned that the study data were collected in the Coronavirus release, in which most of the participants used Google forms of questionnaires. Therefore, the honesty and attention with which participants answered the questionnaire questions should be considered a significant limitation of this study.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

A conceptual model was devised to investigate the relationship between autonomy and the different spiritual intelligence sub-constructs. First, the model's construct validity (Composite reliability, Indicator reliability, Convergent validity, and Discriminant validity) was investigated based on Hair et al. (2022). Then, correlations among the sub-construct of SI and autonomy were examined, and the normality of distribution was checked. Next, the correlation coefficient of the two scales was obtained. Finally, after investigating the construct validity of the outer model (the measurement model), partial least squares (PLS-SEM) path modeling was used to assess the inner model (i.e., the relationships among the constructs).

4. Results

In order to investigate the relationship between autonomy and different sub-construct of SI, a conceptual model (see Figure 1) was devised. The study followed what Hair et al. (2022) recommended to investigate the construct validity of the proposed model (comprised of reflectively measured constructs) and then examined the correlations among sub-constructs of SI and autonomy.

Here, partial least squares (PLS) path modeling was exploited. The rationale behind using PLS structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in this analysis is that this composite-based causal-predictive approach (Hair & Sarstedt, 2021) has much more flexibility about distributional assumptions, such as lacking normality of data (skewness). It shows more

flexibility in measuring a model, that is, specification of complex models, prediction of dependent variables, and not using a goodness of fit indices in its traditional form and number (Hair et al., 2022). As it was mentioned before here rules of thumb proposed by Hair et al. (2022) to evaluate the construct validity of a model are listed:

1. Composite reliability (CR): it is an index of internal consistency for each construct; it should be between 0.6 to 0.7 or higher than 0.7.
2. Indicator reliability: the outer loading of items (see Figure 1) should be higher than 0.7. For loadings between 0.4 and 0.7, only those should be deleted if their deletion will lead to an increase in CR.
3. Convergent validity: the average variance extracted (AVE) should be higher than 0.5.
4. Discriminant validity: the outer loadings of items on a construct should be higher than all its loadings on other constructs (cross-loadings). Also, the square root of the AVE of each construct should be higher than the correlation of it with other constructs (Fornell-Larcker criterion).

First, no important issues can be seen regarding the normality of the data (the skewness and kurtosis measures of the items were between -2 and +2). No signs of collinearity were observed as variance inflation factor (VIF) (they show the amount of multicollinearity in a set of indicators [items] of constructs) values were all below 5 (Hair et al., 2022). No outliers or missing data were identified in the dataset as well.

Concerning the first step in the evaluation of the measurement model (the constructs and their indicators), it can be seen in Table 2 that CRs of all the constructs are higher than 0.7. Also, the Cronbach alpha of each construct is above the threshold of 0.7 (Hair & Sarstedt, 2021). In addition, the evaluation of convergent validity here has yielded satisfactory results, with AVE values of all the constructs being higher than 0.5 (see Table 2).

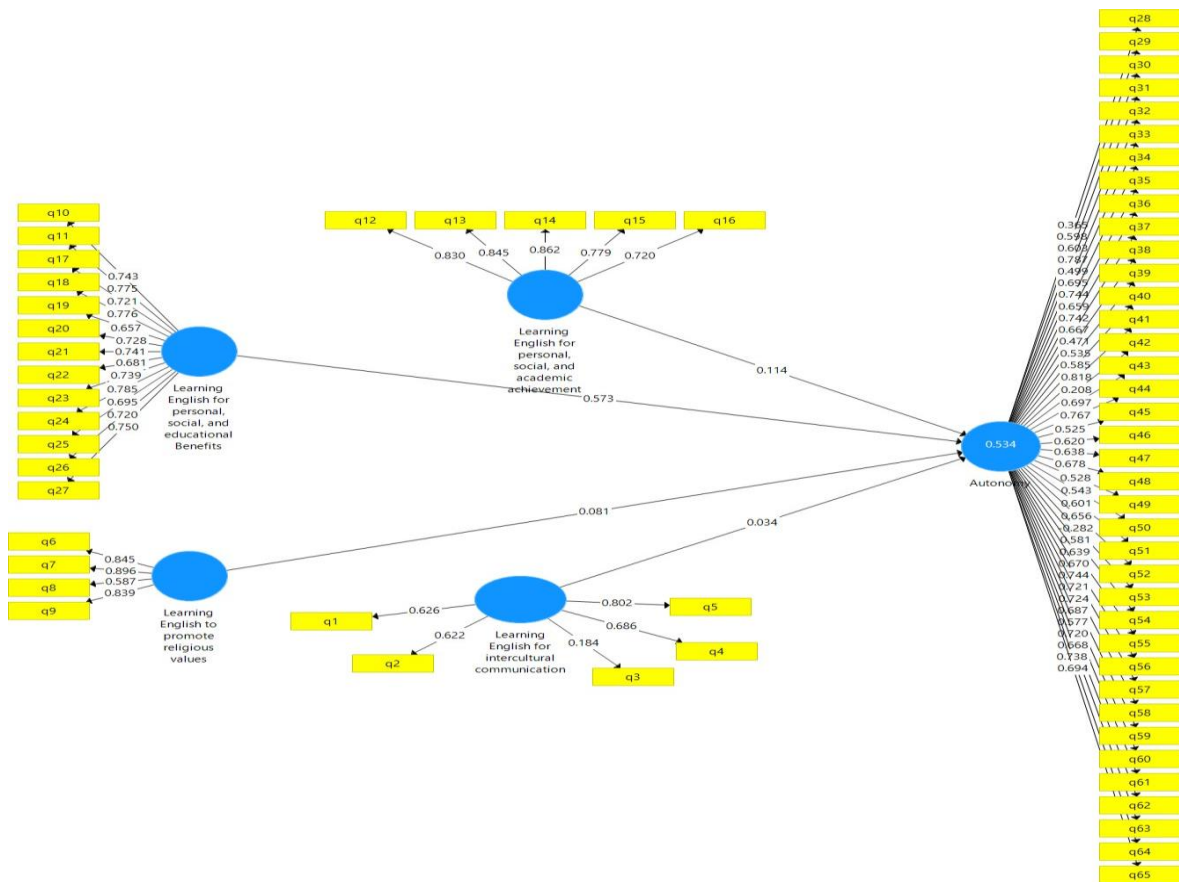


Figure 1. *The Path Model*

Table 2.

Internal Consistency Reliability Measures

| | Cronbach's Alpha | rho_A | Composite Reliability | (AVE) |
|---|---------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------|
| Autonomy | 0.95 | 0.97 | 0.96 | 0.52 |
| Learning English for intercultural communication | 0.81 | 0.81 | 0.88 | 0.61 |
| Learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement | 0.87 | 0.87 | 0.90 | 0.65 |
| Learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits | 0.93 | 0.93 | 0.94 | 0.54 |
| Learning English to promote religious values | 0.82 | 0.88 | 0.87 | 0.64 |

Pertaining to indicator reliability, as seen in the Indicators’ Outer Loadings Table (Appendix), the hefty majority of outer loadings are higher than 0.6 in this exploratory research, which is acceptable according to Hair et al. (2022). Ultimately, regarding discriminant validity, having checked each indicator’s outer loading on a construct, the researcher identified that it was higher than all its cross-loadings with other constructs.

Also, *Fornell-Larcker Criterion* (1981), another yardstick for examining discriminant validity, was met, as the square root of the AVE of each construct (see Table 3) was higher than its correlation with any other construct. Pertaining to model fit, the fit indices (SRMR = 0.07, a value less than 0.08 is considered satisfactory; NFI= 0.92, a value higher than 0.9 and closer to 1 is considered satisfactory) did not yield any sign of misfit in the model.

Table 3.

Fornell-Larcker Criterion

| | Autonomy | Learning English for intercultural communication | Learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement | Learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits | Learning English to promote religious values |
|---|----------|--|---|---|--|
| Autonomy | 0.636 | | | | |
| Learning English for intercultural communication | 0.509 | 0.621 | | | |
| Learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement | 0.619 | 0.542 | 0.809 | | |
| Learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits | 0.721 | 0.655 | 0.777 | 0.733 | |
| Learning English to promote religious values | 0.415 | 0.472 | 0.508 | 0.455 | 0.801 |

Having investigated the construct validity of the outer model (the measurement model), we here commence the assessment of the inner model (the structural paths), that is,

the significance of the structural relationships (i.e., the relationships among the constructs). Before this, again, inner VIF values in the inner model were all below 5, showing no indication of multicollinearity among the constructs. Firstly, four constructs in the models represented 53% of the variance in autonomy (adjusted R²), which, according to Plonsky and Ghanbar (2018), was considered to be a fairly robust model. Among the constructs, two of them, that is learning English for personal, social, and educational benefits and learning English to promote religious values, are considered to be the significant predictors of autonomy (see Table 4 for the coefficient of determination [direct effects] of each modeled relationship and its pertaining *t* value).

PLS-SEM has been used to prove the role of SI in predicting LA. Therefore, based on the results, there is no significant relationship between learning English for intercultural communication as a subscale of SI and LA. Moreover, there is no significant relationship between learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement as a subscale of SI and LA. Besides, there is a significant relationship between learning English for personal, social, and educational benefits as a subscale of SI and LA. In addition, there is a significant relationship between learning English to promote religious values as a subscale of SI and LA.

Table 4.

Total Direct Effects

| Constructs' Paths | Original Sample | Sample Mean | Standard Deviation | <i>t</i> -test | <i>p</i> Values |
|---|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Learning English for intercultural communication -> Autonomy | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.54 | 0.58 |
| Learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement -> Autonomy | 0.11 | 0.11 | 0.06 | 1.65 | 0.10 |
| Learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits -> Autonomy | 0.57 | 0.57 | 0.07 | 7.98 | 0.00 |
| Learning English to promote religious values -> Autonomy | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.04 | 1.80 | 0.03 |

Note: -> shows a correlation path in the model

5. Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between SI and LA. After interpreting the data analysis, it was concluded that some components of SI and LA positively and significantly correlated with each other. Two components of SI, learning English for personal, social, and educational benefits and learning English to promote religious values, predict LA.

Data analysis showed that there isn't any significant relationship between the component "learning English for intercultural communication" in SI and LA. This construct includes five main questionnaire items based on the premise that students will communicate and share information with people from other cultures by learning English. All cultures equip their members with appropriate ways to respond to the world. In other words, the individual behaves based on their culture (Lustig, 2006). When an individual refuses to tolerate a practice because he is acting based on his culture, a barrier is formed, and intercultural communication becomes problematic (Amroun, 2008). Amroun's study (2008) reported that the degree of autonomy varies based on the cultural setting and that an individual's cultural behavior can cause barriers to learning. According to Pennycook (1997, p.44), "To encourage learner autonomy universally, without first becoming acutely aware of the social, cultural and political contexts in which one is working, may lead at best to inappropriate pedagogies and at worst to cultural impositions."

In addition to cultural awareness, language proficiency also plays a crucial role in intercultural competence (Peng et al., 2005). Unfortunately, some Iranians have frequently stated that they cannot act successfully in their intercultural communications (Rahimi & Soltani, 2010). In this respect, Mirdehghan et al. (2011) examined the negative effects of cultural barriers on ELT and effective communication in Iran. They recommended that cultural elements be included in ESL/EFL curricula. As Mozaffarzadeh and Ajideh (2019) mentioned, intercultural language learning requires providing learners with materials teaching intercultural communication to enhance the learners' intercultural competence, which is essential for effective communication in an increasingly multicultural context. However, research findings reported that the cultural content is neglected in many ELT textbooks. In a similar study, Pourakbari et al. (2018) reported that many language learners had no experience with communication or language use. Therefore, it seems that intercultural competence has not been given enough attention, and learners' cultural communicative needs are overlooked in learning opportunities, teaching, and instructional materials. Results from this study show Iranian EFL learners suffer from inadequate

intercultural competence as a component of SI. Therefore, it can be concluded that the SI component "learning English for intercultural communication" cannot predict Iranian EFL learners' autonomy.

In addition, there isn't any significant relationship between the component "learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement" in SI and LA. The construct includes five main questionnaire items related to different kinds of EFL learners' achievements when learning the English language and as a sign of being spiritually intelligent. This finding is in contrast to the results of many studies that show a significant correlation between language learning achievement and LA (Benson, 2007), but it is consistent with other studies that have reported learner autonomy, and English proficiency of English students are not significantly correlated (Ezzi, 2018). Researchers have emphasized that academic success in foreign language learning depends on the autonomy level of EFL learners (Benson & Huang, 2008; Dam & Legenhausen, 2010). However, similar to the results, Gunes and Alagozlu (2020) found no significant relationship between academic success and LA.

The studies on EFL contexts reported that the degree of LA relates to the learner's culture. For instance, Chan (2001) claims that it can be harder to promote LA in some cultures, including China, Japan, and Turkey, than in Western cultures due to the lack of autonomy-raising activities in the class. In EFL contexts, language learning mainly occurs in the classroom, and learners lack opportunities to practice the target language outside the classroom (Liu, 2012).

In Iran, several attempts have been made to investigate LA. Alibakhshi (2015) reported that promoting LA in Iran is challenging. He found that Iranian learners are not self-motivated, dependent on teachers, have little exposure to English outside the classroom, have limited language proficiency, have less access to proper materials, and have a deficiency of previous autonomous learning experience. Mansooji et al. (2022) argued that the limitations of fixed curricular requirements, such as the use of specific books and the limitations on the time of completing specific materials, were the fundamental reasons that most learners did not take part in more autonomy-related practices during and after class time. Moreover, learners' low degrees of motivation were the other principal reason. Teachers believed learners were not intrigued by language learning and preferred not to put additional time and energy into learning outside class. Besides, the existing government policies do not respect

English and only include it in the curriculum. In this manner, the instructors feel that empowering autonomy in learning is an exercise in futility. In another study, Nasri et al. (2017) tried to find the constraints of promoting LA. The results of the study showed that predetermined materials, schedule, lack of facilities, desire to depend on teachers, and learners' low level of English proficiency were the significant limitations of promoting LA. Hence, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners do not have a high degree of autonomy to develop their language ability and increase their success and achievement based on their cultural context. If learners do not have language proficiency, they will not gain personal, social, and academic achievement.

The "learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits" component was correlated in SI and LA. Based on their needs and goals, individuals can benefit from learning the English language, the language of academia, research, communication, education, diplomacy, science, technology, and the internet (Al-Kadi & Ahmed, 2018). Al-Salkhi (2019) stated that SI empowers students by improving their self-confidence, self-development, and self-actualization, enabling them to solve their problems and achieve their goals. It also provides individuals with feelings of integrity, interest, contentment, and pleasure. Language learner autonomy, self-confidence, and self-concept were identified as factors that significantly relate to the quality and quantity of language learning (Zarrinabadi et al., 2019). Galeh and Dorcheh (2015) stated that a spiritual attitude in the educational setting makes learning easier by increasing autonomy, confidence, self-esteem, and empathy while decreasing stress and anxiety. Therefore, it can be concluded that SI can predict autonomy based on this component.

A significant correlation was also found between the "Learning English to promote religious values" component in SI and LA. Religious value is an essential factor needed to develop students' SI. Language is the most potent means of communication, a tool for expressing cultural and religious values, and an instrument for conserving them. English can help manage the world's socio-cultural, linguistic, religious, and political needs. Language has been one of the principal means to portray a religion. However, it has to be communicated for the religion to survive, and this need to transfer information is where language plays its role. Language is used to portray the righteousness of religion, holy worshipping, convey justice and good to humanity, and teach morality (Balraj et al., 2020).

Language learning is a process of socialization, where the language is a tool to join a second culture, values, and beliefs (Wekesa, 2001).

Religion is a strong determinant in language learning and strategy choice. It forms the values and attitudes of its followers. Eventually, this influence finds its way into the language classroom (Wekesa, 2001). Liyanage (2004) reported that the religious identity of the learners is essential in selecting learning strategies. Some researchers reported a significant association between religion and cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Liyanage et al., 2010; Wekesa, 2001). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), metacognitive strategies relate to thinking, planning, monitoring, evaluating, and problem-solving, while cognitive strategies relate to analyzing and synthesizing information. In this sense, Macaro (2001) also defined autonomy as the ability to use a range and combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in learning. Indeed, metacognitive and cognitive strategies are prerequisites for being an autonomous learner (Holec, 1981). LA can be promoted through the use of learning strategies. Therefore, selecting different learning strategies based on their religious and cultural values can promote LA, which develops language learning ability.

6. Conclusion

An awareness of SI, its essential constituent, and its relation to another influential factor in language learning is necessary to promote this awareness in everyday language teaching and learning practices. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the correlation between the constructs of SI and LA in the Iranian EFL context. Moreover, by exploring the relationship between SI and LA, a better understanding of how the constructs of SI can promote LA. Both the SI and LA can improve and develop the language learning of EFL learners.

This study first developed a conceptual model and checked the construct validity of two questionnaires. Then, PLS-SEM analysis revealed that two constructs, learning English for personal, social, and educational benefits and learning English to promote religious values, could be correlated in LA. Therefore, it can be concluded that SI affects LA, in particular, and language learning, in general.

Research results have significant implications for education stakeholders, such as theorists, practitioners, school administrators, teachers, and learners. Moreover, the study results suggest that EFL education organizations set programs to acquaint EFL teachers with

the correlation between SI and LA and how they might influence language learning ability development. Teachers' understanding of the relationship between SI and LA might help develop EFL learners' understanding of SI and how it aids more successful language learning. Future studies on using the SI questionnaire and its correlation to many other influential factors in language learning will provide valuable data for officials to be more concerned with EFL learner identity in Iran. Moreover, the study's findings can be applied in an EFL setting, either directly or indirectly, to affect language learning ability.

The limitation of the study includes the selection of participants from one socio-cultural context of Iran, the different branches of Islamic Azad University in Tehran, which might not meet the generalizability of outcomes. The researcher suggests extending the study to include EFL learners from other institutes and universities. Moreover, the honesty and attention with which participants answered the questionnaires can be considered another limitation of the current study. More importantly, the current study was only concerned with the relationship between SI and LA; other learners' features should also be considered in future studies. Moreover, it might be practical for researchers to provide a clear image of SI and its influence on LA. While SI and LA are student-related factors that may affect language learning development, the role of other factors, like age, proficiency level, learning style, attitude, motivation, and willingness, should also be considered in EFL syllabus design, material development, and class activities.

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Appendix

Indicators' Outer Loadings in the Measurement Model

Table

Indicators' Outer Loadings in the Measurement Model

| | Learning English for Autonomy | Learning English for intercultural communication | Learning English for personal, social, and academic achievement | Learning English for personal, social, and educational Benefits | Learning English to promote religious values |
|-----|-------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| q1 | | 0.63 | | | |
| q10 | | | | 0.74 | |
| q11 | | | | 0.78 | |
| q12 | | | 0.83 | | |
| q13 | | | 0.85 | | |
| q14 | | | 0.86 | | |
| q15 | | | 0.78 | | |
| q16 | | | 0.72 | | |
| q17 | | | | 0.72 | |
| q18 | | | | 0.78 | |
| q19 | | | | 0.66 | |
| q2 | | 0.62 | | | |
| q20 | | | | 0.73 | |
| q21 | | | | 0.74 | |
| q22 | | | | 0.68 | |
| q23 | | | | 0.74 | |
| q24 | | | | 0.79 | |
| q25 | | | | 0.70 | |
| q26 | | | | 0.72 | |
| q27 | | | | 0.75 | |
| q28 | 0.36 | | | | |
| q29 | 0.60 | | | | |
| q3 | | 0.18 | | | |
| q30 | 0.60 | | | | |
| q31 | 0.79 | | | | |
| q32 | 0.50 | | | | |
| q33 | 0.69 | | | | |
| q34 | 0.74 | | | | |
| q35 | 0.66 | | | | |
| q36 | 0.74 | | | | |
| q37 | 0.67 | | | | |
| q38 | 0.47 | | | | |
| q39 | 0.53 | | | | |
| q4 | | 0.69 | | | |
| q40 | 0.59 | | | | |
| q41 | 0.82 | | | | |
| q42 | 0.21 | | | | |
| q43 | 0.70 | | | | |
| q44 | 0.77 | | | | |
| q45 | 0.53 | | | | |

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| | |
|-----|-------|
| q46 | 0.62 |
| q47 | 0.64 |
| q48 | 0.68 |
| q49 | 0.53 |
| q5 | 0.80 |
| q50 | 0.54 |
| q51 | 0.60 |
| q52 | 0.66 |
| q53 | -0.28 |
| q54 | 0.58 |
| q55 | 0.64 |
| q56 | 0.67 |
| q57 | 0.74 |
| q58 | 0.72 |
| q59 | 0.72 |
| q6 | 0.84 |
| q60 | 0.69 |
| q61 | 0.58 |
| q62 | 0.72 |
| q63 | 0.67 |
| q64 | 0.74 |
| q65 | 0.69 |
| q7 | 0.90 |
| q8 | 0.59 |
| q9 | 0.84 |
