

Iranian EFL Learners' Perception of Autonomous Language Learning in Language Classrooms

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Abstract. Most educators and thinkers agree that autonomy should be taken as a desirable educational aim in order for students to master the new language. The study is an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL learners' perception of autonomous language learning in foreign language learning classes, as well as Iranian EFL learners' perception of their teachers' role in autonomous language learning. It also attempts to identify the difference between males and females language learners in terms of autonomous language learning. To this end, a 45-item autonomous language learning questionnaire adapted from Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002) was administered to sixty five language learners learning English in two language institutes. Results indicated that for some certain activities students shared their responsibility with their teacher. With regard to students' engagement in autonomous activities inside and outside of the class, results indicated that the learners are able to do some certain activities but unable to do some others. Result also indicated that females do more inside and outside class activities than males.

Keywords: Autonomy, language learning, EFL learners' perception

1. Introduction

Since language learning has become an essential component in people's lives, educational research has emphasized the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning. It goes without saying that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners is the result of changes in the curriculum towards a more learner-centered learning. Thus, in

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order to contribute to the development of learner-centered education in language classrooms, it is vital that students be involved in taking control of their own learning. Most educators and thinkers agree that autonomy should be taken as a desirable educational aim in order for students to master the new language. In this respect, many conceptions have been proposed and many educators have tried to explain learner autonomy.

Autonomy has been defined differently by different scholars. Benson (2008) argues that, because the concept of autonomy in learning draws its meaning from the concept of personal autonomy, it is centrally concerned with the kind of learning that best helps people to lead autonomous lives. Autonomous life refers to individual freedom with the free choice of goals and relations as essential ingredients of individual well-being (Raz, 1986, as cited in Benson 2008). In this regard, autonomy has to do with individual freedom and human rights for making individual choices. It is a matter of lifelong process rather than a need for a particular situation or course.

It seems that autonomy is being watched with keen interest in educational areas. One of the Japanese educational themes emphasizes the necessity of the ability to learn and think of one's own accord. This ability, which bears a close resemblance to autonomy, has always been a matter of great importance in the Japanese society because we really need autonomy, cooperativeness and creativeness to survive and succeed in every area of our society. Umeda (2000) specifies three reasons for the significance of autonomy from the general educational perspective; fostering a survival capacity to cope with rapid social changes, developing the learners' individuality, and improving the diversity of the learner's cultural and educational background. Benson (2001) states more straightforwardly that it was argued that the development of such a capacity is beneficial to leaning. Knowles (2001) says one of our main aims in education is helping individuals to develop the attitude that learning is a lifelong process and to acquire the skills of self-directed learning (William & Burden, 1997).

The results of the present study can make Iranian EFL teachers and learners more familiar with the concept of autonomy and its importance

in language learning and teaching. Moreover, teachers can learn how to make their learners more independent so that they can take more responsibility for their own language learning.

2. Research Questions

- 1) What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of autonomous language learning in foreign language learning classes?
- 2) What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of their teachers' role in autonomous language learning?
- 3) What is the difference between male and females language learners in terms of autonomous language learning?

3. Literature Review

There is a growing body of research on the development of autonomy and autonomous language learning in EFL contexts. Autonomous learners should possess a range of abilities and capabilities, according to Benson (2010) "autonomy is a complex construct" (p. 78). He also added "when we judge intuitively that students are either more or less autonomous, what we appear to be doing is observing certain behaviors and associating them with broader construct of autonomy" (p. 78) some of these observable behaviors or variables are strategies, especially metacognitive strategies which show the learners' ability of reflection, planning, and monitoring. Based on the idea of Cotterall (1995), metacognitive strategy is one of the aspects of learners' readiness for autonomy and as Little (1999, p. 23) said "strategic control of language learning and language use" is one of the crucial aspects of autonomy. Oxford (2008) also argued that learners who are more active in the language learning process are those who employed more strategies. As literature suggests before any intervention and fostering autonomy there is a need for research on learners' perceptions towards autonomous language learning.

In a study in Iran, conducted by Kashefian-Naini (2002), the author explored 168 male and female EFL learners' readiness for autonomy at in Shiraz University. She employed Cotterall's (1995) questionnaire and

used factor analysis to show the existence of these factors among this group of Iranian EFL students:

- (1) learner independence,
- (2) dependence on teacher,
- (3) learner confidence,
- (4) attitudes towards language learning, and
- (5) self-assessment.

She also considered the effect of other variables (age, sex, marital status, grade point average, year of study, their occupation, place of birth, place of residence, and parents' level of education). Among these variables, only students' academic achievement and professional status of students had an impact on their readiness for autonomy. Students' academic achievement had an effect on learners' autonomy, in that those students with averages 17 to 20 demonstrated a great deal of autonomy. Professional status had an impact on learners' readiness towards autonomy, in that those students with occupation obtained higher indexes of autonomy.

In another study Hashemian and Heidari Soureshjani (2011) investigated the relationship between autonomy, motivation, and academic performance of 60 Persian L2 learners from Sharekord Payam-e-Noor University. They used two questionnaires, one for autonomy developed by Kashefian-Naini (2002) based on Cotterall (1995)'s questionnaire and another one for motivation developed by Vaez (2008). They analyzed the data through correlation and regression. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between motivation and academic performance. This study did not find any relationship between autonomy and motivation.

Ahmadi (2013) attempted to investigate whether or not a group of law major students attending English for specific purposes course are ready to be involved in autonomous language learning. For this reason, Learner Autonomy questionnaire designed based on Chan, Humphreys, and Spratt (2002)'s Autonomy Questionnaire and Oxford (1990)'s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and distributed among 133 law major students at the Law Department of University of Guilan. The analysis of results showed that ESP students are not ready for auton-

omy and they gave most of the important decisions of their learning to their teachers. The results showed that students did not feel ready for the autonomous learning in the most of important aspects of learning and they believed that teaching activity should be designed by the teacher, and teacher has the responsibility of selecting objectives. They did not do most of autonomous activities used in this study and they were medium users of metacognitive strategies. Students need more support and help from their teacher, and they also need training in order to employ metacognitive strategies more frequently in their learning because it is one of the abilities which help students' autonomy in learning.

There is one rewarding result in this study and that is the notion of shared responsibility in evaluating. Students had the notion of shared responsibility in evaluating their course and their learning. Little (2011) believed that "one aspect of the individual learner autonomy in language learning is that the learner should have a role in evaluating the learning" (p. 26).

Nematipour (2012) investigated learners' autonomy level and its relationship with learning style in a sample of 200 undergraduate students studying at the Department of Foreign Languages of Azad University, Shiraz Branch by means of two questionnaires. The data of the study were analyzed by a two-way ANOVA and Pearson Product Moment Correlation with SPSS Version 16.0. The results revealed that visual and auditory learning styles were significantly and positively related to their learner autonomy. However there were no significant differences among males and females regarding language learning style and autonomy level.

Bagheri and Aeen (2011) examined the impact of practicing autonomy on the writing proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To this end, Preliminary English Test (PET) by Thomas and Sharon (2006) was administered to 92 intermediate language learners as a pre-test. Accordingly, 60 homogeneous learners comprised the research sample. The participants were randomly divided into two similar groups, one as an autonomous group and the other as a non-autonomous group. Each group consisted of 30 learners. The autonomous group practiced autonomy in writing and the non-autonomous group followed a traditional approach to writing. Then, the participants were post-tested on writ-

ing. In order to compare the results of the treatment in the autonomous group with the non-autonomous group, t-test was used. The null hypothesis was rejected because the autonomous group outperformed the non-autonomous group.

Nosratnia, Eftekhari and Sarabchian (2013) investigated the relationship between English as foreign language (EFL) learners' autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies, with major emphasis on predicting learners' autonomy through their vocabulary learning strategies. To meet the above purpose, a total number of 144 male and female students, between 20-25 years old, studying English Language Teaching and English Language Literature at Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran, Iran were randomly selected and given Learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies questionnaires. Pearson Product Correlation results revealed a statistically significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies ($P < 0.01$). Also, the results of multiple regressions indicated that social strategy was the best predictor and predicted about 23.8 percent of learner autonomy. Moreover, the memory strategy was the second best predictor, which increased the predictive power to 30.9 percent ($R = .55, R^2 = .309$). The findings of this study may lead students' attention to the awareness of the determining role of language learning strategies and learning autonomy as contributing factors to their success in the process of learning a target language, and point out the need for the implementation of autonomy in relation to vocabulary achievement.

Ghazisaeedi (2013) investigated the relationship among EFL learners' autonomy, first language essay writing and second language essay writing in Task/Content Based Instruction. To this aim first, 145 EFL university students (99 female and 46male) of Teaching and Translation English of two branches of Islamic Azad Universities, were selected based on their performance on a sample of piloted TOFEL test and a sample test of written English (TWE) from among 210 participants at advanced level. Subsequently, a piloted autonomy questionnaire and eight L1 and L2 essay writing tests were administered (four tests of essay writing in L2 and four tests of essay writing in L1). Correlation and regression analyses were used to analyze the data. Consequently, the results of this

research revealed that, there is a positive and significant relationship among EFL learners' autonomy, first language essay writing and second language essay writing in Task/Content Based Instruction. Also it was shown in the data analysis that autonomy was a better predictor of English essay writing as compared to Persian essay writing.

4. Method

The participants of the study were chosen based on convenience sampling from two language institutes the researcher had access to. A total number of seventy five questionnaires were distributed among language learners in the language institutes. Of the total number of questionnaires given, sixty one questionnaires were filled appropriately and were thus included in the study. The number of male participants was twenty nine and the number of female participants was thirty two. The participants were selected from intermediate to advanced levels.

The instrument that was used in the study was an autonomous language learning questionnaire adapted from Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002). It has 45 items and comprises three sections (responsibility, ability, and autonomous activities inside and outside of the class). The forty-five items of the questionnaire were categorized into three sections: the students' views of their own and their teachers' responsibilities (thirteen items), students' views of their own abilities in learning (eleven items), students' engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities (twenty-one items).

5. Results

Table 1 presents the percentages of responses related to each question of the first section of the questionnaire. The results can be classified into three main categories: (1) students and teachers share the responsibility, (2) teachers have more responsibility than students, and (3) students have more responsibility than their teachers.

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of their own and their Teachers' Responsibilities

	Students' perceptions of their own responsibilities in %			Students' perceptions of their teachers' responsibilities in %		
	Not/ A little	Some	Complete	Not/ A little	Some	Complete
1. Make sure you make progress during lessons	21.4	34.5	44.1	22.6	25.7	51.7
2. Make sure you make progress outside class	33.2	20.8	46.0	51.9	28.6	19.5
3. Stimulate your interest in learning English	21.9	36.6	41.5	26.0	35.9	38.1
4. Identify your weaknesses in English	15.4	38.9	45.7	11.9	37.2	50.9
5. Make you work harder	12.1	19.8	68.1	39.6	32.9	27.5
6. Decide the objectives of your English course	42.5	39.7	17.8	12.4	37.8	49.8
7. Decide what you should learn next in your English lessons	50.4	35.2	14.4	26.4	25.54	48.1
8. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	56.7	33.5	9.8	23.3	22.9	53.8
9. Decide how long to spend on each activity	47.2	20.1	32.7	25.4	21.5	53.1
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	38.7	24.4	36.9	21.2	26.4	52.4
11. Evaluate your learning	23.3	34.8	41.9	29.4	25.4	45.2
12. Evaluate your course	37.7	29.2	33.1	14.5	35.4	50.1
13. Decide what you learn outside class	21.2	30.1	48.7	29.8	31.9	38.3

The results of the descriptive statistics in Table 4.1 indicate that for items 1, 3, 4, 11 and 13, learners shared responsibility with their teachers. These items refer to making progress during lessons (Item 1), stimulating their interest in learning (Item 3), identifying their weaknesses in English (Item 4), evaluating their learning (Item 11) and deciding what learners learn outside class (Item 13).

For items 2 and 5, the learners gave the responsibility to themselves; these items refer to making progress outside class and making work harder. For Item 2 (making progress outside class), 46% of the respondents said that they have complete responsibility for making progress outside class. For Item 5 (work harder), more than 68% of the respondents argued that they have main responsibility for working harder.

The second objective of this study was to determine the learners' perceptions of their teachers' role in autonomous language learning. Based on the results presented in Table 4.1, the learners gave the responsibility to their teachers for items 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12. As such, it can be concluded that the learners consider the following cases as their teachers' responsibilities: deciding the objectives of the English course, deciding what they should learn next in English lessons, choosing what activities to use to learn English in English lessons, deciding how long to spend on each activity, choosing what materials to use to learn English in English lessons and evaluating the course.

Concerning the second section of the questionnaire, the responses were coded as "very poor =1" to "Good =5". For the ease of interpretation, "very poor" and "poor" categories were considered in a negative category whereas "very good" and "good" categories have been combined into one positive category. Tables 2 depicts the percentage of answers to each item.

Table 2: Students' Views of their own Abilities in Learning English

	Very poor / Poor	Ok	Good / Very good
14.Choosing learning activities in class	35.8	44.1	20.1
15.Choosing learning activities outside class	18.8	33.5	47.7
16.Choosing learning objectives in class	44.7	41.2	14.1
17. Choosing learning objectives outside	20.1	51.7	28.2
18. Choosing learning materials in class	18.0	48.1	33.9
19. Choosing learning materials outside class	33.4	28.8	37.8
20. Evaluating your learning	20.8	29.4	49.8
21. Evaluating your course	38.9	37.4	23.7
22. Identifying your weaknesses in English	28.7	27.6	43.7
23. Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	38.4	32.2	29.4
24. Deciding how long to spend on each activity	26.0	32.4	41.6

For items 15, 19, 20, 22 and 24, the learners said that they had “good/very good” ability to decide on their own. These items refer to “choosing learning activities outside class (%47.7), choosing learning materials outside class (%37.8), evaluating their learning (%49.8), identifying their weaknesses in English (%43.7), deciding how long to spend on each activity (%41.6)”. However, as for other items, the respondents argued that their abilities were either very poor/poor or OK.

The items of the third section of the questionnaire (students' engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities) were also coded as “Never =1” to “Often =4”. Table 3 presents the percentages of answers related to each item.

Table 3: Students' Engagement in Autonomous inside and outside Class Activities

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
25. Read grammar books on own	33.2	21.1	42.3	3.4
26. Done non-compulsory assignments	61.5	28.7	8.6	1.2
27. Noted down new words/meanings	17.7	10.4	49.6	22.3
28. Written English letters to pen pals	73.4	21.2	3.6	1.8
29. Read English notices around you	50.9	36.1	6.4	6.6
30. Read newspapers in English	64.3	14.8	19.5	1.4
31. Sent e-mails in English	26.4	54.8	9.7	9.1
32. Read books/magazines in English	22.3	60.2	13.1	4.4
33. Watched English TV programs	12.7	66.4	19.3	1.6
34. Listened to English radio	74.1	20.3	4.6	1.0
35. Listened to English songs	4.7	11.3	38.8	45.2
36. Talked to foreigners	39.6	54.5	4.1	1.8
37. Talked to my friends in English	52.2	23.1	14.6	10.1
38. Practiced using English with friends	37.4	33.5	19.6	9.5
39. Done grammar exercises	35.2	41.1	21.4	2.3
40. Watched English movies	15.4	18.5	45.3	20.8
41. Written diary in English	75.6	18.6	3.4	2.4
42. Used Internet in English	7.1	18.6	20.9	53.4
43. Done revision not required by the teacher	25.3	44.1	21.3	9.3
44. Collected texts in English	38.2	34.6	24.1	3.1
45. Gone to see your teacher about your work	14.4	27.1	35.3	23.2

According to Table 4.3, the learners have never done most of the activities (items 26, 28, 29, 30, 34, 37, 38, 41 and 44).

26. Done non-compulsory assignments
28. Written English letters to pen pals
29. Read English notices around you
30. Read newspapers in English
34. Listened to English radio
37. Talked to my friends in English
38. Practiced using English with friends
41. Written diary in English
44. Collected texts in English

The results also indicate that the learners have rarely done the following activities (items 31, 32, 33, 36, 39 and 43).

31. Sent e-mails in English
32. Read books/magazines in English
33. Watched English TV programs
36. Talked to foreigners
39. Done grammar exercises
43. Done revision not required by the teacher.

The learners also viewed that they sometimes did the following autonomous activities used in the study (items 25, 27, 40 and 45).

25. Read grammar books on own
27. Noted down new words/meanings
40. Watched English movies
45. Gone to see your teacher about your work

For item 35 (listening to English songs), item 42 (using internet in English), the respondents said that they were “often” engaged in these activities.

To answer the third research question, the mean scores for responsibility, ability, and activity were computed. The t-test was used for the analysis of the findings related to gender. Tables 4 and 5 show the pertaining results.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Participants Responses to the Autonomous Language Learning

	Participants	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Students' views of their own responsibilities	Male	29	1.6373	.20602	.03525
	Female	32	1.8485	.40955	.07129
Students' views of their own abilities	Male	29	2.6076	.29914	.05197
	Female	32	2.6717	.06343	.06343
Students' engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities	Male	29	2.2940	.44095	.03993
	Female	32	3.2182	.41341	.07197

Table 5: Independent Samples t-test to Compare the Males' and Females' Responses

		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
Students' views of their own responsibilities	Equal variances assumed	.539	.465	-1.401	59	.164	-.2112	.07644	-.25868	.04454
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.301	52.495	.199	-.2112	.08230	-.27218	.05804
Students' views of their own abilities	Equal variances assumed	.030	.864	-.834	59	.406	-.0641	.07154	-.20154	.08222
	Equal variances not assumed			-.828	61.032	.411	-.0641	.07209	-.20380	.08448
Students' engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities	Equal variances assumed	1.241	.268	-4.544	59	.000	-.9188	.04637	-.30270	-.11876
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.230	52.732	.000	-.9188	.04982	-.31067	-.11078

According to Table 4.5, there is a significant difference between males and females in terms of their engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities (*sig.* = .000, $p < .05$). From the mean scores presented in Table 4.4, it can be inferred that females ($M = 3.21$) engage in autonomous inside and outside class activities more than males ($M = 2.29$). The male and female participants were not significantly different in terms of their views.

6. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Results indicated that students shared responsibility of doing some certain activities with their teacher, but in the case of some other activities (such as making progress outside class), they deemed themselves mainly responsible. Results indicated that in the case of some activities, students deem their teacher responsible for doing the activities. Such activities were mainly those dealing with the methodological and planning aspects of learning and management of the activities, which students are not willing to get involved in. Results showed a significant difference between males and females in terms of doing inside and outside class autonomous activities. It was found that females did more inside and outside class activities than males. One can conclude that females, as compared to males, are more concerned with such autonomous language learning activities.

A number of pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings of the study. Results indicated that students did not feel ready for some activities. As such, they need more support and help from their teacher, and they also need training in order to practice autonomous learning as it is one of the abilities which helps students learning. Language teachers are recommended to give more room to their students to maneuver in class and take charge of their own learning. They can for example decide on the learning activities to do in class.

Knowing the students' views of their responsibility and ability help material developers, teachers, and administrators to prepare programs and materials to develop autonomous behaviors among students. Since English is a foreign language in Iran and is not used as the primary medium of communication, providing opportunities such as autonomous

learning activities and a shift in responsibility towards learners and learner-centered methodology would facilitate the development of autonomy in foreign language learning contexts.

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