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The Effect of Self-directed Learning on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Speaking Accuracy

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Abstract
Self-directed learning (SDL) can be studied in relation to various language skills and their development. In this regard, the effect of SDL on language learners' speaking accuracy could be studied. Meanwhile, as such an impact has been rarely focused on in the EFL literature; therefore, the present study can be significant from this respect. One of the areas which require investigation is the low achievement of speaking accuracy among Iranian EFL learners. SDL has its roots in andragogy. By distinguishing adults learning from children learning, based on the concept of andragogy, SDL has been described as a procedure in which learners take responsibility for their own learning, try to find and understand their own learning needs, and set goals. To fulfill the purpose of the study, sixty Iranian second language learners at the upper intermediate level were selected based on the results of PET as the proficiency English test. They also receive a pretest of speaking accuracy before experiencing the treatment. Following 8 weeks of instruction the participants took a post test of speaking accuracy as well as the self- directed Readiness scale questionnaire. The findings revealed that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the participants in the control group. These findings could be employed by EFL learners, teachers, material developers and curriculum develops in the ELT domain.
Keywords: self-directed learning, speaking accuracy, learner autonomy

INTRODUCTION

According to Savicevic, andragogy was adopted by at least ten European countries such as Germany, England, Poland, France, Finland, Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. The andragogical approach has been adopted in multiple disciplines such as education (Bolton, 2006), medicine (Bedi, 2004), criminal justice (Birzer, 2004), and management (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). The following accounts review the applications of Knowles' andragogy in a variety of fields. Forrest and Peterson (2006) claim that the andragogical approach is essential in management

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education to help prepare students for their working environment. Forrest and Peterson further state, "Modern management requires practical implementation of skills learned, not regulation of principles. Without implementation, students cannot adapt to the ever-changing workplace." (p. 114) In short, management students value practical knowledge in the workplace.

The rapidity of change, the continuous creation of new knowledge, and an ever-widening access to information make such acquisitions necessary. Much of this learning takes place at the learner's initiative, even if available through formal settings. It means that learners should be active in the process of learning and move towards learning autonomy and a self-regulated learning process which is common labeled as self-directed learning enjoying specific skills and expertise. The controversies in the field have led to a number of studies which have been aimed at reaching to the consensus of the nature on strategies in different areas in order to examine (Self Directed Learning) SDL for EFL Iranian learners (Khodabandehlou, Jahandar, Seyedi, & Abadi, 2012; Meshkat&Hassanzade, 2014; Rostami, 2014).

Self-directed learning is in close contact with the concept of autonomy and in case the second language learners are energized to be self-directed in their learning they would be moving towards the processes of self-study, self-evaluation and autonomy in learning. As one of the goals of learning in the present century is making learners self-autonomous through teaching them how of self-modification for personal adjustment, self-directed behavior, in general and fostering language learning autonomy in particular are of paramount importance.

Another significant issue focused on in the studies covering SLD involves giving learners the control of their own learning, that is, adopting a learner-centered approach that pays attention to aspects such as learning styles, proficiency levels and learning goals and needs, motivation, self-monitoring and self-assessment. In this regard, an important role for the teacher is to help students learn strategies and activate cognitive and meta-cognitive processes. This involves encouraging them to reflect on their own learning, suggesting a variety of strategies and making them aware of which ones they are using for a particular task and why. In case the learners become familiar with self-directed learning they can accept the responsibility of their own learning and therefore they can be more active and liberal learners.

Self-directed learning, specifically in the adult case, is in close contact with the principals of andragogy. This discipline tries to provide the educators with answers to the central question of "how adults learn?" although andragogy is supposed to be the technological application of psychological and sociological knowledge and not in itself "a science of the system of adult education"; however, recent studies have stressed the significance androgogy in the development of self-directed learning.

Among the language skills, speaking is the most challenging one to the foreign language learners, though the emergence of technologies has paved the way for the availability of various second or foreign language facilitating resources. Accordingly, stressing the

effect of promoting self-directed learning in formal educational institutions, the combination of second language speaking accuracy and self-directed learning could be considered a significant research area required to achieve not only the ability of understanding and reporting the context and environment but also evaluating the processes and activities involved in doing and learning.

The ability to speak is one of the essential requirements of the today's modern society is. In fact, speaking is a Cinderella skill and is located at the heart of language learning. Besides other skills and knowledge, speaking ability can be treated as one of the most critical factors in dealing with every day situation. A highly structured learning environment is required for the adult learners as the way they develop the target second language analytically differs from that of the kids. The instructor provides the plans, resources, and knowledge and in this type of setting, students often do not view themselves as active in their own learning process. Programs that support self-directed learning assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning through working with instructors to design a learning program that addresses their personal goals. One of the overtly observed problems of EFL learners in the Iranian context is presenting a good and effective way for improving L2 speaking. Being weak in the speaking skill seems to frustrate EFL learners and that is why students often complain about the difficulties involved in speaking for the aim of being more fluent and accurate. Speaking can probably be considered as the most problematic language skill to teach, learn and assess. Iranian EFL students are not exceptional in this regard and the majority of Iranian learners find speaking ability as the most difficult one because it needs several abilities to be merged. Since they have seldom access to native speakers, many Iranian EFL learners may find themselves far from perfect L2 speaking. Thus, this problem of the students triggers the researcher motivation to investigate the effects of self-directed learning on speaking ability with the hope to contribute the speaking accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. Furthermore, most of the studies regarding self-directed learning have been conducted in reading comprehension domain. Hence, the present study tried to explore the effects of self-directed learning on speaking accuracy to fill the gap in the related literature.

Considering the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study the following research questions were formulated.

RQ1: Does self-directed learning (SDL) significantly affect upper intermediate EFL learners' speaking accuracy?

RQ2: Is there any statistically significant relationship between the upper intermediate EFL learners' self-directed learning (SDL) ability and their second language speaking accuracy?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were 60 upper intermediate learners (both girls and boys) in Talash institute, Minab, Iran in 2015. These participants were selected out of 90 learners who took a pre-test (which was a copy of PET standard test) for the purpose of homogenizing the sample of the study (see the PET booklet in the appendix 1). The reason was that PET is a standard and frequently used test of language proficiency for intermediate and early upper-intermediate levels. The age range of the learners was 18 and 25. As a matter of fact, these participants were the ones obtained scores which were within 1SD above and below the Mean. The reliability of the test then was calculated as 0.89 based on Kr-21 method which is an acceptable reliability. The subjects were randomly (not based on their ranking) divided into 2 experimental and control groups.

INSTRUMENTATION

Pre-test Instruments

The instrument used for the purpose of sample homogeneity was a copy of PET which aimed at checking the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing of the EFL learners taking part in the study. The second instrument in the pre-treatment level was a pretest of speaking (selected from among the standard speaking test topics presented in the test manual of the learners' course book) which was given to the participants selected after the pretest of language proficiency. The results showed how well they were familiar with second language speaking accuracy before the treatment began. To achieve these, the test results were checked against those of PET itself.

Posttest Instruments

The posttest which was the same as the pretest was given to the students after the treatment sessions to measure speaking accuracy of the students. To measure the speaking accuracy of the learners' speaking the scale provided by Ellis and Yuan (2004) was used, based on which the accuracy level of speaking of the learners was measured both before and after the treatment. This scale has been used in different studies in regard with writing, and as both speaking and writing are productive skills, so we used it in this research to measure the speaking accuracy of the learners.

Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS)

One of the instruments used for measuring self-directed learning, Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), has been developed by Guglielmino (1977) in her doctoral dissertation. It is a method for evaluating an individual's perception of their skills and attitudes that are associated with self-directedness in learning. The scale is structured around eight factors, attitudinal and personality that are linked to self-directness. This scale was used in this study because clear correspondence of the instrument with other literature on self-directed learning shows strong content validity.

Correlation of the SLDRS with other instruments is reported as follows – Student's Orientation Questionnaire 0.35, Preference for challenge 0.81, curiosity of Learning 0.79, Perceived Scholastic Competence 0.69, Use of internal criteria for evaluation 0.64, independent mastery 0.56, and independent judgment 0.54 (Posner, 1990). The SDLRS uses a 58-item 5-point Likert scale. Through factor analysis, the scale includes eight factors: openness to learning opportunities, self-concept as an effective learner, initiative and independence in learning, informed acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning, love of learning, creativity, positive orientation to the future, and skill to use basic study skills and problem-solving skills. Higher scores occurring from using the scale represent higher readiness for self-directed learning (Guglielmino, 1977).

Procedure

The selected students received a pretest of second language speaking accuracy as well to see how well they were familiar with second language speaking before they experienced the treatment. The researcher conducted the treatment throughout the winter semester (in 2015) of the institute which took 8 weeks (each week 2 sessions and each session 90 minutes, altogether equal to 24 hours of instruction / treatment). Both groups of the learners took similar materials (Touchstone, book 2) for their ordinary conversation course; meanwhile the experimental group also received its own specific self-directed learning program.

In the Experimental Group, however, the learners received self-learning techniques presented by Gibbons (2002), Costa (2013), and Costa and Garmston (2013). The teacher firstly taught the mechanisms of speaking to the learners in a stepwise mode, based on the complexity level of the structures used and the length of the materials. Then the teacher (the researcher, herself) asked the learners to develop their own speaking both in the class and at home in the form of assignments. Summarizing the texts and retelling them, consulting various sources while speaking, oral production, self-expression, using dictionaries for vocabulary choice and selection, and other techniques were introduced to the learners.

RESULTS

An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the PET in order to determine that both groups enjoyed the same level of general language proficiency prior to the administration of the treatment. As displayed in Table 1 the experimental (M = 40.96, SD = 2.28) and control (M = 40.93, SD = 2.34) groups showed almost the same means on the PET.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics PET by Groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	40.967	2.2816	.4166
Control	30	40.933	2.3479	.4287

The results of the independent t-test (t (58) = .056, P = .956 > .05, R = .007, representing a weak effect size) indicated that there was not any significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the PET. Thus it can be concluded that they enjoyed the same level of general language proficiency prior to the administration of the treatment.

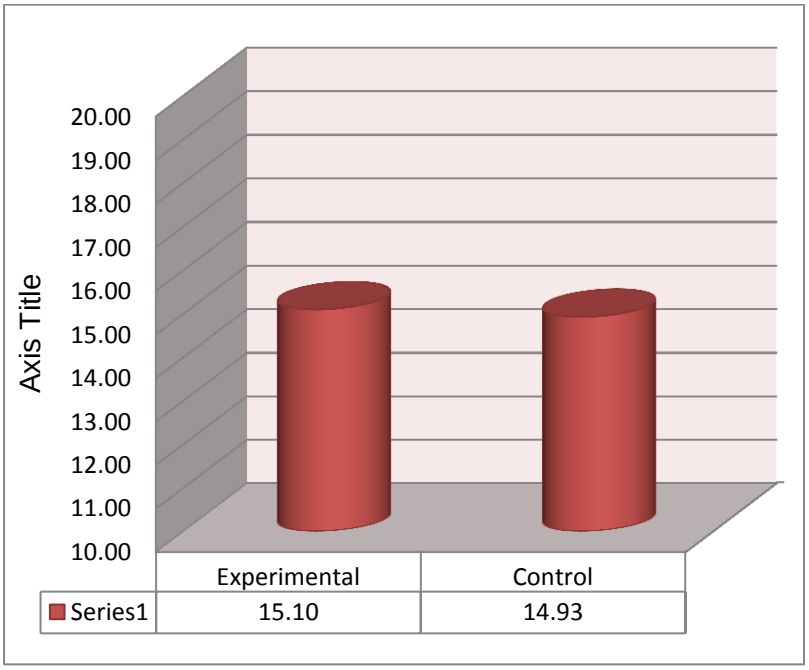

Figure 1. Pretest of Speaking Accuracy by Groups

A one-way ANOVA was run to compare the below average, average and above average groups on the post test of speaking accuracy in order to probe the first research question which was whether self-directed learning (SDL) significantly affect upper intermediate EFL learners' speaking accuracy.

It should be mentioned that the subjects were divided into three groups based on their scores on the Self-Directed Learning Readiness (SDL) scale. That is to say, based on the criteria offered by Guglielmino (1977), those subjects whose scores were between 58 to 201 formed the below average group, those subjects with scores between 202 to 226 were considered as average and the rests of the subjects (227 to 290) formed the above average group (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Self-Directed Learning Readiness

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Below Average	20	140.200	18.475
Average	20	203.200	30.039
Above Average	20	273.000	16.283
Total	60	205.467	58.971

The results of the one-way ANOVA (F (2, 57) = 82.96, P = .000 < .05, ω^2 = .73, representing a large effect size) (table 3) indicated that there were significant differences between the means of the three groups on the post test of speaking

accuracy. Thus, the first null-hypothesis as "self-directed learning (SDL) does not significantly affect upper intermediate EFL learners' speaking accuracy" was rejected.

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA Post-test of Speaking Accuracy by SDL Levels

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	619.900	2	309.950	82.964	.000
Within Groups	212.950	57	3.736		
Total	832.850	59			

As displayed in Table 4 the above average subjects (M = 26.70, SD = 2.13) outperformed the average (M = 23.30, SD = 1.80) and below average (M = 18.85, SD = 1.84) groups on the post test of speaking accuracy.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics; Post-test of Speaking Accuracy by SDL Levels

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Below Average	20	18.850	1.843	.412	17.987	19.713
Average	20	23.300	1.809	.404	22.453	24.147
Above Average	20	26.700	2.130	.476	25.703	27.697
Total	60	22.950	3.757	.485	21.979	23.921

Although the F-value of 82.96 indicted significant differences among the means of the three groups on the post test of speaking accuracy the post-hoc Scheffe's tests were to compare the groups two by two. Based on the results displayed in table 4.9 below it can be concluded that:

A. There was a significant difference (MD = 7.80, P = .000 < .05) between the means of the above average (M = 26.40) and below average (M = 18.85) groups on the post test of speaking accuracy.
B. There was a significant difference (MD = 3.40, P = .000 < .05) between the means of the above average (M = 26.40) and average (M = 23.30) groups on the post test of speaking accuracy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study revealed that Self-directed Learning (SDL) significantly affects upper intermediate EFL learners' accuracy in speaking ability. Secondly, the findings proved that SDL is more significantly effective than the conventional mechanism of teaching in developing upper intermediate EFL learners' speaking accuracy and therefore, there is a statistically significant relationship between the upper intermediate EFL learners' self-directed learning (SDL) ability and their second language speaking accuracy.

Both of these findings are in line with the findings of other researchers recorded in the literature: Lam (2014) and Adams (2015) focus on the effective role of self-directed learning to prepare students to take more control over their learning process. Guglielmino and Long's (2011) principles of an SDL program which mainly concentrate

on life-long learning, knowledge transformation and transition, learner autonomy, academic as well as personal, social, and technical domains of human experience which are completed with full range of human capacities, including our senses, emotions, and actions as well as our intellects could be considered a general frame work within which developing a second language is of high value.

One explanation for this may be the students' locus of control. "A person's locus of control is the perception of the extent to which he or she is in control of the outcome of events in life" (Classroom Management: Locus of Control, n. d., p.1). Students with an internal locus of control tend to believe their actions and skills impact their learning and are often high achievers (Lynch, Hurford, & Cole, 2002; McClun& Merrell, 1998). Students with an external locus of control tend to believe the teacher must teach them what they should learn and that they are not responsible for their own learning.

The findings of the study also are in line with the results of the previous research conducted on adult's second language speaking development: As Matsuda and Silva (2014) present that SDL can pave the ground for understanding and facilitating adult learning. They also stress that language skills could be developed better in case the learner tries to comprehensively analyze his/her ways of learning and come to know about the principles and effective practices as well as strategies s/he is more successful in.

Developing second language speaking through SLD frame work is an experiential learning (Rafiee, et al., 2014), which could be energized through learner autonomy (Benson, 2013) and is bound to the ever emerging experiences (Conner, 2004). Experience is considered as an essential element in learning, especially for adult education and many researchers have considered an important element (Costa, 2013;Guglielmino, 2008;Wang, 2014) in adult learning, as it carries with it a rich resource for adult learners. Students should also be encouraged to seek feedback from their peers and their facilitator, and understand that self-direction does not mean learning in isolation. Meshkat and Hassanzade (2014) suggest that more research into cross cultural aspects of self-directed learning within the body of adult education is needed to break the dominance of the North America and European in adult learning. They further adds that the elements within certain cultures play a far more significant role in adult learning as compared to the age factor. Hiemstra (2010) also suggests that more research on cross cultural aspects of self-directed learning should be undertaken, especially in the Eastern and African societies.

CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of self-directed learning on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking accuracy. The study also aimed at finding any statistically significant relationship between the upper intermediate EFL learners' self-directed learning (SDL) ability and their second language speaking accuracy. More specifically the study was trying to find out if SDL was more significantly effective than

the conventional mechanism of teaching in developing intermediate EFL learners' accuracy in speaking ability.

The present study demonstrated that SDL can influence the EFL learners' speaking accuracy development. EFL learners need to know native like vocabularies, pronunciation, intonation, stress patterns, supra-segmental features, grammatical points, and preferences, dictions, and the like for a native like speaking accuracy. Therefore, according to the results of the present study, some implications for teaching and learning speaking accuracy through employing Self Directed Learning can be suggested. Watson and Tharp (2013) within the framework of SLA pays attention to the role SDL and interactional feedback play in L2 development. Although he does not directly use the term "SDL based language development", he emphasizes on the importance of presence of SDL in prompting learners' second language awareness.

English teachers and learners could employ SDL, focus problems to be solved meaningfully, and then SL speaking accuracy in an atmosphere filled with awareness of a mismatch between the input they receive and their current learning. This way the classroom interactions could be enriched and would help subsequent L2 development of the learners. Materials developers in the ELT domain also could employ the findings of the present study and those of the similar ones to present tasks in which learners' awareness toward learning is enhanced. Such tasks may help the learners move towards Self-directed Learning, autonomy, and meaningful learning.

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