

Becoming Autonomous Learners through Self-regulated Learning

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore the instructional efficacy of self-regulated learning strategies on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy. The participants in this study were 40 Iranian intermediate EFL learners, aged 18-20, attending speaking courses in four English language institutes in Shiraz, Iran. At the beginning of the study, the participants were randomly divided into two groups: the control group with 20 learners (10 males and 10 females) and the experimental group including 20 learners (10 males and 10 females). The learners in the experimental group were subjected to the self-regulated learning intervention to get to know and use self-regulated learning strategies. In contrast, the control group students were taught the course using traditional approaches to speaking English with no use of self-regulated learning strategies. The instruments used in this study were the Self-regulation Regulation Learning Questionnaire (Brown, Miller & Lawendowski, 1999) and Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Zhang & Li, 2004) Results suggested that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the participants in the control group and in the experimental group concerning their level of learning autonomy. However, no significant relationship was found between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy. It was also noted that there was no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy in the control and experimental groups.

Keywords: self-regulated learning, Iranian EFL learners, learner autonomy

INTRODUCTION

As a consequence of the changed views in the field of English Language Teaching, a great emphasis has been put on the role of learners. This resulted in the emergence of the notion of learner-centered education which views language learning as a collaborative process between teachers and learners rather than a set of rules to be transferred to the learners from teachers. This learner-centered approach requires different classroom activities, the structures of which are decided by students themselves resulting in

increases in students' involvement and motivation. Putting an emphasis on the learner in a foreign language learning process has been of the greatest possible importance for some approaches as is the case with communicative language teaching (CLT) which emerged with the changed views on the nature of language learning in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, by the emergence of learner-centered concept, more attempts have been done to make the learners autonomous; this can be done through various ways such as the use of self-regulated learning strategies.

However, the concept of learning autonomy has received little attention in the educational settings in Iran and especially in EFL contexts. As a result, many Iranian EFL learners who start studying English from elementary school years and even from early childhood years, gradually lose their interests in studying English and are not able to develop four language skills to their full potentials. One possible reason behind such problems is the unemployment of self-regulated learning strategies. Consequently, EFL learners are not able to set goals for their learning and to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and their learning process.

Iranian EFL learners even at advanced levels are often dependent on their teachers, as the teachers must decide for them, manage their learning, solve their problems, and do many other things that must be taken care of by the learners themselves. Therefore, more attention must be paid to a shift from this teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered approach in which language learning are empowered to take care of their learning, to discover their strengths and weaknesses, and try to cope with any possible problem arising during learning the language in order to become autonomous learners. As pointed by Holec (1981), an autonomous learner possesses the ability to take charge of one's own learning and this ability is not inborn but it must be acquired either by natural means or by formal learning in a systematic way. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the impact of self-regulated learning strategies on Iranian EFL students' learning autonomy. So it seeks to answer the following questions:

- Is there any relationship between self-regulated learning and learning autonomy of Iranian EFL learners?
- Is there any significant difference between male and female learners with regard to their autonomy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomy

Dickinson (1987) views autonomy as a mode of learning in which individuals are responsible for all the decisions to be taken about their learning and undertaking the implementation of these decisions. Candy (1988) sees autonomy as an inborn capacity of the individuals which may be suppressed or distorted by institutional education. Pennycook (1997) also defines LA as the effort to become the author of one's own world, to be able to make one's own meaning, and to follow cultural choices among the cultural

politics of everyday life. Likewise, Friere (1996) takes autonomy as the learners' capacity and freedom to construct and reconstruct the taught knowledge. In fact, autonomy is the ability to create the learning situations and recreate what they have already got of the situations and the knowledge.

In the definition by Boud (1988), autonomy is shown as an approach to learning. According to him, the major characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that learners take some meaningful responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to training. In other words, LA is the ability to assume responsibility for one's own affairs - the ability to act in situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of the decisions. Allwright (1990) views autonomy as a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence. For him, LA is the phenomenon that goes on changing towards self-development and less dependence. Cotterall (1995), on the other hand, describes it as the behaviors that the learners use to establish independence. Kenny (1993, p.436) gives a broader definition and sees learning autonomy as the "opportunity to become a person", not only the freedom to learn. It refers to all the decisions and activities of independent learning. According to Hedge (2000, p. 410), LA is: "The ability of the learner to take responsibility for his or her own learning and to plan, organize, and monitor the learning process independently of the teacher". She correlates the concept mainly to the area of formal instruction in this sense.

Self-regulated Learning

Zimmerman (2000) defines self-regulated learning as the extent to which students are motivated, use meta-cognitive strategies, and become behaviorally active in their learning process and in accomplishing their goals. Self-regulation involves monitoring, management, and control of cognition, motivation, and behavior in order to achieve self-determined goals (Wolters, Pintrich, & Karabenick, 2003). According to Garcia and Pintrich (1994), cognitive learning strategies (e.g. elaboration, rehearsal, and organization), meta-cognitive control strategies (e.g. planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning outcomes), and resource management (e.g. time management and the management of the learning environment) should be employed effectively in self-regulated learning. Students should possess the characteristics of self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions sequentially planned to reach their individual objectives (Zimmerman and Campillio, 2003). Language learning strategies are "the learner's goal-directed actions for improving language proficiency or achievement, completing a task, or making learning more efficient, more effective, and easier" (Oxford, 2011b, p. 167). Oxford (2011b) also summarizes the major themes of strategy studies to date: effectiveness, models and theories, instruction, assessment, language-area strategies, factors, technology, and caveats. What is more, the goal of teaching learning strategies is to help learners to consciously control the way they learn so that they can become efficient, motivated, and independent language learners (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary,

& Robbins, 1999). Self-regulation (SR) may be generally defined as the effort made by learners to expand, monitor, manipulate, and improve their own learning (Corno & Mandinach, 1983). In addition, SR includes factors such as resource management, goal setting, success expectations, and deep cognitive involvement (Trawick & Corno, 1995). Radwan (2011) provided a taxonomy of two major classes of strategies, direct and indirect. Direct strategies are further sub-classified into memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies are sub-classified into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Wahyuni (2013) investigated L2 speaking strategies used by Indonesian EFL tertiary students to find out what strategies the students use in relation to L2 and speaking proficiency, as well as gender; how the students use the strategies; and why they use them in specific ways. It was shown that the students used a wide range of strategies that spread over six strategy groups, favoring metacognitive strategies. Regarding strategy use in relation to learner factors, the study showed a statistically significant relationship between L2 proficiency and students' overall strategy use. Besides, speaking proficiency and gender significantly affected the use of affective strategies only. The participants used strategies consciously, confidently, and persistently because of the usefulness of the strategies or pleasure in using them. Soureshjani (2014) investigated the interrelationship of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' self-regulation, willingness to communicate (WTC), and their oral presentation performance among 90 Iranian advanced-level EFL learners. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between the self-regulation degree of language learners and their oral performance. In addition, there was a strong, positive correlation between the WTC degree of learners and their oral presentation performance.

Self-regulated Learning and Autonomy

According to Wenden (1995) "in the cognitive literature on learning and instruction, autonomous learning is referred to as self-regulation". The ability to take responsibility for learning often refers to learners' ownership of many learning processes traditionally owned by teachers such as setting goals; choosing learning methods, materials and tasks; monitoring and evaluating progress (Ho and Crookall, 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Benson, 2006). These strategies have been used in the literature to describe both autonomous and self-regulated learners (e.g. Wenden, 1995; Lee 1998; Graham, Harris, and Troia, 1998). In Vygotsky's theory, the goal of learning is to develop an independent, self-regulated, problem-solving individual. This can occur only with the help of more capable others (teachers, more competent peers, parents, or others), who offer assistance to the learner. This assistance is metaphorically known as scaffolding, i.e., the external structure that supports and holds up a building under construction. There comes a time when the edifice needs less and less external support or scaffolding. When something is no longer needed, it is gradually removed. For instance, in higher-order cognitive development; the "more capable other" remove the scaffolding bit by bit from the individual learner as the learner becomes increasingly independent and self-regulated.

The findings of research show that there is a strong association between learner autonomy and the employment of self-regulation strategies (Wenden, 1995; Ho and Crookall, 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Benson, 2006) to the extent that some researchers consider autonomy synonymous with self-regulation (Little, 1999). However, it is not clear how the use of self-regulated learning may improve EFL learners' autonomy in Iran and whether there is any relationship between the self-regulated strategy used and EFL learners' autonomy. Therefore, considering such gap in the literature, the present study aims explore the instructional efficiency of self-regulated learning strategies on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy in language leaning contexts.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were 40 Iranian intermediate EFL learners, aged 18-20, attending speaking courses in four English language institutes in Shiraz. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: the control group with 20 learners (10 males and 10 females) and the experimental group including 20 learners (10 males and 10 females).

The participants were randomly divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group, each with 20 participants. The control group took the normal course of instruction while the experimental group was exposed to the treatment in the form of instructions on how to use self-regulated learning strategies. The aim of the treatment was to find out whether the awareness of self-regulated learning strategies such as personal self-regulated learning strategies, behavioral self-regulated learning strategies, and environmental self-regulated learning strategies affects the participants' autonomy or not.

Instruments

The participants' autonomy data were collected through the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Zhang and Li, 2004) to determine the level of the participants' autonomy in both groups upon the completion of the treatment in experimental group and the teaching period in the control. The questionnaire contained 11 items on a five-point Likert scale. The second part contained 10 multiple-choice items. Moreover, the Self-regulation Regulation Learning Questionnaire (Brown, Miller, & Lawendowski, 1999) was administered to both groups after the treatment. This questionnaire contained 63 items with a five-point Likert scale. The collected data through the questionnaires were analyzed by SPSS Software Package (Version 19) in order to answer research questions and test. To do so, descriptive statistics, *t*-test, and Pearson correlation test were used to analyze the data.

Data Collection Procedures

The experimental group participants received the treatment in order to know how to use self-regulation strategies while the participants in the control group took the normal course of instruction. After the treatment that lasted for about 2 months, both groups were asked to fill in the 63-item self-regulated learning questionnaire to determine their awareness of such strategies. Furthermore, the participants in both groups were asked to answer in almost 20 minutes to the items in learner autonomy questionnaire to know the extent to which they developed learning autonomy. The collected data through instruments were then codified and entered into SPSS to perform the subsequent data analysis using descriptive statistics, *t*-test, and Pearson correlation test.

RESULTS

The Participants' Level of Learning Autonomy

Table 1 shows the participants' total mean scores on learning autonomy for both groups based on their answers to the items in the questionnaire:

Table 1. Participants' Level of Learning Autonomy

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Autonomy	Control	40	65.38	8.104	1.281
	Experimental	40	69.38	8.276	1.309

As shown in the above table, the mean score of autonomy for the participants in the control group is 65.38 and that of the participants in the experimental group is 69.38, so the level of the learning autonomy of the participants in the experimental group is moderately higher than that of the participants in the control group.

Table 2 shows the results of Mann-Whitney U test concerning groups' differences on learning autonomy:

Table 2. Results of Mann-Whitney U for Groups' Mean Scores on Learning Autonomy

	Autonomy
Mann-Whitney U	570.500
Wilcoxon W	1390.500
Z	-2.212
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.027

As evident in the above table, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the participants in the control group and in the experimental group concerning their level of learning autonomy ($U = 570.500$, $P < 0.05$); showing that the level of learning autonomy for the participants in experimental group was significantly higher than the level of learning autonomy of the participants in the control group. This indicates that the participants in the treatment group were significantly more autonomous language learners than those in the control group at the end of the study as the experimental group

participants' awareness and use of the self-regulated learning strategies was higher than that of the control group participants; thus, they gained a higher level of learning autonomy as the results of their exposure to the self-regulated learning strategies.

A comparison of the findings of the study concerning the use of self-regulated learning strategies by the participants and their level of learning autonomy shows that the participants in the treatment group were more autonomous language learners than those in the control group at the end of the study. In addition, the treatment group employed self-regulated learning strategies more frequently to improve their speaking ability than the participants in the control group. Table 3 shows the male and female participants' total mean scores on learning autonomy:

Table 3. Males' and Females' Mean Scores on Learning Autonomy

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Males	40	67.70	8.256	1.305
Female	40	67.05	8.602	1.360

As can be seen in the above table, the mean score of the male participants' learning autonomy is 67.70 and that of the female participants is 67.07 so both male and female participants in this study reported to have the same level of learning autonomy. Table 4 shows the result of the Mann-Whitney U test for males' and females' mean scores on learning autonomy:

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U Test for Males and Females' Mean Scores on Learning Autonomy

	Total
Mann-Whitney U	757.500
Wilcoxon W	1.578E3
Z	-.410
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.682

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test suggest that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the male and female participants' level of learning autonomy ($P > 0.05$). This shows that gender is not an important variable in developing learning autonomy.

Correlation between the Participants' Level of Autonomy and Self-Regulation Strategies Use

Table 5 shows the results of Pearson correlation test for the participants' mean scores on self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy:

Table 5. Correlation between the Use of SRL Strategies and Learning Autonomy

		Self-regulated	Autonomy
Self-regulated	Pearson Correlation	1	-.043
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.706
	N	80	80

The value of correlation between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy is -.043. This shows that there is a weak negative correlation between the use of self-regulated learning strategies and the learning autonomy of the participants in this study; indicating that as one variable goes up the other variable goes down. In other words, an increase in the use of self-regulated learning strategies would decrease the participants' level of autonomy. Furthermore, as the value of significance level shows, there is no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy. Table 6 shows the results of Pearson correlation test concerning the relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy in the control group.

Table 6. Correlation between the Use of SRL Strategies and Learning Autonomy in the Control Group

		Self-regulated	Autonomy
Self-regulated	Pearson Correlation	1	-.109
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.502
	N	40	40

The value of correlation coefficient between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy in the control group is - 0.233. Consequently, there is a weak negative correlation between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy in the control group. This means that an increase in the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies would decrease their learning autonomy. Besides, given that the significance level of the Pearson correlation test is greater than 0.05 ($P > 0.05$), there is no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy in the control group. Table 7 shows the results of Pearson correlation test for the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy in the experimental group.

Table 7. Correlation between the Use of SRL Strategies and Learning Autonomy in the Experimental Group

		Self-regulated	Autonomy
Self-regulated	Pearson Correlation	1	-.173
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.285
	N	40	40

In the above table, the value of correlation coefficient between the participants' mean scores for the use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy in the experimental group is -0.173, so there is a weak negative correlation between the participants' mean scores of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy in the experimental group. This suggests that an increase in the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies would decrease their learning autonomy. Additionally, the value of significance level shows that there is no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy in the experimental group ($P > 0.05$) as was the case for the participants in the experimental group. Overall, the results of the Pearson correlation test suggests that there is no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy in both groups. Table 8 shows the correlation between male participants' learning autonomy and their self-regulated learning strategies.

Table 8. Correlation between Males' Learning Autonomy and Self-Regulated Learning Strategies

	Self-regulated	Autonomy
	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.044
Self-regulated		.785
	N	40

The value of correlation coefficient for males' learning autonomy and self-regulated learning strategies is -0.44, suggesting that there is a moderately negative correlation between male participants' mean learning autonomy and their self-regulated learning strategies. Accordingly, an increase in the use of self-regulated learning strategies by the participants would decrease their learning autonomy. Besides, as the value of significance level shows this correlation is not significant ($P > 0.05$). As a result, there is no significant relationship between male participants' learning autonomy and their use of self-regulated learning strategies. Table 9 shows the correlation between females' learning autonomy and their self-regulated learning strategies.

Table 9. Correlation between Females' Learning Autonomy and Self-Regulated Learning Strategies

	Self-regulated	Autonomy
	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.028
Self-regulated		.863
	N	40

As was the case for the male participants, the value of correlation coefficient for females' learning autonomy and self-regulated learning strategies is -0.028, showing that there is a negative and weak correlation between female participants' mean learning autonomy and their self-regulated learning strategies. Moreover, as the value of significance level shows this correlation is not significant ($P > 0.05$) so, there is no significant relationship

between female participants' learning autonomy and their use of self-regulated learning strategies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the participants in the control group and in the experimental group concerning their level of learning autonomy, suggesting that the participants in the treatment group were more autonomous language learners than those in the control group at the end of the study. This is may be due to the familiarity of the treatment group with self-regulated learning strategies and using them as pointed out by Corno and Mandinach (1983), Trawick and Corno (1995), and Mahdavi and Azimi, (2012). However, there was no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy. However, previous studies have focused on general strategies and especially on the effects of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective on the students' outcomes (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007).

In addition, there was no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy in the control and experimental groups. The same was the case for the male and female participants in this study as there was no significant relationship between male and female participants' learning autonomy and their use of self-regulated learning strategies. These findings are contrary to the results of the previous studies (Wenden, 1995; Ho & Crookall 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Benson, 2006). One possible explanation for such inconsistency is that the participants in the present study were instructed on the use of self-regulated learning strategies for a relatively a short period of time and perhaps they needed more practice and reinforcement in order to become totally autonomous learners as learning is a change in behavior or in potential behavior that occurs as a result of experience.

The findings indicated that EFL learners who received treatment in this study in the form of self-regulated learning strategies awareness used such strategies more frequently and significantly. Accordingly, EFL teachers can increase their students' awareness of such strategies and encourage them to employ them when performing language learning tasks in order to make them more autonomous learners. It was noted that gender was not an important variable in using self-regulated learning strategies and in developing learning autonomy in this study. Consequently, EFL teachers can use such strategies extensively in their language classrooms for both male and female learners to develop their learning autonomy.

This study ran into a number of shortcomings. For instance, the participants in the treatment group were instructed on how to use self-regulated learning strategies for a short period of time. Besides, the number of the participants in both control and experimental groups were not sufficient in this study and this may endanger the generalizability of the findings concerning the level of the participants' autonomy and the

role of gender in the strategy use and developing learning autonomy. Nevertheless, this number of participants was selected due to manageability concerns.

Since the focus of the present study was on the use of self-regulated learning strategies and their impact on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy, future researchers are recommended to explore the effects of such strategies on the improvement of other language skills such as listening, writing, and reading as well as on the acquisition of other language components such as vocabulary and grammar. The focus of the present study was on the intermediate EFL learners. Accordingly, future researchers are advised to explore the instruction and the use of self-regulated learning strategies by EFL learners with different level of English proficiency to find out what type of learners benefit more from such strategies. In fact, the inclusion of the notion of self-regulation into learner autonomy framework may not only contributes to perspectives of researchers working within different research paradigms, but also improves our understanding of how teachers can support their learners' development of autonomy, and provoke the appropriate conditions necessary for this development (Nakata, 2014).

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