

The Effect of Learners' Autonomy on EFL Learners Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of learner autonomy on reading comprehension of EFL learners. To fulfill the objective of this study, 100 learners who took part in advanced classes whose score fall into the range of 48 to 60 (advanced level according to the test placement chart) were considered as the intended participants to this study. Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) was used to homogenize the learners, and then they were given two questionnaires: Questionnaire of autonomy by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2000) and Reading comprehension test derived from PET Practice Tests developed by Jenny Quintana (2003). According to the results, there was a significant positive relationship between learner autonomy and reading comprehension of EFL learners. Also running multiple regressions revealed that learner autonomy can predict reading comprehension of learners. Also, the t-test was computed to determine the significance of difference between male and female on learner autonomy questionnaire. On the basis of the above results, there is no significant difference between male and female learners in autonomy level.

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Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the skills that has complex process in itself. This skill is fundamental for language acquisition and academic learning. Reading is a process that interacts between reader and the text, resulting in comprehension. The text includes letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs that encode meaning. The reader uses knowledge, skills and strategies to determine what that meaning is (Chastain, 1988). Reading is a means by which an individual can get information. It is a way of getting pleasure and also a mean of extending one's knowledge of the language (Keshavarz & Ashtarian, 2008). In addition to this fact, the primary goal of those who want to understand the world and themselves, is to understand what is read (Tierney, 2005). Indeed, in most EFL contexts, students need to acquire reading ability (Richards & Renandya, 2002), in line of this fact, Farhadi, Jafarpoor, and Birjandi (1994) say, "reading is the most important of all skills for most language learners in general, and for EFL learners in particular" (P. 247).

On the basis of River's view (1987), although reading comprehension is the most important skills for learners at different level, yet it is common to find students who are unable to read in a comprehensive and autonomous way (as cited in Pang, 2008). Learner autonomy is one of the most important topics that are the reason whether an individual reaches to him/her potentials. Learner autonomy which is achieved through learner training and strategy training enable an

individual to surpass the circumstances (Benson, 2001). Autonomy is generally defined as the ability to deal with and to be responsible of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). It is both a social and an individual construct. It involves the personal development of each student and, at the same time, interaction with others (La Ganza, 2001). Dafei (2007) believes that one of the reasons why the relationship between autonomy and language proficiency, mainly reading proficiency, has become a critical debate in these years is that researchers have realized that effective learning is greatly influenced by independent self-directed learning.

According to Benson (2001) "researchers are increasingly beginning to understand that there is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning. However, to date, this relationship has largely been explored at the level of theory and lacks substantial empirical support" (P. 189). Therefore, as a step toward filling this gap, the present study wants to investigate the effect of learner autonomy on reading comprehension.

Objective of the Study

The main aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between autonomy and reading comprehension among EFL learners, also, to predict learners' reading comprehension ability and their learning autonomy, At last, and to determine any significance difference among male and female learners in learner autonomy.

Research Questions

Q1: Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading comprehension?

Q2: Can learner autonomy predict reading comprehension in learners?

Q3: Is there any significant difference between male and female learners in learner autonomy?

Research Hypothesis

H01: There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading comprehension.

H02: Learners' autonomy cannot predict reading comprehension in learners.

H03: There is no significant difference between male and female learners in learner autonomy.

Methodology**Participants**

The participants of the study were 100 EFL learners at advance level, at language institutes of Genaveh. The subjects were from equal linguistic background, namely Persian. The mean age of participants was 18 to 22 years old. First, to ensure of the participants homogeneity, The Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) was administered to all 100 students who take part in advanced classes. Based on the results of this test, learners whose score fall into the range of 48 to 60 (advanced level according to the test placement chart) were considered as the intended participants to this study and take part in autonomy and reading comprehension test.

Procedure

To achieve the purpose of this study and address the questions posed, certain procedures were pursued which are explained here under:

The participants of this study were advanced EFL learners in Iran Language Institutes of Genaveh. First, to ensure of the participants homogeneity, The Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) were administered to all 100 students who took part in advanced classes whose score fall into the range of 48 to 60 (advanced level according to the test placement chart) were considered as the intended participants to this study. Then, the researcher obtained permission from the professors to visit their classes and explained the purpose of the study to the students. Before administrating the questionnaires, the participants will fully briefed on the process of completing the questionnaires; this briefing were be given in English through explaining and exemplifying the process of choosing answers. Moreover, the researcher intentionally randomized the order of administered questionnaires to control for the impact of order upon the completion process and validity of the data.

The researcher randomly observed the process of filling out for some individuals to make sure they were capable to fully understand the questions and responses. It should be added that the whole length of

the class periods of 90 minutes were devoted to administrating these questionnaires. Subsequently, the administrated questionnaires were scored to specify the participants' reading comprehension ability and the degree of learner' autonomy. This was followed by the statistical analyses which were elaborated in due course.

Instruments**The Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT): (Version 2, 2007)**

An already determined standard placement test of Oxford University and Cambridge University (2007) was used as a proficiency test to establish participants' homogeneity. The Quick Placement Test (QPT) is a flexible test of English language proficiency developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL to give teachers a reliable and time-saving method of finding a student's level of English. It is quick and easy to administer and is ideal for placement testing and examination screening.

Questionnaire of autonomy by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002)

To evaluate the participants' level of autonomy, a questionnaire of autonomy including 52 items was administered. In fact, this was designed by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002). They asserts that the questionnaire design is strongly influenced by Holec's definition of autonomy. The instrument has four sections. The first section which includes 13 items, examine the students' views about their responsibilities and those of their teachers'; the second section with 11 items explores the students' confidence in their ability to operate autonomously; the third section which has 1 item, aims to measure the levels of student motivation to learn English. At last, the fourth section with 27 items investigates the students' practice of autonomous learning in the form of both inside and outside class activities. Respondents were asked to indicate their answers in 20 minutes in a Likert-scale, sequentially assigning values of 1,2,3, 4, and 5 to options of "not at all", "a little", "some", "mainly", and "completely" in section one; counting 1 for "very poor" to 5 for "very good" in section two; setting 5 to 1 beside the first to the last choices in section three; and attributing values of 1,2,3, and 4 to options of "never", "rarely", "sometimes", and "often" in section four. In this regard, the result could vary from 52 to 233, and the higher the mark, the more autonomous was the participant.

Since this questionnaire is designed for native speakers, to avoid any misunderstanding in part of cultural differences and lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, the researcher used the Persian translated version of the questionnaire which had been prepared by Sheikhy Behdani (2011).

Reading comprehension test derived from PET Practice Tests developed by Jenny Quintana (2003)

The reading comprehension test that the researcher used in this study was adopted from reading comprehension parts of PET Practice Tests developed by Quintana (2003) which has been written in level format of Preliminary English Test provided by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. This instrument consisted of six reading comprehension passages followed by five multiple-choice reading comprehension questions on each that participants were supposed to answer them in 25 minutes.

Results

This study investigated the relationship among EFL learners' autonomy and their reading comprehension ability. To this end, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H01: There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading comprehension.

H02: Learners' autonomy cannot predict reading comprehension in learners.

H03: There is no significant difference between male and female learners in learner autonomy.

In order to test the hypotheses and come up with certain results, the researcher conducted a series of calculations and statistical routines that are elaborated comprehensively in this chapter. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized in the process, details of which are presented below:

Analysis of Proficiency Test

All participants of the main study ($n = 100$) took part in a proficiency test called Oxford Placement Test. The purpose of the proficiency test was to manifest the learner's homogeneity or to show whether

the learners' knowledge of English is at the same level. The detailed descriptive statistics of proficiency test are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Proficiency Test

	frequency	percent
48	12	14.5
49	15	18.1
50	10	12.0
51	8	9.6
52	9	10.8
53	10	12.0
54	5	6.0
55	6	7.2
56	3	3.6
58	1	1.2
59	2	2.4
60	2	2.4
Total	83	100.0

According to Oxford Placement Test the advance are those who attain 48 and above out of 60 questions. The total score should not be less than 48. As table 1 shows, 17 participants could not attain the intended scores for advance level of language proficiency; therefore, they were excluded from the sample.

Descriptive Statistics of learner autonomy

The learner autonomy Questionnaire administered in the study in order to evaluate the participants' emotional intelligence. The descriptive statistics related to the obtained scores on the instrument appears below in table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of learner autonomy Questionnaire Administration

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learner autonomy	83	109.00	123.00	232.00	189.915	18.931
Valid(N)	83					

The minimum and maximum scores on this questionnaire were sequentially 123.00 and 232.00. The mean and standard deviation of the scores are 189.915 and 18.931.

Descriptive Statistics of the reading comprehension questionnaire

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of reading comprehension Questionnaire Administration

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading comprehension	83	22.00	18.00	40.00	27.819	5.0537
Valid(N)	83					

The minimum and maximum scores on this questionnaire were sequentially 18.00, and 40.00. The mean and standard deviation of the scores are 27.819 and 5.0537.

Another instrument of the present study was the reading comprehension questionnaire to determine the extent of participants' reading comprehension. The descriptive statistics related to this questionnaire is presented in table 4.3.

Testing the Hypotheses

Following the descriptive statistics of this study, the three research hypotheses were investigated through correlational analysis and regression analysis

of the data. In this section, first, each null hypothesis is tested; then, the results are provided and interpreted.

H01. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading comprehension.

In order to test the first hypothesis, the researcher carried out the Pearson Product Correlation between the participants' autonomy level and their reading comprehension. Table 4 illustrates the degree of correlation for these two variables. The value of correlation ($r = .742^{**}$) at significance level of (0.01)

shows a statistically significant and positive relationship between learner autonomy and reading comprehension of EFL learners. In another words, increasing of each one corresponds to increasing of another.

Thus, H01 is rejected at 0.01 level of significance and it is concluded that a statistically significant relationship exists between EFL learners' autonomy level and their reading comprehension.

Table 4. Correlation between learner autonomy and reading comprehension

		Learner autonomy	Reading comprehension
Learner autonomy	Pearson correlation	1	.742**
Sig.(1-tailed)			.000
N		83	83
Reading comprehension	Pearson correlation	.742**	1
Sig.(1-tailed)		.000	
N		83	83

**correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (1-tailed)

H02: learners' autonomy cannot predict reading comprehension in learners.

In order to test the second hypothesis, the researcher carried out Linear Regression. The result was shown in table 5.

Table 5. Regression enlightened: predicting reading comprehension by learner autonomy

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	T	Sig.
	B	Std.Error	Beta		
1 (constant)	-9.780	3.797		-2.576	0.012
Learner autonomy	0.198	0.020	0.772	9.951	.000

The above table is coefficient table and it reports Beta or Betas. Beta is standardized coefficient. The bigger is B and t value, and significance level is smaller, the independent variable or predictor can better predict the dependent variable. Through linear regression analysis in Table 5, findings indicate that learner autonomy coefficient in predicting reading comprehension is significant (significant value is

.000). In other words, learner autonomy can significantly predict learners' reading comprehension and the second hypothesis was safely rejected.

H03: There is no significant difference between male and female learners in learner autonomy.

The t-test was computed to determine the significance of difference between male and female on learner autonomy questionnaire.

Table 6. Means, standard deviations, standard error mean and t-value showing differences in scores between Genders on learner autonomy questionnaire.

Gender	n	M	SD	T value	Sig(2-tailed)
male	43	191.2093	18.93532	.643	.522
female	40	188.5250	19.96936		

On the basis of the above results, there is no significant difference between male and female learners in autonomy level.

Discussion

The current study attempted to investigate the possible relationships between EFL learners' autonomy and their reading comprehension.

As displayed in Table 4, learners' autonomy has a strong, positive relationship with reading comprehension. This finding was also in line with the results of previous researches that found links between these two variables. This result of the current study is also consistent with the results of the study by Zarei and Ghremani (2010), Myartamanto, Latief and Suharmanto (2013), Valadi, Rashidi (2014).

Also, the finding of this study confirms the ideas of the randomized controlled survey conducted by Zhang and Li (2004). They concluded that learner autonomy was closely related with the language levels. It also confirms the hypothesis of Corno and Mandinach (1983) who asserted that learner autonomy could help to improve the learners' proficiency and the autonomous learners were the learners of high proficiency. This study confirms Little's (2007) and Benson's (2001) study who concluded higher degrees of autonomy will result in greater proficiency.

To justify this finding, it can be said that as learners achieve greater autonomy, they can adapt and use more efficient strategies, which in turn, improve their reading comprehension ability. In fact, autonomous learners can decide what to learn, when and how to learn it by being responsible for their learning (Sert, 2006). This responsibility helps learners to focus on their own learning (Harris, 1997). Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) asserted that autonomy in learning makes learners taking more control over their learning, within the classroom or outside it control their purpose for learning the language and more control over the ways of learning it.

Conclusion

The results of this study provided an empirical evidence for the relationship between learner autonomy and reading comprehension. The remarkable shift regarding EFL context persuaded majority of researchers to take the new studies in which find all the variables which may affect on learners learning. And also consider different factors which help learners to become independent and responsible in their learning.

Regarding the results of the study, English (L2) teachers should give more attention to the development of learner autonomy. When teachers know more about students' autonomy, they can plan their instructions so as to enable their students to have more autonomy (responsibility) in their learning in order to make them become more efficient and effective learners (Hashemian & Soureshjani, 2011).

Due to the fact that language learning is a multidimensional phenomenon, not only language teachers, but also language learners are required to play their role properly in order to facilitate and optimize this complicated process. Therefore, results of the current study have implications for language learners, encouraging them to become more creative, autonomous, and critical about their learning activities. It is hoped that the results of this study would make EFL learners more internally motivated to value autonomous learning.

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