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Readiness for Self-Access Language Learning: A Case of Iranian Students

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Abstract

The main aim of this study was to investigate Iranian English for Specific Purposes' students' perceptions and behaviors related to autonomous self-access language learning. The researcher defined autonomy in terms of responsibility and decision-making abilities in different areas of second language learning such as: choosing activities and materials inside and outside of the class, courses objectives, evaluating learning, and their course. In order to reach these aims, a questionnaire by Chan, Humphreys, and Spratt (2002) was distributed among 133 Law major students at two universities in Guilan province (North of Iran) University of Guilan and Anzali Azad University. The results showed that students seem ready to take more responsibility and control for some aspects of their learning, but need some support and control from their teachers in other aspects of learning.

Key words: self-access language learning, learner autonomy, learner responsibility

The concept of autonomy along with self-access language learning is still new in many countries including Iran, and the number of universities and institutes which provide self-access centers are relatively few. The status of English teaching in Iran is as a foreign language, and English is a subject matter in high schools and universities. Students do not use English as a medium for daily communication, the educational system is traditional and teachers and learners hold beliefs and attitudes that sometimes hinder new approaches. As Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) note, there is no shift in the Iranian educational system from modernism to postmodernism. In the majority of cases, most of the classroom time is devoted to teachers' talk; students answer questions and passively follow teachers' directions. There is no initiation of activities by the students, teachers select the objectives, activities, and evaluate students' progress. Learning English is based on memorization of vocabulary and grammatical points, these are the common features in public universities.

Self-access centers give students an opportunity to exercise control over their learning; students have the freedom to choose the materials and plan their own learning and it is an approach that encourages autonomy. In Iran universities and institutes need to provide facilities

like SACs in order to develop abilities such as creativity and critical thinking among Iranian students. According to Holec (1981, p. 3) autonomy is “the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning”. Little (1991, p. 4) defined autonomy as a “capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action”. The core principle of autonomy is closely related to learners’ acceptance of responsibility in language learning.

The passive role of Iranian students in the learning process is a hindrance to their success; they are observers and listeners in the classroom and compete with their classmates rather than collaborate. Inevitably, learners struggle with their new responsibilities in self-access learning. As Gardner and Miller (1999) point out, the introduction of self-access language learning changes the roles of teachers, learners, and the whole environment of the classroom, because it is an “approach to learning language, not an approach to teaching language” (p. 8).

The purpose of this study was to explore law major university students’ perceptions related to autonomy, namely perceptions of responsibility and decision making ability in different aspects of language learning. Understanding more about these perceptions indicate students’ readiness for autonomy and their readiness for autonomous language leaning in self-access centers.

Readiness for Autonomy

Readiness is a term coined by Cotterall (1995) and it involves the amount of learners’ willingness and ability to be involved in autonomous language learning. According to Littlewood (1996), the development of autonomy depends on two things: ability, and willingness. Based on Littlewood’s definition, a person may have the ability to make independent choices but not have the willingness to do so. On the other hand a person may have the willingness, but not capable of making choices.

Readiness measures the relationship between attitudinal factors and autonomy. In one of the early studies conducted by Cotterall (1995), the researcher used a 90 item questionnaire and investigated 131 learners’ beliefs for autonomous language learning. In this study the researcher identified six factors: the role of the teacher, the role of the feedback, the learners’ sense of self-efficacy, important strategies, dimensions of strategy-related behavior, and the nature of language learning. Results indicated that learners’ beliefs regarding these variables have an impact on students’ readiness for autonomy.

The educational system in Iran is in rapid change from a very traditional framework to a more modern, innovative one. Current learners are experiencing changes in primary and secondary schools, and even private institutes are willing to provide facilities for their learners to learn languages independently. However, attitudes and perspectives do not change overnight; there are still many teachers and students in Iran who implicitly and explicitly resist change in their roles and in the types of interactions and activities in the classroom.

The University of Guilan does not have a self-access center, but with an increase in the number of students, changes in the development of language skills, and rapid changes in Iranian society administrators think it is necessary to develop attitudes towards lifelong learning among students. Any changes in learning context needs an investigation of learners and teachers' perceptions and attitudes,

In addition to the study cited by Cotterall (1995), there are a number of other studies on learners' readiness to be autonomous in language learning from different contexts. In a study by Chan, Humphreys, & Spratt (2002), the researchers investigated students' readiness for autonomy in language learning. Their study was initiated by the establishment of self-access centers at the University of Hong Kong. The researchers examined students' views towards their responsibilities, and those of their teachers', their confidence in their ability to operate autonomously, and their assessment of their level of motivation in learning English. The participants were 508 male and female students taking English courses at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The researchers administered a questionnaire and conducted interviews. The results showed that students did not have a good understanding of their own responsibilities and abilities, and they considered their teacher as the person most responsible for their learning.

The only notable study about learners' readiness and attitudes toward autonomy in Iran was conducted by Kashefian-Naini (2002) in Shiraz University where the researcher was based. Kashefian-Naini explored 168 male and female EFL learners' readiness for autonomy. The researcher administered Cotterall's (1995) questionnaire and conducted a factor analysis to show the existence of the following factors among this group of Iranian EFL students: (1) learner independence, (2) dependence on the teacher, (3) learner confidence, (4) attitudes towards language learning, and (5) self-assessment. The researcher also considered the effect of other variables (age, sex, marital status, grade point average, parents' level of education, year of study, their occupation, place of birth, and place of residence). Among these variables, only students'

academic achievement and professional status of students had an impact on EFL students' readiness for autonomy.

A related research study by Javdani, Ghafoori, and Mahboudi (2011) also in Iran investigated 120 insurance and biology major ESP learners' beliefs and attitudes towards the role of SACs in improving their reading comprehension at the University of Tabriz. They also tried to determine the attitude of ESP learners towards the role of dictionaries, graded readers, graded readers with cassettes, grammar resources, vocabulary books with exercises, listening and writing materials, computer programs, and audio-video tapes. Questionnaire results showed that participants were positive about the resources. Students also believed that the SAC was a good place for learning.

The author is unaware of any previous research regarding the concept of autonomy in terms of responsibility perceptions and decision-making ability in Iran. The author considered this gap and conducted a study with a group of law major students who were taking an English for specific purposes course at university,

Methodology

The main purpose of the present study was to examine a group of Iranian ESP learners' readiness for autonomous self-access language learning. Readiness is defined as students' perceptions of their own responsibility, their teachers' responsibility, and their decision-making ability in different aspects of language learning. Another purpose was to find out whether or not there is a relationship between students' responsibility perceptions and decision-making ability. The researcher used quantitative research design to describe a large number of ESP students' perceptions in a formal and objective manner.

The research questions were: 1. What are ESP students' perceptions of their responsibility in language learning at university? 2. What are ESP students' perceptions of their decision-making ability in language learning at university? 3. Is there a relationship between ESP students' perceptions of responsibility and decision-making ability in various aspects of language learning at university?

Research Settings and Participants

The study involved 133 law major university students from the University of Guilan and Azad University of Anzali (both from Guilan province in the North part of Iran). The participants were selected based on purposive sampling because the purpose of the research was to focus specifically on law major (ESP) students and the researcher did not intend to exclude any of these participants for this study.

Questionnaire

The main purpose of this study was to measure ESP students' readiness for autonomy and self-access learning in terms of their responsibility and ability perceptions in different aspects of language learning. To fulfill these aims Chan, et al., (2002)'s questionnaire was used which specifically covers these areas. The original questionnaire consisted of four sections [responsibility, ability, autonomous activities (inside and outside of class), and motivation], but for this study the researcher used two sections of the questionnaire (responsibility and ability). To avoid any misunderstanding, the English version was translated into Persian language (Farsi). In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to experts in University of Guilan. They evaluated it in terms of content validity, face validity, and clarity of items. The translated version of the questionnaire was also given to one expert in translation in University of Guilan to compare the Persian version with the English one. Based on evaluators' suggestions and comments the final Persian questionnaire was prepared and piloted with 35 law major students. This group of students was not included in final study. The data based on the pilot study was gathered and analyzed. For the reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach-alpha value was calculated to see the internal consistency of the instrument. Cronbach-alpha value for the Autonomy questionnaire was found to be $\alpha = 0.94$ which is a high level of reliability.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, first, the percentages of responses were calculated for each item in each section to establish the ESP students' responsibility and decision-making ability perceptions in different areas of the language learning process. The chi-square test was carried out in order to

establish whether or not there was a relationship between the students' perceptions of responsibility and their decision-making ability in learning language.

Results and Discussion

Learners' perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibility

In the first section of the questionnaire, the participants were instructed to report their perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibility for the language learning process. Students ranked their perceptions on a five-point Likert scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (completely). Table 1 presents the percentages of answers related to each question, and the table also shows the statistical relationship between participants' perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibility. For the ease of interpretation the "not at all" and "a little" categories and "mainly" and "completely" categories have been combined.

As Table 1 shows, for items 1, 3, 11, and 12 (making progress during lessons, stimulating their interest in learning, evaluating their learning, and their course) the majority of students had the notion of shared responsibility and considered both themselves and their teachers responsible for different areas of language learning process. For items 6, 7, 8, and 10 the percentages of responses by students showed that they gave more responsibility to their teachers, these are items that are related to methodological aspects, planning and management of the class activities (such as deciding the objectives of the course, choosing activities, and materials to learn English).

Items 2, 4, 5, 9, and 13 showed that students considered themselves responsible for different aspects of language learning. These are the items that were directly related to their learning such as (making progress in language learning, identifying their weaknesses, working harder, deciding how long to spend on each activity, and what to learn outside the class).

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of their Own and their Teachers' Responsibilities.

Questionnaire Items	Students' perceptions of their own responsibilities in %			Students' perceptions of their teachers' responsibilities in %		
	Not at all / a little	Some	Mainly / completely	Not at all / a little	Some	Mainly / completely
1. Make sure you make progress during lessons	22.6	23.3	54.1	30.1	26.3	43.6
2. Make sure you make progress outside class	25.6	13.5	60.9	54.1	21.8	24.1
3. Stimulate your interest in learning English	20.3	24.1	55.6	32.3	23.3	44.4
4. Identify your weaknesses in English	23.3	15.0	61.7	41.4	18.8	39.8
5. Make you work harder	13.5	15.8	70.7	38.3	27.8	33.8
6. Decide the objectives of your English course	38.3	21.8	39.8	24.1	21.8	54.1
7. Decide what you should learn next in your English lessons	34.6	28.6	36.8	26.3	23.3	50.4
8. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	35.3	25.6	39.1	24.8	22.6	52.6
9. Decide how long to spend on each activity	23.3	21.8	54.9	37.6	29.3	33.1
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	44.4	16.5	39.1	28.6	18.0	53.4
11. Evaluate your learning	27.1	23.3	49.6	28.6	20.3	51.1
12. Evaluate your course	30.1	23.3	46.6	33.1	19.5	47.4
13. Decide what you learn outside class	18.8	14.3	66.9	49.6	25.6	24.8

ESP Learners' perceptions of their decision making ability in language learning

The second section of the questionnaire investigated participants' perceptions about their ability to decide on different aspects of language learning. Its aim was to establish students' readiness for autonomous language learning. Students ranked their responses on a five-point

Likert scale from 0 (very poor) to 5 (very good). Table 2 shows the percentages of students' responses related to each question. For the ease of interpretation the "very poor" and "poor" categories and the "very good" and "good" categories have been combined.

Most of the students' responses clustered in the "ok" category of the scale. According to Chan, et al., (2002) this category indicates that students have an average ability to handle their own learning autonomously. Only items 17, 20, and 22 showed that students had "good / very good" ability to do these activities. These items were: Ability to choose learning objectives outside the class, ability to evaluate learning, and ability to identify their weaknesses. The findings of this section revealed that participants had the ability to evaluate their language learning but they shared this responsibility with their teachers in responsibility section. These findings show that in spite of being capable of evaluating their learning, Iranian ESP students still need support and help from their teachers.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of their Abilities in Learning English.

Section 2 items: Students' perceptions of their own abilities in learning English	Very poor / poor	Ok	Very good / good
14. Choosing learning activities in class	24.8	54.9	20.3
15. Choosing learning activities outside class	36.8	39.8	23.3
16. Choosing learning objectives in class	24.8	38.3	36.8
17. Choosing learning objectives outside class	29.3	32.3	38.3
18. Choosing learning materials in class	34.6	36.1	29.3
19. Choosing learning materials outside class	30.8	36.8	32.3
20. Evaluating your learning	21.8	34.6	43.6
21. Evaluating your course.	39.8	33.8	26.3
22. Identifying your weaknesses in English	13.5	38.3	48.1
23. Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	28.6	36.1	35.3
24. Deciding how long to spend on each activity	24.8	39.1	36.1

ESP learners' perceptions of their decision making abilities and their responsibilities in language learning

One of the assumptions of this study was the existence of a relationship between students' perceptions of responsibility and their decision making ability in autonomous language learning. In order to find the relationship between these variables, a chi-square test was used and the results showed that there was a significant relationship at the level of $<.05$ in four pairs of items, (Table 3 shows the chi-square results). The items were: items 16 and 6 ("choosing learning objectives in class" and "deciding the objectives of the English course"), items 24 and 9 ("deciding how long to spend on each activity" and "deciding how long to spend on each activity"), items 18 and 10 ("choosing learning materials in class" and "choosing what materials to use to learn English in English lessons"), and items 20 and 11 ("evaluating learning" and "evaluating learning").

The results indicated that there was a relationship between how students perceive their abilities and perceptions of responsibility. Perceptions of greater ability might bring perceptions of greater responsibility, or vice versa.

The results of the present research suggest that Iranian ESP students have the ability to decide some aspects of their language learning process, and students' acceptance of responsibility in some areas of language learning associates directly with their ability. The findings also suggest that Iranian students need more freedom to express their ability; for example, in terms of choosing objectives and activities in the language learning process. As a result it is necessary to consider the role of context and educational system as an important variable which can facilitate or hinder the development of autonomous behavior among students.

Table 3. A Comparison of Students' Perceptions of their Own Responsibilities and Decision-making Ability in Learning English (Chi-square).

Section 1 items: Students' perceptions of their own responsibilities	Section 2 items: Students' perceptions of their own abilities in learning language	Chi square
4. identify your weaknesses in English	22. Identifying your weaknesses in English	.089
6. Decide the objectives of your English course	16. Choosing learning objectives in class	.002
7. Decide what you should learn next in your English lessons	23. Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	.714
8. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	14. Choosing learning activities in class	.138
9. Decide how long to spend on each activity	24. Deciding how long to spend on each activity	.019
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	18. Choosing learning materials in class	.010
11. Evaluate your learning	20. Evaluating your learning	.032
12. Evaluate your course	21. Evaluating your course	.097
13. Decide what you learn outside class	17. Choosing learning objectives inside class	.070

Limitations

Although this research study has achieved its' aims, there were some limitations. First, the participants were limited to law major students so the results cannot be generalized to other students. Second, the researcher only employed a questionnaire to gather data, so reasons for the results cannot be adequately theorized. Further studies need to explore the perceptions of other students such as those studying a different major and those of different age groups. Third, the researcher only considered students' perceptions, so another study could consider teachers' perceptions of readiness for self-access language learning. Fourth, this study investigated participants' perceptions towards ability and responsibility; further studies might consider other factors, such as participants' perceptions of their roles and their teachers' roles.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The major findings of this study are: (1) students were ready to take responsibility for some areas, for example, identifying weaknesses, working harder, deciding what to learn outside the class, and checking progress outside the class.; (2) students were not ready to accept the responsibility for the following areas: deciding the objectives of the course, deciding what should learn next, and choosing activities and materials to learn English; (3) students had an average level of ability to manage learning; and (4) there is a significant relationship between how students perceive their abilities and how they perceive their responsibility. Perceptions of greater responsibility could lead to the perceptions of greater ability, or vice versa.

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, there may be several implications. First, these students expressed an average level of ability in different situations of autonomous language learning mentioned in items (e.g. choosing learning objectives outside the class, evaluating their learning) so it seems reasonable to give them more opportunities to learn English based on their needs, such as providing them with situations where they have the freedom of choice to address their needs and interests. Developing autonomy also needs resources and facilities such as the availability of a self-access center which can encourage independent language learning among students. As Javdani, et al., (2011) indicated a “SAC can function as a bridge and prepare learners for actual language use” (p. 17). Also as Gardner and Miller (1999) point out, learners who engage in learning within self-access centers experience new roles and, they accept some degree of control over their learning. So, this study showed that the students are ready in some aspects of language learning and providing facilities such as a SAC can help them to develop autonomy more easily. This study also revealed that there is a need for more studies to investigate Iranian students’ perceptions towards other related areas such as their perceptions of their roles as learners of English, their practice of autonomous activities, their motivation level, and their employment of metacognitive strategies in learning language. The educational system in Iran is changing, and the number of self-access centers in private institutes is increasing, so research studies of this kind would help universities and, other institutes (both private and public) to be prepared before providing self-access facilities for their students, because students’ behavior is strongly influenced by their attitudes and perceptions.

Notes on the contributor

Razieyeh Ahmadi earned a Master's degree in TEFL at University of Guilan, Iran. She has experience of teaching English to learners at different institutes. Her research areas are autonomy in language learning, computer-assisted language learning, English for specific purposes, and self-regulated learning strategies.

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