

# Remodeling Teachers' and Students' Roles in Self-directed Learning Environments: The Case of Saudi Context

Iman El-Nabawi Abdel Wahed Shaalan

College of Science and Humanity Studies, Prince Sattam bin Abdul-Aziz University, KSA;

College of Humanity Studies, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt

**Abstract**—Traditional classrooms are markedly teacher-centered. EFL learners are largely urged to commit themselves to communicative learning environments which help them enhance their language performance. Self-directed learning is one of the approaches which proved to be highly effective in Foreign Language Learning (FLL). EFL teachers are usually encouraged to adopt self-directed learning practices in order to improve students' linguistic competence and performance. Recently, many Saudi universities integrated self-directed learning mode into EFL instruction. However, students' language performance, which is crucial to finding a job opportunity in labor market, is below the desired level. The study aims at remodeling teachers' and students' roles in light of students' perceptions of English self-directed learning. To achieve this ultimate goal, a questionnaire survey is administered and follow-up semi-structured interviews are held. Results showed that both male and female students have generally positive attitudes towards self-directed learning. However, many of them have real problems with understanding the nature of self-directed learning and how they should use it effectively. Therefore, both institutions and teachers are recommended to improve students' understanding and awareness of self-directed learning modes, and to rethink their roles.

**Index Terms**—self-directed learning, teacher's role, learner-centered, attitude and motivation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional classrooms are markedly teacher-centered. EFL learners are largely urged to commit themselves to communicative learning environments which help them enhance their language performance. Self-directed learning is one of the approaches which proved to be highly effective in Foreign Language Learning (FLL). EFL teachers are usually encouraged to adopt self-directed learning practices in order to improve students' linguistic competence and performance. Recently, many Saudi universities integrated self-directed learning mode into EFL instruction. However, students' language performance, which is crucial to finding a job opportunity in labor market, is below the desired level. The study aims at remodeling teachers' and students' roles in light of students' perceptions of English self-directed learning. To achieve this ultimate goal, a questionnaire survey is administered and follow-up semi-structured interviews are held. Results showed that both male and female students have generally positive attitudes towards self-directed learning. However, many of them have real problems with understanding the nature of self-directed learning and how they should use it effectively. Therefore, both institutions and teachers are recommended to improve students' understanding and awareness of self-directed learning modes, and to rethink their roles.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Improving EFL students' competence and performance in Saudi universities has been an appealing area of research for many studies in the last decade. Despite all efforts exerted to fulfill such goal, students' academic level and vocational performance seem not to be satisfying. In addition, the overall classroom culture in Saudi Arabia, as well as in many countries, is not based on self-direction as students are principally required to absorb information, and to reproduce them in written exams to demonstrate comprehension. Accordingly, graduates are claimed to be less qualified in such a competitive labor market which usually witnesses massive changes. To cope with the mercurial nature of the labor market, traditional teaching methods would not achieve the expected goals, and accordingly more efficacious teaching methods based on hand-on experiences and self-motivated tasks are to be developed and integrated. In its annual reports since 2015, the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, adopted a similar stance as it urged higher education institutions to adopt non-traditional teaching methods, with emphasis on self-directed and independent learning. Such methods are thought to improve students' academic performance, to increase their motivation, to define their potentials and limitations, and to promote their independent thinking. Therefore, departments of English in the Saudi higher education institutions are called upon to commit themselves to these recent teaching and learning methods of which self-directed learning receives utmost attention in the present paper. Self-directed learning in Saudi educational context would help students optimize their

experiences, have passion for what they learn, evaluate different sources of information, and gain sustainable knowledge.

Self-directed learning is not simply a matter of students working alone. Rather, it is an active process in which both students and teachers have specific role. Unlike traditional teaching approaches, students in SDL environments are markedly proactive, while teachers help them use learning resources smoothly and effectively. Therefore, students are required to develop skills of decision-making, effective communication, self-management, and self-assessment to render the learning process more profitable.

### III. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

1. How far are EFL university male and female students in the Saudi context acquainted with self-directed learning practices?
2. How do EFL university male and female students in the Saudi context view student-teacher relationship in self-directed learning environments?
3. What is the effectiveness of EFL students' selection of materials on improving their linguistic performance?
4. How do EFL university learners evaluate their overall experience with self-directed learning?

Answers to these questions are geared towards evaluating the teaching and learning methods adopted in Saudi Universities with special reference to the role of teachers and students. Adopting self-directed learning strategies are claimed herein to remodel such roles.

### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-directed learning, usually addressed in line with concepts such as active learning, self-planned learning, self-regulated learning, independent learning, active learning, cooperative learning and autonomous learning, is essentially based on the notion of autonomy and self-reliance. Longman Dictionary of Language defines learner autonomy as “the principle that learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it.” Meanwhile, Cambridge Dictionary states that autonomy is “the ability to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else.” Autonomy, in an educational setting, refers to the ability of a student to set his educational goals and to take responsibility for his own learning, while teachers are still active partners in the educational process as they usually guide students through the different phases of learning. Hardy-Gould (2013) posits that learner autonomy takes place when the learner takes control and responsibility for their own learning, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn it.

The concept of self-directed learning emerged since the 1970s as it principally targeted adults (Knowles, 1975; Brookfield, 1984; Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Caffarella, 1993; Merriam, 2001; Long, 2010; Conner, 2012; among others). Furthermore, SDL was explored in different careers, including medical science (Shokar, et al., 2002; Pai et al., 2014; Premkumar et al., 2018), information technology (e.g. Bruce, 1995; Conner, 2012), teaching (e.g. Jarvis, 2004), and management. Recently, SDL was incorporated with technology-aided and online learning environments (Hartley & Bendixen, 2001; Song & Hill, 2007; Boyer, Edmondson, Artis, & Fleming, 2014). However, “it [SDL] should be adopted in a systemic manner keeping in mind heterogeneity of students with respect to skills” (Bhat, Rajashekar & Kamath, 2007).

#### A. *Learner's Attitude and Motivation*

It is largely claimed that learners' attitudes and motivation are inseparable as they promote each other, thereby enhancing academic efficacy. In principle, motivation manipulates “attention, concentration, imagination, passion, and other processes to pursue goals” (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, it is important at the beginning and continuation of efforts to achieve the goals set (Nadi et al., 2011). Motivation, by nature, is closely related to readiness. In this regard, Francom (2010) maintains that learners' background knowledge and successful experience help predicting their effectiveness in a learning experience, and therefore support their readiness. In the area of foreign language learning, motivation and positive attitude play a crucial role as motivated learners seem to master that language. Gardner (2008) claims that both motivation and positive attitude are often considered collectively as motivation comprises of attitudinal implications and attitudes comprise of motivational properties. Bolduc (2000, p. 47) mentions two distinct categories of motivation which constitute all sorts of motives: the ‘biological push’ (internal motivation) and the ‘cultural pulls’ (external motivation). Intrinsic motivation emerges from within; it “refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). The development of intrinsic motivation relies on various psychological needs such as autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Saeid & Eslaminejad, 2017). Meanwhile, external motivation is typically a result of external rewards. In other words, implicit and explicit motives help predict a learner's behavior.

McGrew (2008) envisages academic motivation as a subtype of reflectance motivation conceptually regarded as effective dealing with an environment. Such effective dealing with the environment requires the formulation of attitudes. Attitudes are not innate, but they are markedly learned, and by the course of time, they are revised and modified. By default, they are classified into negative attitudes and positive attitudes. In a similar vein, attitudes towards the target language are categorized into three types: (a) attitudes to the community and people who speak the target language; (b)

attitudes towards learning the language concerned; and (c) attitudes towards languages and language learning in general (Stern, 1991, p.376). It should be noted that the relation between self-directed learning and attitudes is integrative, i.e. positive attitude supports self-directed learning; and good experience with self-directed learning supports learners' positive attitudes towards learning.

#### *B. Learner Cognitive and Metacognitive Learning Strategies*

In cognitive psychology, learning a language is a holistic process which cannot be explored based on stimulus-response relations. Effective learning undeniably relies on effective information processing, the possession and quality of basic learning-to-learn skills and knowledge centered upon cognitive and metacognitive skills (Cornford, 2002). Veenman, Van Hout-Wouters, and Afflerbach (2006) argue that metacognition depends on cognition. The relationship between metacognition and cognition and between metacognitive and cognitive strategies is difficult to explain (Mehrdad et al., 2012). Teaching and learning are generally based on different metacognitive and cognitive processes featured in various academic situations. Metacognition deals with the control, awareness, and knowledge of one's learning. Through the evaluation and regulation of one's learning process, metacognition was often considered as a higher order intellectual process. Metacognition is usually treated as higher-order cognition. Blummer (2014) mentions six features characteristic of information behavior: differentiating, extracting, monitoring, chaining, browsing, and starting. The first three features are empirically described as metacognitive strategies. Wentworth Institute classified metacognitive strategies into various categories, such as: writing, comprehension, reasoning, problem-solving, organization, and self-regulation strategies.

Alkahtani (2016, p. 33) maintains that while metacognitive strategies include planning, monitoring, evaluation, cognitive strategies encompass rehearsal, organization, and elaboration. In a similar vein, learning strategies are divided into two major groups such as direct and indirect group. Direct learning strategies are involved in the learning process and they require mental processing, whereas indirect learning strategies are involved in the foreign language learning process. Cognitive strategies are included in direct strategies and metacognitive strategies are in indirect strategies (Oxford, 1990, p.37). Cognitive strategies help learners combine new information with previous information. With regard to language study, Cohen and Dörnyei (2002, pp. 171-190) provide a three-fold classification of strategies: (a) language learning strategies, i.e., thoughts and behaviors used by learners to improve their understanding of a target language; (b) language-use strategies, including retrieval, rehearsal and communication; and (c) self-motivating strategies, "which learners can use to increase or protect their existing motivation" (pp. 178-179).

#### *C. Student-teacher Relationship in SDL Environments*

In educational environment, the teacher is prototypically viewed as the center of the educational process, while students are always recipients. Self-directed learning is based on "both the external characteristics of an instructional process and the internal characteristics of the learner, where the individual assumes primary responsibility for a learning experience" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 24). Reynolds and Miller (2013) state that "Relationships between teachers and children have been a focus of educators' concerns for decades, although this attention had taken different forms and had been expressed using a wide range of constructs and paradigms" (p. 199). In the learner-centered atmosphere, students are motivated to learn new things efficiently and independently. To be an effective self-directed learner, Greveson and Spencer (2005) argue, various factors are to be considered, including the subject matter, social, cultural and educational setting, past experiences, and relevant study skills.

Unlike teacher-centered classroom, learners learn through hand-on experience and direct contact with the learning environment and learning materials. Still, in SDL, teachers have crucial roles to play. In SDL environments, teachers are responsible for helping learners in case they need help, and also to help learners assess their needs. Teachers are furthermore urged to facilitate, motivate, and design communicative activities (Alnaim, 1998, p 3). The role of the facilitator is to guide, direct, inspire and lead the students wherever it needs. He has to guide students recognizing their weaknesses and strengths. In so doing, their motivation, courage, and confidence are supported to do their work perfectly. Teachers can design various communicative activities to motivate and engage the students to practice the new tips in the language learning (Kassem, 2018). Hiemstra (1994) lists the following roles of teachers in ideal self-directed learning environments: content resource, resource locator, interest stimulator, positive attitude generator, creativity and critical thinking stimulator, and evaluation stimulator. However, teachers are required to establish a boundary between students' decisions about selecting materials and learning strategies on the one hand and teaching methods on the other hand.

#### *D. Self-directed Learning in EFL*

To describe a learning experience as being markedly effective, learners ought to be committed to their learning goals in an interactive environment. Candy (1991) argues that SDL covers four domains including personal autonomy, self-management, independent pursuit of learning, and learner-control, all of which are crucial to foreign language learning. Benson (2011) maintains that language learners are urged to control their learning. To integrate self-directed learning in a curriculum, Guglielmino (2013) proposes four guidelines: first, creating an atmosphere supportive of such experience; second, promoting awareness of and reflection on self-directed learning; third, developing metacognition and assessment strategies promoting self-directed learning strategies; finally, providing real tasks and hand-on experiences.

Wang (2012) envisages self-directed learning as an effective pedagogy for EFL learners to improve "linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence beyond the language classroom" (p. 339).

Students' selection of the content to be learned would help them to develop the skill of lifelong learning, i.e. the how rather than the what. Self-directed learning integrates a gamut of skills – including effective communication, self-determination skills, self-management skills, research skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills etc. – as it targets the whole person. Furthermore, SDL environments foster collaboration, negotiation, critical thinking, meditation and sharing of ideas. However, this does not mean that self-directed learning does not have problems. For instance, Guglielmino and Guglielmino (1991) argue that "problems may arise, such as lack of resources or lack of time" (p.10).

In a case study on the tertiary level preparatory program in UAE, Ostrowska (2015) is interested in how learner independence becomes a curricular area. Following exploratory-interpretive method, he examines the responses of the teachers and learners to an Autonomous Learning Log. Instructors' and learners' attitudes towards the Autonomous Learning Log based on the different interpretations of the word autonomy. Findings show that learners were markedly passive, while teachers were symbolized as "the agents and controllers of education". The study recommended rethinking about autonomy to render it as a practical educational goal. In a similar vein, in the Saudi context, Alfalah (2015) examines how far Saudi English major university students are ready to participate in self-directed learning. Findings showed that though students had some misunderstanding of the learning tasks, they tended to participate in self-directed learning activities.

Khodary (2017) explored the effect of Edmodo, a closed social learning network, on developing Saudi EFL students' self-directed learning (SDL). The study targeted fifth level students at Languages and Translation Department, Arar Faculty of Education and Arts, Northern Border University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Findings showed that social networks helped students to develop skills of self-directed English learning. Al-Hazmi (2008), by means of interviews, qualitatively investigated the value of SDL in EFL programs as practiced by Saudi learners. Findings explained that students showed positive attitude toward SDL. Alhujayri (2014) examined the teaching methods and activities included in English teachers' practices aiming at encouraging learner autonomy at secondary schools in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire survey was conducted and found that Saudi English teachers promote self-directed learning by employing child-centered and communicative language teaching pedagogy in the classroom, but for no clear goals.

## V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With reference to the running research questions, the present study uses questionnaire and semi-structured interview to investigate EFL English major undergraduates' attitudes towards the self-directed learning mode, use of cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies, control of their self-directed learning behavior, areas in which they seek teachers' help. The research community is a group of 100 students (50 males and 50 females) from a number of Saudi universities. The whole group responded to the questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview was conducted with only 20 students representing different English departments. The questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews have been effectively used in understanding students' attitude towards EFL teaching methods with the ultimate goal of improving EFL instruction and students' linguistic performance. Therefore, it is postulated that questionnaires and semi-structured interviews help eliciting data on students' understanding and evaluation of self-directed learning methods. This hypothesis is supported by Norris and Watanabe's (2011) argument that surveys and semi-structured interviews are appropriate tools for researchers who do evaluation of language programs and teaching methods as they will be more likely to use the findings of these tools for understanding and improvement.

## VI. RESULTS

This section lists the basic results of the study tools, including the questionnaire and the semi-structures interviews.

### A. Questionnaire Results

TABLE I.  
SEX WISE PERCENTAGES OF SDL STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE; MALE (M), FEMALE (F).

Item No.	Statement	Agree		Disagree		Neutral	
		M	F	M	F	M	F
1	I prefer self-directed learning model more than the traditional teaching methods since I can select the learning content and make decision concerning the pace of study.	27%	27%	3%	5%	20%	18%
2	I can select the appropriate learning materials and sources.	32%	34%	2%	3%	16%	13%
3	I memorize the new words and phrases in a selective manner.	33%	32%	2%	1%	15%	17%
4	My English language has been improved due to my use of self-directed learning methods.	39%	35%	0%	2%	11%	13%
5	In self-directed learning, I consciously take notes of the key words and information	29%	35%	1%	0%	20%	15%
6	Usually I evaluate my learning process in order to identify the problems and find solutions.	34%	30%	4%	3%	12%	17%
7	I'm interested in learning English through newsletters, stories, articles, films and videos.	38%	34%	2%	0%	12%	14%
8	I have a clear understanding that the learner in the self-directed learning model has to prepare a detailed study plan including selecting the learning content and materials as well as making decision concerning my own pace of study.	24%	28%	4%	3%	22%	19%
9	I have prepared a detailed plan for my learning, including the selection of the learning content, materials and my own pace of study.	22%	19%	9%	10%	19%	21%
10	I feel I can learn independently without teachers' help or supervision.	22%	27%	9%	8%	19%	15%
11	If not reminded by the teacher, I may forget the tasks I have to do through self-directed learning.	18%	19%	16%	14%	16%	17%
12	I have a clear understanding that if I face any problems or difficulties in self-directed learning, I can seek the teacher or my classmates.	39%	36%	2%	3%	9%	11%
13	Self-directed learning is as indispensable as the role of the teacher in the classroom.	35%	34%	3%	2%	12%	14%
14	I prefer traditional teaching methods than the self-directed learning model.	15%	18%	15%	12%	20%	20%
15	I set clear objectives for my self-directed learning.	27%	29%	4%	4%	19%	17%
16	I hope I can do self-directed education during classes and not during leisure time.	27%	29%	7%	6%	16%	15%
17	I believe that the teacher should evaluate the students' achievements regarding their self-directed learning on a regular basis.	24%	30%	4%	4%	22%	16%
18	I will not do any self-directed learning unless there are exams, for example, mid-term or final exams.	19%	21%	13%	10%	18%	19%
19	I can finish all the course book exercises before the end of the semester.	26%	26%	6%	4%	19%	20%
20	In the self-directed learning model, I adopt and use different learning methods such as reading aloud, taking notes, and listening to general ideas, etc.	37%	35%	2%	2%	11%	13%
21	I can adapt to the self-directed learning methods in learning English at the university level.	36%	33%	1%	3%	13%	14%
22	I feel that I can do self-directed learning effectively without teacher's help.	26%	24%	9%	8%	15%	18%
23	I believe that student learning should be part of the teaching process done by the teacher in classrooms and should not be left to the learner in any way.	29%	28%	6%	7%	15%	15%
24	I can finish all the self-directed learning tasks without any push or supervision from the teacher.	18%	23%	10%	3%	22%	24%
25	I study and practice English language only before exams.	15%	25%	26%	17%	9%	8%

**B. Semi-structures Interview Results**

In the interviews with the students, they were asked to reflect on their experiences with self-directed learning.

Question No. 1. What are the problems and challenges do you face in self-directed learning?

The majority of students expressed that they used a limited number of self-directed learning strategies, and even they seemed not work in specific contexts. Some students also showed lack of interest in self-directed learning due to the hiatus between their interests and concerns and the materials selected by the teachers. They tended to learn about topics they have personal connection with since they would be much motivated.

Question No. 2. How far is the use of self-directed learning useful in improving your language skills?

Some students reported that sometimes their teachers discouraged them to use technology and online resources, such as mobile phones, laptops, and tablets in classrooms. Simultaneously, however, in writing classes, for instance, they asked to be allowed to use mobile phones or laptops in classrooms because they make the quality of their writing better. They also suggested that their departments should create and support language and conversation clubs run by peer students so that they can practice language and improve their language skills.

## VII. DISCUSSION

Based on the results reported in section (5.1) and (5.2), it seems that Saudi students at college level face some challenges once self-directed learning strategies are integrated in their English language departments. Most of the activities, practices and drills were selected, designed and administered by teachers. In other words, they used to be recipients as they lacked proper insights into the teachers' roles as facilitators and motivators. Another challenge is that many students underestimated the role of teachers assuring that they can acquire English language skills without teachers' support. Accordingly, they were administered to self-directed learning experiences where teachers assumed important roles, viz., in a self-directed learning environment; both students and teachers are real partners. Teachers were advised to initiate discussion with students to help them identify their needs, learning strategies and criteria for material selection. At the same time, teachers ought to be committed to providing continuous feedback, recommending materials based on needs analysis, and engaging students to reflect on their learning outcomes. No significant differences between male and female students are reported, however; furthermore, they showed considerable interest in self-directed learning modes as they were much more motivated to improve their language skills.

The major results of the present study stress the significance and efficacy of self-directed learning, especially in language learning. According to Bayley and Featherstone (2013), educational institutions have to be committed to developing self-directed learning modes in order to enhance students' learning and achievement. In a similar regard, Tait and Knight (2006) argued that many factors need to be considered for a successful and effective execution of self-directed learning modes, taking charge of one's learning, building and maintaining strong and productive teacher-pupil relationships, and providing the students with strong affective skills which could regulate their use of metacognitive learning strategies. Departments and colleges in Saudi educational contexts are called on to provide students with study skills guidelines about how to study effectively and how to use the study materials and resources to improve their language skills. They are encouraged to have advising centers that can be easily accessed by the students (cf. Dofs & Hobbs, 2011).

Teachers, in turn, are recommended to help their students gain a positive attitude toward self-directed learning, and to find a strategy to overcome all challenges and possible threats to such effective learning mode. In so doing, the learning process would be more innovative and creative. In this regard, they should involve students in selecting materials and resources, planning the curriculum, applying relevant learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. In respect of improving language skills, teachers should encourage EFL students to enhance their language performance and competence by designing an interactive learning environment inside and outside classrooms. Technology and online resources including Blackboard, language learning blogs, documentaries, and even YouTube are recommended to help promoting self-learning experiences.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The present study sought to provide an evaluation of the current learning experiences as described by Saudi EFL students in a number of Saudi universities. Its main concern is surveying the challenges and problems they face, especially those related to their attitudes towards self-directed learning modes and their concept of teachers' roles. In order to investigate how EFL students perceive self-directed learning, a questionnaire was conducted to measure how far students take responsibility for their learning, set learning goals and objectives, and realize their strengths and weaknesses. Results indicated clearly that in spite of students' interest and positive attitude towards self-directed learning, many of the male and female students have real problems with understanding the nature of self-directed learning and how they should use it effectively. English departments at Saudi Higher education institutions are recommended to develop tools for the management of language learning through self-directed learning modes. Results stress the need to remodel teachers' and students' role in active learning environments. On the part of teachers, they need to teach their students self-directed learning strategies that enable them to learn autonomously and effectively. Teachers also are recommended to make the best use of Blackboard systems which are available in most Saudi universities in order to provide students with materials for self-study, tips and guidelines for self-directed learning.

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**Iman El-Nabawi Shaalan** was born in Saudi Arabia. She is an Assistant Professor at the college of Humanity Studies, AL-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. She has earned her Ph.D. in APPLIED LINGUISTICS, TEFL, AL-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt in 2010.

She supervised a number of MA theses and Ph.D. dissertations. Among her research interests are: language teaching methodologies, approaches of teaching foreign language skills, pedagogical techniques, curriculum development and teaching methods, research methodological studies, program, syllabus, and materials design, language teaching for specific purposes, second and foreign language teaching and learning, new technologies in language teaching, and translation.

Dr. Iman is currently working at the college of Science and Humanity Studies, Prince Sattam Bin Abdul-Aziz University, Saudi Arabia. She heads the Alumni Unit of the college. She also heads the Research Projects' Committee of the college.