



## Independent learning of English literature students: Learning from an Iranian experience

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### Abstract

Independent learning is imperative for it can facilitate significant and faster development of a nation's human resource. Over the last two decades, more active roles are given to language learners and independent learning is taking momentum in the area of language learning. This study sought to investigate independent learning among university students of the Shiraz University majoring in English Literature at the department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics. Analysis of variance and t-test for independent samples were conducted to compare independent learning among students with different learning backgrounds. It was found that professional status influenced students' independent learning in favour of those students who had an occupation. However, other learner variables did not have such an impact on students' independent learning. This finding might be instructive for Malaysia's institutions specializing in English and other foreign languages.

**Keywords:** human resource development, independent learning, Iran, language learners, learner variables, professional status

### Introduction

The swing of the pendulum has recently been towards empowering students. Language learners are no longer regarded as passive recipients of instruction but they are deemed active participants in the process of language learning. The role of a teacher has also changed to that of a facilitator. Teachers no longer direct nor control the language behavior of their students nor are they responsible for providing their students with models for imitation. They should be well aware of the dedicated efforts that learning a foreign language demands and of the psychological barriers that learners would encounter. Moreover, a step-by-step handover of many of the roles which were traditionally allocated to teacher should occur in all learning contexts and one of the roles of teachers is to boost students' self-concept so that they may accept increasing responsibility for their learning. There are three main approaches which are pertinent to learner independence and autonomy. According to Kettani (2014) these approaches are positivism, constructivism and critical theory. Positivism is based on the presumption that learning includes the conveyance of knowledge from one person to another (Benson and Voller, 1997). Constructivism asserts that people reorganize and restructure their experience and critical theory maintains that knowledge makes 'competing ideological versions of the reality demonstrating the interests of various social groups.

## Statement of the problem

One day, each student's studies at his or her university terminates and if s/he is not able to learn on his or her own due to the detrimental reliance on instructors, s/he will be doomed to failure. Hence, it is of paramount importance for students to be endowed with the ability to continue learning throughout their lives. Likewise, it is crucial to know the underlying factors of autonomy and to investigate how some factors such as having a job or not, can influence students' autonomy in learning. Inasmuch as the beliefs learners hold may either facilitate or thwart the development of autonomy, it can be rewarding to investigate those beliefs which demonstrate students' predispositions towards autonomy.

As achievement of a sense of autonomy would impel language learners to make the most of the available resources and would elevate students' self-concept so far so that they would try to increase their knowledge in spite of all drawbacks, attention to this goal can be of great significance.

It is hoped that students will manifest more learner-control and the results of the study would serve to encourage both learners to display increasing initiative and responsibility for their learning and teachers to help their students to promote autonomy.

## Objectives of the study

This study aimed to compare different views about autonomy and to shed light on the various contingencies and thoughts which gave rise to this important pedagogical goal. In a corresponding way, it aimed at clarifying characteristics of autonomous learners and elements which may foster autonomy. The issue of self-directed learning as an aspect which paves the way for autonomy would also be illuminating.

It also intends to examine a number of factors pertinent to autonomy and to determine how autonomous language learners differ from non-autonomous ones. The following questions are to be answered via this study:

1. Does the age of the students affect their predispositions towards autonomy and its underlying factors?
2. Are selected university students who have jobs different from those without jobs in their readiness for learner autonomy?

## Characteristics of independent learners

Students' perceptions of their own passive role and of the teacher's 'all-or-nothing' role have been growing deeply in them over time and the previous schooling has regrettably failed to create independent learners who are eager to take control of their own learning (Hashil Mohammed Al-Saadi 2011). Learner independence is known by a number of other terms: learner autonomy, independent learning, lifelong learning, learning to learn, thinking skills (Sinclair 2001). In this paper, learner independence is taken equivalent to learner autonomy.

Independent learners are endowed with some characteristics which help them carry out the demanding task of learning. According to Little (1991), independent learners have the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making. They also show independent action, psychological relation to the process and content of learning and have the capacity of transferring what they have learned to wider contexts.

In their article, *Independent Learning in Your Classroom*, Mynard and Sorflaten (2003) enumerated a multitude of characteristics of dependent learners versus independent learners. They maintained that the element of self-reliance is more observed among independent learners. However, dependent learners are much more reliant on their teachers. Dependent learners are often deprived of many of the abilities

possessed by independent learners. The following table (Table 1) summarizes all the characteristics provided by Mynard and Sorflaten (2003).

**Table 1. Characteristics of dependent and independent learners**

Dependent learners	Independent learners
Rely heavily on the teacher	Are self-reliant
Cannot make decisions about their learning	Can make informed decisions about their learning
Do not know their own strengths and weaknesses	Are aware of their strengths and weaknesses
Do not connect classroom learning with the real world	Connect classroom learning with the real world
Think that the teacher is wholly responsible for their learning	Take responsibility for their own learning
Do not know the best way to learn something	Know about different strategies for learning
Do not set learning goals	Plan their learning and set goals
Will only work when extrinsic motivators such as grades or rewards are offered	Are intrinsically motivated by making progress in learning
Do not reflect on how well they are learning and the reasons	Often reflect on the learning process and their own progress

Autonomous learners are indeed effective learners (Benson 2010; Little 1991). Learners who exercise autonomy and independence in language learning accept responsibility for their own learning and for the learning of group (Shield et al., 2001). They also tend to negotiate with each other and with their tutors about what is to be learned, when and how. The role of the tutor is that of guide and co-learner, for autonomous language learners may design their learning in such a way that the tutor may also become a learner.

In his paper, Hashil Mohammed Al-Saadi (2011) asserted that independent learners have some features in common. They are responsible, flexible, and curious; they can see the need to learn, hold positive attitude towards learning, set their own objectives, plan their own learning, explore available learning opportunities and resources. Moreover, they use a variety of strategies, interact with others, monitor their progress, reflect on and evaluate their learning and rationalize their actions. Finally, they are aware of alternative learning strategies, are aware of their cognitive abilities and learning style and transfer what they have learned to wider contexts. According to Nunan (2000), autonomous learners have the ability to self-determine the overall direction of their learning. They can become actively involved in the management of the learning process and exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.

Seven main attributes characterising autonomous learners have been offered by Omaggio (1978, cited in Wenden, 1998). These features are (a) autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies; (b) they take an active approach to the learning task at hand; (c) they are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs; (d) they are good guessers; (e) they attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy; (f) they develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and (g) they have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

## The study

All male and female students majoring in English Literature at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of Shiraz University of Iran were involved in the present study. On the whole, 166 students participated in the study. They differed with regard to the variables professional status and age. Most of the students who participated in this study did not have any kinds of jobs (around 65 percent). However, only around 32 percent of them were involved in a kind of occupation. In addition, 51 percent of students were in the age range of 18 to 21, around 39 percent were in the age range of 22 to 25 and over 10 percent were above 26 years of age.

The necessary data were collected via a questionnaire the items of which were taken from two other questionnaires by Cotterall (1995) and Cotterall (1999) with some adaptations. The items of the questionnaire in this study were obtained from those of the previously mentioned questionnaires which showed students' beliefs regarding autonomous language learning. Forty items were incorporated into a five-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement. In order to establish the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to a number of professors in the field and they were asked to mark inappropriate items. Appropriate items which provided indexes of students' predispositions towards autonomy were included in the final version.

The five clusters of items which were identified and varied together were learner independence, dependence on the teacher, learner confidence, attitudes towards language learning and self-assessment. For every factor, participants got numerical indexes together with a total score which showed students' predispositions towards autonomy.

### *The validity of the instrument*

In order to establish the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to a number of professors and experts in the field and they were asked to mark inappropriate items. Appropriate items which provided indexes of students' predispositions towards autonomy were included in the final version.

Cotterall (1995) and Cotterall (1999) performed factor analysis of responses to validate her instruments and to find factors which covaried. Though her questionnaires had been validated in other contexts and the items of the questionnaire in this study were obtained from them, factor analysis of items was performed to validate the questionnaire in the present context and to find underlying factors as well. The five clusters of items which were identified and varied together were learner independence, dependence on the teacher, learner confidence, attitudes towards language learning and self-assessment.

### *The reliability of the instrument*

The reliability of the questionnaire was established via Cronbach's alpha. It is an internal consistency reliability coefficient measuring the degree to which items agree with each other. The Cronbach's alpha for the whole questionnaire was found to be .76. Table 2 below indicates the Cronbach alpha indexes for all the five factors of the questionnaire.

**Table 2. Cronbach alpha indexes for the 5 factors identified**

Factor	No of Items for Each Factor	Cronbach Alpha
Learner Independence	12	.88
Dependence on the Teacher	9	.83
Learner Confidence	8	.51
Attitudes towards Language Learning	6	.52
Self-assessment	5	.56

For positively stated items the numerical values 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 were respectively assigned to the response categories starting at the favorable end and for negatively stated items the values 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were assigned. The minimum possible score for each item is 1 and the maximum possible is 5. Therefore, a student would at least obtain a score of 40 [(40) (1)] and at most 200 [(40) (5)] on the questionnaire.

## Results

When the means of students of different age groups were compared and the one-way ANOVA was applied, it was found that the differences in means were not statistically significant for any of the factors of learner independence, dependence on teachers, learner confidence, attitudes towards language learning and self-assessment. To obtain a measure of autonomy for students of each age group, a one-way ANOVA was run and the means of students of different age groups were compared. Although students of the age group 18-21 had the highest mean (129.81), the differences were not statistically significant (see Table 3 below for the results of the analysis of variance).

**Table 3. One-way ANOVA for learner autonomy by age**

Source of Variance	d.f.	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	P
Between Group	2	469.04	234.52	1.34	.26
Within Group	165	28770.23	174.36		
Total	167	29239.27			

The t-test for independent samples was conducted for the five underlying factors and it was found that those students who had occupations had higher means for all factors except self-assessment. The difference in means was highly significant at 0.005 for the factor learner independence while other differences were not statistically significant. Having a job influenced students' learner independence which is one of the underlying factors of autonomy, for those students who had an occupation obtained better results.

**Table 4. Comparison of employed and unemployed students on the 5 factors**

Factors	Means of those who Had Jobs	Means of those with No Jobs	SDs of those with Jobs	SDs those with Jobs	t-value	d.f.	2-Tail Sig
Learner Independence	43.90	40.06	8.15	8.02	2.85	162	.005
Dependence on Teacher	26.60	25.97	3.09	3.40	1.17	162	.245
Learner Confidence	28.45	27.84	4.17	4.42	.86	162	.391
Attitudes towards Language Learning	15.06	14.07	3.70	3.30	1.66	162	.087
Self-assessment	18.30	18.38	2.30	2.39	.2	162	.844

When the T-test was carried out regarding students' learner autonomy, it was noticed that those students who had occupations had higher means in learner autonomy (132.29) in comparison with others. The difference in means was highly significant at the .008 level of significance. The results are shown in table 5 below. In other words, those students who had occupations displayed greater predispositions towards independence in learning and this can be explained by the fact that those students who have occupations are usually apt to make decisions regarding their own affairs and this power may be transferred to their learning. That is they would feel that they are completely free to make decisions about their own learning and this may lead to their greater autonomy and independence in learning.

**Table 5. Comparison of employed and unemployed students on autonomy**

Professional Status	Mean	SD	d.f.	t-value	Level of Sig
With an Occupation	132.29	13.81	162	2.70	.008
Without Occupations	126.31	12.30			

## Summary and conclusion

The principal objectives of the present study were to explicate the characteristics of independent learners and to enumerate the features possessed by independent versus dependent learners. In a corresponding way, it aimed to examine the role of age and professional status in students' predispositions towards autonomy. To this end, a questionnaire was prepared and based on factor analysis of responses, five underlying factors were identified. These underlying dimensions were learner independence, dependence on the teacher, learner confidence, attitudes towards language learning and self-assessment. Though autonomy had its highest index for students who were in the age range of 18.64 and its lowest index for students in the age range of 26 and over, the differences were not statistically significant. It can be inferred that the age of students does not influence their predispositions towards autonomy. Students who had occupations obtained higher indexes of learner autonomy in comparison with those who did not have any occupations. In other words, professional status does influence students' readiness for autonomy. As learning is a process which extends throughout a person's life, every student should strive to foster independent learning in order to make growing progress.

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