The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Autonomy and their Vocabulary Learning Strategies with a Focus on Gender

Elham Sedighi [*1], Nasrin Hadidi Tamjid [2]

1, 2. Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran
*Corresponding author: nhadidi@iaut.ac.ir

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy with a focus on the gender. To meet this objective, 82(39 males and 43 females) sophomore and junior students majoring in English Language Teaching who had passed at least 45 credits at Tabriz Azad University, in Iran were asked to take part in the study by filling the questionnaires on learner autonomy (LAQ) and vocabulary learning strategies (VLSQ). After discarding incomplete questionnaires, 70 acceptable cases were used in the statistical analysis. Correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant and positive relationship between Iranian EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy for both male and female students. The findings can have some pedagogical implications for teachers.

Keywords: learner autonomy, vocabulary learning strategies

Introduction

The concept of autonomy entered the field of language teaching in the mid-1970s in the context of innovative adult foreign language learning projects (Holec, 1981). The concept of autonomy as a favorable goal of education and a constituent element of good teaching and learning along with related concepts such as self-direction, independent learning, and self-regulation, has become more and more important in the educational literature over the past twenty years (Candy, 1991). By increasingly focusing attention on learning quality and learner development in foreign language instruction, the movement towards learner-centered approach, in which learners acquire foreign language proficiency more quickly and effectively, has resulted in an emphasis on the value of learner autonomy in enhancing learner development. Learner autonomy is one of the important goals of higher education. The findings have shown that learner autonomy positively affects the growth of target language proficiency (Little, 2008).

Autonomy in language learning, according to Benson (2007), is controlling the purposes for which people learn languages and the ways in which they learn them. Dickenson (1987, p. 11) describes autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (p.11). Holec (1981)states that "learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own directed learning" (p. 3). In the same vein, Candy (1991) believes that autonomy is a necessary way of effective learning. She says that it is the teacher and student collaboration to meet students' needs rather than the total detachment of the teacher.

In learning a language, second or foreign, vocabulary knowledge seems to be essential. Communicating without the needed vocabulary is impossible. There is no doubt one cannot learn all vocabulary in language classes; this means that students are forced to find other ways to learn vocabulary by themselves. Learner autonomy is a great relief for learners in vocabulary learning because it provides the learners with many privileges (Gu & Johnson, 1996). It is worth noting that if an autonomous learner is willing to be a good vocabulary learner, he/she will find that there are a lot of factors that influence their autonomy development. In order to gain profit of learning strategies, the learner should make decision about what kind of strategies he or she should

adopt. Certainly, learners do not need to learn just a bunch of vocabulary; they require to be taught how to learn vocabulary. So, it is important to make a distinction between "learning the meanings of specific words" and "learning strategies to become independent word learners" (Blachowics& Fisher, 2000, p. 505), that is, learners should learn how to acquire new words for themselves, in other words, to be responsible for their own vocabulary development. Vocabulary learning strategies are defined as:

> The knowledge about the mechanisms (processes, strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students (a) to find out the meanings of unknown words, (b) to retain them in the long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode. (Catalan, 2003, p. 56)

Generally, it is believed that vocabulary learning strategies are the processes which facilitate increasing language learners' receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary as one of the most important components of language learning (Decarrico, 2001). Some researchers, such as Holec (1981), Dickinson (1992), Little (1991), and Benson (2003), put great emphasis on the necessity of autonomy in education. They believe that learners who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn; moreover, they have a higher sense of confidence in their own learning ability. Academically successful and motivated learners are those who depend on themselves in learning vocabulary; in contrast, learners who do not use such efficient learning strategies are not so successful. As a result, in teaching any language, including English, teachers have to try to teach how to learn vocabulary autonomously (Shawwa, 2000).

Gender as one of the most significant variables that influence foreign language learning has received little attention in the fields of second language learning and teaching. In particular, the number of studies done on gender as a variable in second language learning are few in comparison with the research on other factors such as age, motivation, or personality. Male and female differences in employing language learning strategies seem to be more widespread than thought by researchers before. The results are mixed; some findings have revealed that males use more strategies than female whereas others suggested that there are no significant differences between males and

females in employing language learning strategies (e.g., Chang, 1990). In their study, Gardner and Lambert (1972) noticed that females had more positive attitudes toward the speakers of a second language and that they were more motivated toward learning a second language than males were. In a research conducted by Varola and Yilmaz (2010), the results revealed that there were some differences between the males and females in their preferences for autonomous activities. The females seemed to take more opportunities, mostly in trying new things in class activities. In general, females seemed to behave more autonomously in and out of the class.

A number of studies have investigated the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and autonomy in EFL classes. Azimi Mohammad Abadi and Baradaran (2013) conducted a research study to find out the relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies among 190 male and female learners with different language proficiency level. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies use in high proficient group, and a significant positive relationship between these two constructs in low proficient group, however, not as strong as the relationship in the advanced group.

In another study, Nosratinia, Abbasi, and Zaker (2015) examined the relationship among 100 male and female undergraduate EFL learners' critical thinking, autonomy, and choice of vocabulary learning strategies. The participants were randomly selected and were asked to complete three questionnaires including a questionnaire of autonomy by, a questionnaire of critical thinking, and a vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire, estimating their critical thinking, autonomy, and vocabulary learning strategies. Analyzing the collected data by Pearson's Product Moment correlation coefficient revealed that there was a significant positive relationship among the participants' autonomy, critical thinking, and vocabulary learning strategies.

Considering the above mentioned theoretical assumptions and considering the important role of learner autonomy and language learning strategies in language learning, as well as noticing the scarcity of such a study in Iranian EFL context, this research intended to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies with a focus on gender. Hence, the following research questions were posed:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian male EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy?

2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian female EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy?

Method

Participants

In the present study, initially, 90 undergraduate EFL students majoring in ELT at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran participated. However, only 82 students returned the questionnaires. It should be noted here that all the participants were above 18 years old and were selected from among the students who had passed at least 45 credits at university in a non-random sampling way as it was based on the students' accessibility. During the administration of the study, 12 participants from among 82 participants were excluded from the data analysis due to their incomplete answers or subject mortality. Finally, 70 students consisting of 35 females (50%) and 35 males (50%) were selected as the main participants of the study.

Instrumentation

In the current study, the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ), formulated by Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002), was administered to see how autonomous the participants were in learning English as a foreign language. It has 52 items including four sections. The participants were asked to indicate their answers in a Likert-scale, sequentially rating the frequency to options of "not at all", "a little", "some", "mainly", and "completely" in section one; 1 for "very poor" to 5 for "very good" in section two; putting an "X" beside the first to the last choices in section three; and also rating the frequency using options of "never", "rarely", "sometimes", "often", and "always" in section four. Thus, the result could vary from 52 to 260; the higher the mark was, the more autonomous the participant would be. In this study, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was checked through Cronbach's Alpha which was found to be 0.79.

The second instrument which was used in this study was Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ), adopted from Bennett (2006). It is a 41-items questionnaire. All 41-items in the questionnaire are

classified under 5 different groups of strategies as determination, memory, social, cognitive, and meta-cognitive. The participants were asked to rate the frequency of each category they use on a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from "never" to "always". As a result, the scores could range from 41 to 205 and the high score indicated the students' more frequent use of more vocabulary learning strategies. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was also checked through Cronbach's Alpha which was found to be 0.82.

Procedure

To conduct the present study, the researchers pursued the following procedure. At the first step, to ensure the content validity, the questionnaires were approved by the supervisor and two ELT professors at Tabriz Azad University, Iran. Next, permission was obtained from the instructors of the classes at university to visit their classes in order to collect the data. At Tabriz Azad University, Iran, the researcher explained everything about the study and the time frame for the data collection to the instructors, and asked for some time to administer two questionnaires on autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies.

Initially, two questionnaires, one on learner autonomy and the other on vocabulary learning strategies, were piloted to 20 (8 males and 12 females) undergraduate EFL students majoring in ELT at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz branch by the researcher in order to reveal any probable problem before the main study was conducted. These participants had almost the same characteristics as the target sample. It is worth mentioning that all the participants of the study were selected from among those who have passed at least 45 credits at university.

At the next step, the two piloted questionnaires regarding learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies were distributed in 5 classes among 90 students who were appointed as the participants at Tabriz Azad University, Iran, by the researcher.

After giving an oral instruction of how to fill the questionnaires, each participant received a package of research instruments containing VLSQ and LAQ. The questionnaires were administered during one class session. The respondents were asked to fill the questionnaires in approximately 35 minutes and return the results on the same or next session in the same class, bearing in mind that there was no right or wrong answers. Out of 90 questionnaires which

had been distributed, 82 questionnaires were returned, that is, 91.1% of the questionnaires. Moreover, 12 of them were excluded from the data analysis due to careless coding and incomplete answers, bringing the final number of participants to 70, among whom 35 (50%) were female and 35 (50%) male students. At the final step, all of the questionnaires were analyzed. The statistical procedures were conducted by the researcher to see whether or not there was any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy with a focus on the gender.

Design

This study adopted a survey research that utilized two types of questionnaires to obtain the data from the respondents. The variables of the study were: vocabulary learning strategies, autonomy, and gender.

Results

Based on the answers of the participants, the statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to complete the analysis of the collected data. In this study, both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were provided. First, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were obtained. Moreover, to check the normality of distribution One Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was used. To analyze the collected data and to answer the research questions, two Pearson's correlation analyses were performed.

Testing the Normal Distribution of the Scores

As one of the most important assumptions for running parametric statistical analyses, is the assumption of the normal distributions of the scores, the researcher ran One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Tests on the obtained scores to ensure the normality of the distributions. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3
One Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Autonomy Scores

		Iranian Male VLS	Iranian Female VLS	Iranian Male Autonomy	Iranian Female Autonomy
N		70	70	70	70
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	131.20	142.31	166.37	184.14
	Std. Deviation	37.676	33.675	47.719	43.576
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.096	.132	.097	.126
	Positive	.095	.108	.097	.107
	Negative	-.096	-.132	-.096	-.126
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.096	.132	.097	.126
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.200	.130	.200	.174

a. Test distribution is Normal.
b. Calculated from data.

As is indicated in Table 4.3, the p-value for each set of scores is higher than 0.05; therefore, all sets of scores have normal distributions and the parametric tests of Pearson's Correlation analysis and independent samples t-test are allowed to be run.

The Results Regarding the First Research Question

The first research question of the study attempted to investigate the relationship between Iranian male EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy. Initially, the descriptive statistics of the data are presented. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics regarding the participants' vocabulary learning strategies scores.

Table 1
The Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Vocabulary Learning Strategies Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Iranian Male VLS	35	67	199	131.20	37.676
Iranian Female VLS	35	73	197	142.31	33.675

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Iranian Male VLS	35	67	199	131.20	37.676
Iranian Female VLS	35	73	197	142.31	33.675

As Table 1 indicates, Iranian male EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies mean score was 131.20 with the standard deviation of 37.676 while Iranian female EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies mean score was 142.31 with the SD of 33.675.

The descriptive statistics regarding the participants' autonomy scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
The Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Autonomy Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Iranian Male Autonomy	35	85	252	166.37	47.719
Iranian Female Autonomy	35	95	255	184.14	43.576

Based on the results presented in Table 2, the male EFL learners' autonomy mean score was 166.37 with the standard deviation of 47.719 and the female EFL learners' autonomy mean score was 184.14 with the SD of 43.576.

To answer the first research question, a Pearson's correlation analysis was run. Table 4 presents the results of this analysis.

Table 4
Pearson's Correlation between Iranian Males' Use of Vocabulary learning Strategies and their Autonomy

		Iranian Male VLS	Iranian Male Autonomy
Iranian Male VLS	Pearson Correlation	1	.713**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	35	35
Iranian Male Autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.713**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	35	35

As is shown in Table 4, the coefficient of correlation was 0.713 and the p-value (i.e., 0.000) observed was less than the level of significance set for the present study (i.e., 0.05). Thus, it can be claimed that there was a significant relationship between Iranian male EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy.

The Results Regarding the Second Research Question

The second research question of the study aimed at exploring the relationship between Iranian female EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy. To this end, another Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted. Table 5 displays the results of this analysis.

Table 5

Pearson's Correlation between Iranian Females' Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Their Autonomy

		Iranian Female VLS	Iranian Female Autonomy
Iranian Female VLS	Pearson Correlation	1	.610[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	35	35
Iranian Female Autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.610[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	35	35

As is indicated in Table 5, the coefficient of correlation was 0.610 and the p-value (i.e., 0.000) observed was lower than 0.05. Therefore, it was inferred that there was a significant relationship between Iranian female EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy.

Discussion

The findings of the current study indicated that vocabulary learning strategies' use was significantly related to learner autonomy in Iranian EFL context. The results were supported by the findings of Nosratinia et al. (2013). They also attempted to investigate the degree of relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies. The results of Pearson

Product correlation analysis in their study revealed a statistically significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies. The results of the present study were also in line with the findings of Azimi Mohammad Abadi and Baradaran (2013). In their study, the relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies among EFL male and female learners with different language proficiency level were investigated. The results showed a significant positive correlation between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies use in high proficient group, and a significant positive relationship between these two constructs in low proficient group; however, there was not a strong relationship in the advanced group. In another study, Nosratinia, Abbasi, and Zaker (2015) also indicated that there was a significant and positive relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and overall use of VLSs. Other similar results were found by Naraghi and Seyyedrezayi (2015). The results of their study showed that there was a relationship between intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and learner autonomy. The results were also supported by the findings of Nosratiniaet al. (2015), whose results of study indicated that there was a significant and positive relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and overall use of VLSs.

The outcome of the present study indicated that students who use more vocabulary learning strategies are more autonomous. In other words, the more use of vocabulary learning strategies, the higher the level of learner autonomy will be. Similar to the findings of the present study, Little (1995) proposed that the relationship between learner autonomy and learning strategies is so close that one can conclude how autonomous learners are from the strategies they use in learning. He believed that emphasizing on language learning strategies will lead to learner autonomy. Also, Scharle and Szabo (2000) believed that learning strategies are one of the most significant building blocks of responsibility and autonomy, which is in line with the results obtained from EFL learners of this study. In fact, in the context of learning English as a foreign language, similar to the one we experience in Iran, a learner needs to be autonomous and independent and make conscious effort to learn vocabulary outside the classroom simply because the exposure to the target language is limited in class. This makes explicit/implicit vocabulary learning strategy

instruction necessary. However, vocabulary, due to its complex linguistic, semantic and cognitive aspects, is notoriously difficult to teach, and as mentioned before, the class time for vocabulary is so limited when compared with the great number of vocabulary items needed to be learned (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). On the other hand, most students seem to be unfamiliar with the efficiency of VLSs. It is the duty of language teachers to get them familiar with VLSs and include strategy training into teaching programs (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Hence, teachers can focus on strategy-based instruction for more efficient learning and also find faster and less time-consuming ways to teach based on learners' autonomy levels. Strategy training is based on the belief that it is possible to develop in the learners the ability to take responsibility of their own learning so that finally they can become independent of the teacher. Therefore, along with VLS instruction, as a direct form for promoting VLS use, EFL teachers should encourage autonomy, as a significant internal factor (Nosratiniaet al. 2015), among their learners. They can be foster the autonomy through the use of different approaches which need to be adjusted according to the students' needs and interests. In the promotion of learner autonomy, learner choice is necessary. Thus, creating a learning environment, which provides students with opportunities to practice autonomy in class, must be considered to be an essential method for learner training. The ultimate goal of any language teacher should be to prepare students for life-long learning and this can be done only if they become autonomous learners (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2010).

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Biodata

Nasrin Hadidi Tamjid has a Ph.D. in TEFL. She is an assistant professor who has been teaching at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch for 18 years. Moreover, she is the editor of the Applied Linguistic Journal at this university. She is also an official translator to the justice administration.She has published and presented a number of papers in different international journals and conferences. Her main research interests are alternative assessment, teacher education, second language teaching, and writing.

Elham Sedighi has finished her MA in TEFL at the Islamic Azad University Tabriz Branch. She has been teaching at different language institutions. Her main research interest is teaching English as a Foreign Language.