



# From Spoon Feeding to Self-Feeding: Are Iranian EFL Learners Ready to Take Charge of their Own Learning?

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## Abstract

Learner autonomy has been the recurring theme in language teaching and learning for more than three decades. This study asserts that, in any given context, prior to taking any measures to develop autonomous learning, it is necessary to scrutinize learners' perceptions concerning their readiness to exercise autonomy. In this study, data were elicited from 405 EFL learners studying English in Kish Institute through a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and non-participant observations. The results reveal that there is a gap between learners' consciousness of autonomous learning and their actual practice in the classroom. Learners perceived themselves to be motivated, resorted to their teacher as a source of knowledge and believed that teachers should raise their awareness towards practicing autonomy. However, the participants voiced their disagreement regarding constraints they faced when practicing autonomy. Reiterating the significance of studying attitudes and expectations that learners hold, the study concludes with implications for the stakeholders involved in the learning process with regard to learner autonomy and hopes to be a driving force behind further research.

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## 1 Introduction

One of the manifestations of learner-centered approaches has been the notion of learner autonomy, which has become a topic of interest among researchers, and which can be functionally interpreted as learner self-initiation and self-regulation. It is argued that in today's educational system, the issue facing educators is not teaching students to get better marks, but preparing them for life beyond the classroom (Flannagan, 2007). Learners in the language classroom are now expected to bear responsibility for their own learning and to do their own share (Benson, 2011).

However, while trying to strike a balance between input and intake, teachers encounter learners who never do their homework, are not willing to use the language for working in groups, or forego learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom. One important reason behind all this can be learners' over-dependence on the teacher and their tendency to take on a passive role. Accordingly, many attempts have been made to promote learner autonomy and its justifications (Benson, 2006, 2011; Holec, 1981; Palfreyman, 2003), yet little attention has been accorded to the different ways in which learners conceptualize autonomy in language learning and act accordingly (Benson, 2011; MacDougall, 2008). The same gap is felt in the Iranian context with its spoon-feeding education system, (Ghorbani, 2009; Tajadini & Sarani, 2009) where both teachers' and learners' interpretation of and their beliefs about their roles and functions in the learning process may be in a mismatch; as a result, the learners' autonomy suffers.

This study, then, addresses the issue of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perceptions of learner autonomy as an important yet neglected variable in autonomous learning with the hope of gaining a better understanding of their perceptions and interpretations of this role shift which reflects their readiness for taking the plunge. For this purpose, 405 EFL learners from Kish Institute located in Tehran, Iran, participated in the study and their perceptions were investigated in four areas: their opinions of their own responsibilities and that of their teachers, their ability to function autonomously, their motivational level, and the use of autonomy-related activities.

Gaining an awareness of learners' readiness for learner autonomy can contribute towards reducing the mismatch between teachers' expectations and learners' presuppositions; moreover, the results can be enlightening for curriculum developers and provide guidelines for materials modifications. The study also sheds new light on learner training and, possibly, training people in critical thinking skills.

This article presents firstly a summary of related empirical studies, followed by details of the present study, before it discusses the implications, limitations and suggestions for further research.

## 2 Summary of related empirical studies

Much insightful research has been conducted previously in the field of autonomous learning. Building on earlier research, the present study aims to add to previous literature in some significant ways. Many studies have been devoted to how one can promote autonomous learning (Bhattacharya & Chauhan, 2010; Cotterall, 2000; Hadidi Tamjid & Birjandi, 2011; Kobayashi, 2011; Lo, 2010; Mlstar, 2001; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2011; Younesi, 2012; Zohrabi, 2011).

Along the same line of research, some studies have tried to explore the relationship between autonomy and motivation. To begin with, Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) aimed at determining whether motivation takes precedence over autonomy or the other way round. They concluded that "motivation is a key factor that influences the extent to which learners are ready to learn autonomously, and that teachers might therefore endeavor to ensure motivation before they train students to become autonomous" (p. 245). Interestingly, Hashemian and Heidari Soureshjani (2011) and Sahragard, Jokar and Soozandehfar (2011) did not find any relationship between autonomy and motivation and their results contradict those of Cotterall (1999) and Tatarko (2010).

Furthermore, some studies have addressed the promotion of autonomy through portfolio writing. For example, the results of Khodadady and Khodabakhshzade's (2012), Lo's (2010), and Mineishi's (2010) studies revealed that those learners who kept portfolios outperformed learners who did not. It seems that the common thread running through all these studies is the focus they put on learners' responsibility – taking it as a key factor for learning, though ironically the learner himself has been taken as the "Cinderella variable" in this part of literature. In fact, fostering autonomy is established from the bottom, that is from learners' beliefs, which is addressed in the present study.

Earlier studies on readiness for autonomous learning (Chan, 2001; Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Koçak, 2003; Rungwaraphong, 2012; Yildirim, 2008; Zhong, 2010) have shown that research in this area has been carried out in the tertiary context, while other institutional settings which provide high exposure to English language, especially in the EFL context, have been left unnoticed. Students from different settings could be expected to be different in a number of ways. Because of possible differences in the practice of autonomous learning in different settings – and since autonomous learning is context sensitive (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Schmenk, 2005) – it is important that the background of the present study and the types of learners involved be understood. Still another area neglected in the literature is the adaptation of a triangulation approach towards the gathering of data: while most other research studies employed a single method and only a few of them two methods (Chan, 2001; Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Chang, 2007), this study aimed to collect triangulated data to gain a representative and complete picture.

Furthermore, reviewing the local literature on learner autonomy reveals that few studies have been done so far on learners' perceptions of autonomy as a key indicator of their readiness. In response to the aforementioned points, I find it useful to briefly outline the background of the EFL

situation in Iran. The arrival of EFL in Iran dates back to the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979) due to the close relationship between Iran and the U.S. Since then, private language schools rapidly increased in number and learning English became a requirement for job vacancies. Moreover, unlike many countries like Hong Kong whose students are taught English from the age of 6, India where children are taught Hindi, English and the regional language, or Japan and China where many of the universities now offer degrees in English, Iran has been reluctant to take this route, largely due to the maintenance of a national unity and identity, especially among the young generation. It seems that Iran follows a contrasting foreign language learning policy, according to which educational policies, decided in advance by the central government, are handed down to lower-level organizations to be carried out (Ghorbani, 2009). This also leads to language being taught more traditionally (Farhady, Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010).

EFL in Iran is taught through a top-down curriculum in which input and output in the classrooms are controlled (Ghorbani, 2009), and the roles of learners have been defined so rigidly (Es-lami R. & Valizadeh, 2004) that incorporating an idea like autonomous learning with its roots in Western culture seems to be a demanding task which require prior preparation on the part of learners. Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) also lamented that the EFL situation in Iran has still not progressed beyond the modern era and that learners are obsessed with acquiring Standard English, imitating native-like accent, and thus alienating themselves from their local culture.

### **2.1 Research questions**

What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of learner autonomy as presented through

- their opinions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities;
- their ability to function autonomously;
- their motivational level; and
- their views about their practice of autonomy-related activities?

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Participants**

A sample of 405 EFL learners participated in this study. The sample included 219 female and 186 male students with an age range of 15–40, studying English at different levels, from elementary to advanced, in the Kish Institute. This institute was established in 1988 in an attempt to start training courses related to the science and technology of maritime fishing. In 1990, English language courses were started and today it has 72 centers in 17 states in Iran. For practical reasons, this study adopted the convenience type of non-probability sampling, as its low cost and ease of use made it a better choice for the researcher. Moreover, the rationale behind choosing this institute was its high reputation for having a wide diversity of learners in terms of proficiency level and age.

### **3.2 Instrumentation**

To answer the research questions, this study adopted a triangulation approach in terms of instrumentation in order to strengthen both the validity and reliability of the findings. It aimed to profit from the depth of qualitative evaluation and the breadth of quantitative instruments. The quantitative data were gathered through a questionnaire, and the qualitative data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews and non-participant class observations.

#### **3.2.1 Questionnaire**

The first instrument was taken from Spratt et al. (2002) and was originally a 52-item questionnaire designed to measure students' readiness for autonomous learning consisting of four parts: the

first part examines the learners' opinions of their responsibility and that of the teacher; the second part focuses on students' views of their abilities to learn autonomously; the third part assesses students' motivation level; and the last part aims to explore students' practice of autonomy inside and outside the classroom. The respondents answered the questionnaire items on a Likert scale (see Appendix A).

In order to ensure the content validity of the instrument, including the relevance and clarity of the items or wording, it was reviewed by experts and their opinions were taken into account; then for ease of reading and to avoid any misunderstanding on the part of the respondents, it was translated into their native language. For the sake of translation fidelity, the Persian version of the questionnaire was given to three colleagues, who were experts in the field, and they were asked to back-translate it to English. Finally, the two versions of the questionnaire were compared by the translation experts and the researcher, and necessary modifications regarding word order, vocabulary, conjunctions, and clause type were applied.

After the revision procedure, the questionnaire was piloted with 50 students who were not among the participants of the main study to probe its reliability. In order to guarantee the clarity of phraseology of the questionnaire, students were asked to comment on any ambiguous items. In the light of their feedback, some questions were reworded to simplify for learners. It was argued that there were overlaps among items in the last part of the original questionnaire, and therefore some similar items were combined, leading to the shorter length of the questionnaire. The piloting procedure also helped the researcher to estimate the amount of time this questionnaire would require when administered to the study sample. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was .82, which is reasonably high.

### **3.2.2 Interview**

The interview was semi-structured in nature and this allowed for more room for participants' answers and is "the richest single source of data" (Gillham, 2000, p. 65). A list of key questions which mirrored the same areas already addressed in the questionnaire was prepared (see Appendix B). The first question aimed at exploring learners' opinions of the roles and responsibilities they consider to be their own or belonging to their teacher. The second question mirrored their perceptions of their motivation level; the third part of the questionnaire which seeks to ascertain learners' decision-making abilities is discussed through the third and fourth questions. As for learning activities, learners' responses to the last part of the questionnaire are addressed mainly through question five. The last question, question six, which arose from learners' feedback and literature (Littlewood, 1996, 2000) takes care of potential factors which help or hinder the practice of autonomy.

The interview was conducted with 72 participants who were chosen randomly from the original sample. Interview data were gathered by note-taking, as this was the most direct and least interfering way of collecting this kind of data, while making interviewees comfortable enough to express themselves. The interview sessions were held in groups usually with 5 learners and they were conducted by the researcher during the learners' break time after or before class in their own classrooms. The interviews were mainly conducted in Persian and were later transcribed and translated into English. However, the researcher randomly asked some participants to answer in English as well, and these answers have been marked by "[sic]".

### **3.2.3 Non-participant observation**

The third instrument used to cross-examine the result of the questionnaire was non-participant observation. In this type of observation, the researcher remains disconnected and adopts a 'fly on the wall' approach. It is more frequently used in quantitative research studies, as it is said to contribute to objectivity (Richards, 2003). In the context of this study, non-participant observation was employed for collecting data on students' classroom behavior. An observation protocol was provided based on the different areas addressed in the questionnaires. It was decided to grade the fre-

quency of activities and behaviors taking place in the classroom on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 showing the lowest and 4 showing the highest frequency of the items (see Appendix C).

### **3.3 Procedure**

Upon verifying the psychometrics of the modified version of the questionnaire through pilot studies, data collection started with the distribution of the revised questionnaire to participants. The questionnaire was administered during class time. Prior to the implementation of data collection, the permission of the institute's head office was obtained through a submission of the proposal and sample questionnaire, interview schedule, and observation protocol.

The questionnaire was administered to the participants by classroom teachers who were briefed on the aim of the study. The respondents were given 15 minutes to answer the questionnaire and subject confidentiality was ensured. Participants were reassured that data collection procedure was for research purposes and not for term evaluation. The semi-structured interviews, then, took place after their class time. In order to encourage them to express themselves, the interviews were conducted at a relaxed pace, in an informal atmosphere and in their mother tongue (i.e. Persian). In some cases, the interviews were audio recorded with the students' permission; however, since some students did not feel comfortable with audio recording, the researcher took notes during the interviews.

For the ease of management and smooth interaction, while attempting to obtain more detailed information, it was decided to assign interviewees to small groups (of five learners each) according to their gender, as classes were gender-segregated. Each group interview took 15-20 minutes according to participants' involvement and interaction. The researcher preserved neutrality by neither accepting nor rejecting interviewees' ideas. Non-participant observations were carried out after the completion of the first two stages (questionnaire and interview). At first, it was decided to observe twenty classes, though, due to institutional constraints, 17 classes were observed. Non-participant observations were conducted in five weeks and the observation procedure took up half of the class time (50 minutes). To avoid any behavioral modifications on the part of the learners and their teacher, they were not informed of the content of the observation protocol. Due to ethical constraints, none of the classroom observations were recorded. As a non-participant observer, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom taking notes about the learners' behavior and performance. These observations enabled the researcher to verify or differentiate the data collected through the questionnaire and interviews.

### **3.4 Design and data analysis**

The design of the study was descriptive. It did not concern the manipulation of variables. Both qualitative and quantitative procedures including questionnaire, interviews, and non-participant observations were exercised to seek learners' perceptions of autonomous learning. All the data were analyzed using SPSS program version 16. In piloting the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was computed to ensure the reliability of the instrument. Descriptive statistics (i.e. frequencies and percentages) were applied to the results of the questionnaire. The collected data from the interviews were analyzed to identify repeated patterns in the interviewees' answers concerning the different parts of the questionnaire. As for the non-participant observations, the number of times features in the protocol occurred was taken into account.

## **4 Results**

Participants' responses to the questionnaire items will be presented in terms of four parts: 1) learners' perceptions of their own responsibilities and those of their teachers, 2) their decision-making abilities, 3) their motivation level, and 4) the use of learning activities. Moreover, questionnaire, interview and observation data are presented in parallel to translate the findings into more understandable, brief and meaningful results.

#### 4.1 Learners' perceptions of their own responsibilities and those of their teachers

In the opening part of the questionnaire, learner participants were asked to respond to eleven items on their perceptions of their teachers' roles and those of their own in the process of language learning. For the sake of easy interpretation, "not at all" and "a little" and also "completely" and "mainly" were merged respectively as "a little" and "completely."

**Table 1. Questionnaire results for participants' perceptions of their own responsibilities and those of their teachers'**

Items	Students' perception of their own responsibilities (%)			Students' perceptions of their teacher's responsibilities (%)		
	A little	Some	Com-pletely	A little	Some	Com-pletely
1. make sure you make progress during lessons	31.8	44.3	23.9	14.2	45.2	40.6
2. make sure you make progress outside the classroom	12.3	29.3	58.4	46.7	37.8	15.6
3. stimulate your interest in learning English	17.9	32.5	49.5	19.8	27.0	53.3
4. identify your weaknesses in English	10.1	67.0	22.9	13.0	23.7	63.3
5. make you work harder	18.9	34.4	46.7	15.5	34.3	50.2
6. decide the objectives of your English course	14.2	36.6	49.2	19.2	35.6	45.2
7. decide what you should learn next in your English class	37.2	44.0	18.8	24.4	31.5	54.1
8. choose what activities to use to learn English in your class	37.3	48.1	14.6	14.2	28.4	47.4
9. choose what materials to use to learn English in your class	47.2	35.6	17.2	17.0	28.3	54.7
10. evaluate your learning	21.5	57.9	20.6	14.3	22.5	63.3
11. decide what you learn outside class	11.6	32.3	56.1	34.2	48.4	17.4

Table 1 shows learners' responses mainly bunched up in the "some" or "completely" part of the scale. Items 3, 5, and 6 show their tendency towards sharing responsibilities with their teachers in these areas:

- Stimulate your interest in learning English (their own = 82.0%, teacher = 80.3%)
- Make you work harder (their own = 81.1%, teacher = 84.5%)
- Decide the objectives of your English course (their own = 85.8%, teacher = 80.8%)

While learners perceived less responsibility for items 1, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10 by choosing the 'a little' or 'some' categories, they put more responsibility on their teachers by choosing the 'some' or 'completely' categories for their teachers:

- Make sure you make progress during the lessons (their own = 76.1%, teacher = 85.8%)
- Identify your weaknesses in English (their own = 89.9%, teacher = 87.0%)
- Decide what you learn next in your English class (their own = 81.2%, teacher = 85.6%)

- Choose what activities to use to learn English in your class (their own = 85.4%, teacher = 85.8%)
- Choose what materials to use to learn English in your class (their own = 82.8%, teacher = 83.0%)
- Evaluate your learning (their own = 79.4%, teacher = 83.0%)

However, as for items 2 and 11, learners revealed their tendency to shoulder more responsibility by choosing 'some' or 'completely' for their own responsibilities, as compared to 'a little' or 'some' for their teachers:

- Make sure you make progress outside the classroom (their own = 87.7%, teacher = 84.5%)
- Decide what you learn outside class (their own = 88.4%, teacher = 82.6%)

These findings reveal that there is more responsibility for the teacher who decides on formal language instruction, while putting less responsibility on learners. The same responsibility pattern was reflected in the interviews in which the interviewees referred to their teacher as the more responsible figure in the classroom, while mentioning some parameters which modified their autonomous behavior. The following was representative of this pattern:

Learner 13: This is the teacher's job to bear responsibility [...] during the process of learning; in fact they are paid to do so.

Learner 72: Teachers have enough experience and expert [sic], while learners have difficulty pinpointing their own learning problems.

Learner 33: As an English learner I don't have any previous autonomous learn [sic].

Learner 4: In our context autonomous learning educational and cultural background [sic] is not provided [...] it seems [sic] a new field for most of us.

Learner 50: When we give our ideas or suggestions in the classroom they may conflict with those of our classmates [sic] that sometimes resulting in our embarrassment though I myself cannot trust my peer [sic] evaluation or correction.

Learner 6: I don't have a clue about my own part in the learning process; it doesn't [sic] even touched by teachers sometimes.

Learner 17: As a learner the main role can be studying and taking care of my classroom assignments. It's the way it is [sic] since I started learning English.

Learner 8: I certainly cannot take care of my own learning; it's the teacher [sic] job to put me on the right track, actually they are taught to do so.

Learner 29: I prefer traditional learning in which [sic] teacher tells us what to do and decides different things in the classroom such as exercises [...]

Learner 10: That's why teachers are for they are highly skill [sic] to do the teaching and I don't think they would be ready to do the other way round.

Learner 41: I've never heard of this (autonomous learning), I don't think [...] it can work in our context. It needs a lot of preparation.

Learner 12: [...] for doing this I think you need to be highly motivated and assertive and not afraid of making mistakes.

Learner 63: It would be crazy, if I am [sic] supposed to accept my learning responsibility I wouldn't come to English class [...] I'm here to be told what to do or not to do for my learning [...] it gives me a sense of security.

Learner 24: The teacher should arouse learners' motivation and inspire them in their learning [...] only in this way they can win their learners' eagerness.

Learner 15: I don't think [sic] teacher can do a lot for me if I'm not interested or active in my classroom, unless she tries to create some encouraging atmosphere in the classroom.

This traditional representation of the teacher's and learner's roles was also perceived during non-participant observations, in which the classroom was controlled by teacher's instructions and the teacher held the responsibility for curriculum content and course outcomes. The large amount of teacher talk time was seen even in advanced level. Everything was decided by teachers (activity type, time, and sitting arrangement), and evaluation sessions were held every 7th or 8th session. However interestingly, learners themselves were reluctant to take part in their learning process by voicing their ideas on the choice of materials, activities or objectives of the course. Learning was competitive, as it was observed in one of the classes that the teacher labeled stronger students as "Top Students." When shifting from their traditional roles, teachers should take care of these points regarding learners' expectations and feedback.

#### 4.2 Learners' perceptions of their decision-making abilities

In order to make evaluation easier, "good" and "very good" and also "poor" and "very poor" categories were combined as "poor" and "good," respectively. In this part, participants' responses mostly gathered under the "ok" heading. For items 13, 15, and 17 regarding the choice of learning activities, learning objectives, and learning materials outside the class, more learners chose the "good" category than the "poor" category. On the other hand, for items 12, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20, and 21, which represent in-class activities and methodological decisions in the classroom, bigger proportion of learners chose the "poor" category (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Questionnaire results for participants' perceptions of their decision-making abilities**

Items	Learners' perceptions of their decision-making abilities		
	Poor %	Ok %	Good %
12. choosing learning activities in class	35.4	45.2	19.4
13. choosing learning activities outside class	22.1	41.1	36.9
14. choosing learning objectives in class	34.2	36.1	29.7
15. choosing learning objectives outside class	25.0	40.0	35.0
16. choosing learning materials in class	37.1	49.7	23.2
17. choosing learning materials outside class	21.2	41.5	37.3
18. evaluating your learning	39.3	39.9	20.8
19. identifying your weaknesses in English	35.2	40.3	24.5
20. deciding what you should learn next in class	34.8	39.9	25.3
21. deciding how long to spend on each activity	32.4	38.2	29.4

When the rationale behind choosing the "ok" heading was explored in the follow-up interviews, participants interpreted this category as being slightly able to manage these activities. They also justified their attitudes towards their abilities by saying that they did not have enough experience and knowledge, and also lacked enough awareness regarding the concept of autonomous learning, much less its practice. They also mentioned it was the teacher's responsibility to make these decisions and that teachers are to guide them in this process. The following is a summary of the participants' views:

Learner 12: I think autonomous learner should have strong motivation but I can [sic] see only a few of my classmates are that motivated.

Learner 39: To be autonomous you need to be [...] highly motivated and behave [sic] in yourself though when I make a mistake in the class I feel embarrassed.

Learner 29: I'm used to face-to-face learning [...] in which my teacher is present in the classroom and



learning is tangible [...]

Learner 41: I didn't have a single clue of what this (autonomous learning) is unless you asked me. To many of us it's a new terminology [...] no ideas.

Learner 1: If I like the subject I try hard otherwise I do enough to get by.

Learner 22: Since I started learning English it has been the teacher who decides on different stuff in the classroom and otherwise can be unusual for me.

Learner 10: [...] Once our teacher sought our opinions on some supplementary book we were lost and nobody talked because we didn't used [sic] to do this.

Learner 59: I think most of learners lack enough ability and willingness to set their own learning objectives.

Learner 8: I should admit that I'm really passive and dependent; when my teacher assigns some individual task I would do it awkwardly without her direct guidance.

Learner 20: I don't think we are knowledge [sic] enough to accompany our teachers in her decision making job, all we know is that she as the teacher knows the best and we try to respect that [...]

Learner 24: It's a matter of having enough capacity to provide feedback on your learning I think for learners in lower levels it just doesn't work.

Learner 6: This kind of decisions are left to teachers to be taken, I remember last term we played some pranks on our teacher but we never got the idea that we could be involved in his class management outline [...] it seems impossible.

The results from the questionnaire and interviews are in line with those from non-participant observations. Most of learners felt reluctant to participate in classroom activities and provide their comments, and they responded, only when their teacher wanted it. They even preferred to be grouped or put in pair work by their teacher rather than choosing their partners on their own. In one class, the teacher sought learners' opinions on some supplementary book to work on in the classroom, but learners did not come up with any ideas. In another class, the teacher started a discussion on some topic, but her effort came to naught, as only a few learners started talking.

### 4.3 Learners' perceptions of their motivational level

The pattern which emerged in this part revealed that majority of the respondents (53.2 %) were motivated, less than a quarter (21.7%) considered themselves as highly motivated and the rest (17.7%) reported that they were slightly motivated, while the last option was selected by only a very small number (1.4%). Unlike for the other parts of the questionnaire, there were 13% missing responses (see Table 3). When it was raised in the interviews, some respondents said they overlooked it, whereas others attributed this to their reluctance to show their lack of motivation.

**Table 3. Questionnaire results for participants' perceptions of their motivational levels**

Level	%
Highly motivated	21.7
Motivated	53.2
Slightly motivated	17.7
Not at all motivated	1.4

The results of the questionnaire were also reflected in the interviews. The interviewees seemed to be instrumentally motivated and were interested to learn English for communicative purposes rather than purely for the structure of the language. Learners mentioned that they liked to have a good command of English for a number of reasons, such as passing university entrance exam,

finding a better job, communicating with their pen-pals, and living in another country. Generally, they considered motivation to play a key role in achieving a high proficiency level in English. The following was what learners mentioned with regard to what drives them to learn English:

Learner 20: I think it's very important to have [sic] good command of English especially nowadays.

Learners 45 & 18: When you master English language you feel accepted by native-speaker community and it can be very important when communication happens.

Learner 41: I'd like to communicate with a native speaker and make friends.

Learner 25: In my case time presses and I think in order to be promoted in my job I need to learn English as soon as possible.

Learner 13: Having a good command of English provides you with more opportunities to find a good job.

Learner 66: I think most of my classmates are here to learn English perfectly [...] I know one of them is immigrating and the other pursuing her educational course abroad, so they need to master speaking.

Learner 19: It seems to me that having [...] degree in English is the best weapon for you to compete in this job-finding battle these days.

The only thing that implicitly showed that students were motivated instrumentally was limited to their classroom behavior, such as copying from the board and occasionally seeking more examples of some grammar point or a new vocabulary item, and how they could use it in the real context. In one class, students asked their teacher how soon they could get a full command of English or when they could sit for some authorized examinations. In another, the class teacher showed her learners how to communicate interactively. It was also observed that most of learners had a clear picture of what they would like to gain through the study of English.

#### 4.4 Learners' perceptions of their activities

A precise review of the results showed some thought-provoking patterns here (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Questionnaire results for participants' perceptions of the use of learning activities**

Items	Often %	Sometimes %	Rarely %	Never %
1. read grammar books on your own	15.8	13.3	41.7	29.2
2. done non-compulsory assignments	16.8	18.6	44.3	20.2
3. read newspapers/ magazines in English	13.3	16.5	37.1	33.1
4. listened to English songs	51.5	32.5	13.1	2.9
5. watched English movies	51.4	27.0	15.1	6.5
6. practiced using English with friends	14.9	18.1	36.6	30.4
7. used the Internet in English	48.2	31.0	11.7	9.1
8. noted down new words/ meanings	35.7	26.3	22.2	15.8

Of the eight outside-class activities, there were three activities which appeared to be more widely practiced, as learners responses mainly gathered under the 'often' or 'sometimes' categories (items 4, 5, 7 and 8):

- Listened to English songs (84.0%)
- Watched English movies (77.4%)
- Used the Internet in English (79.2%)
- Noted down new words/meanings (82.0%)

However the other five activities seemed to be less exercised, as learners mostly picked the 'rarely' or 'never' headings for these learning activities (items 1, 2, 3, and 6):

- Read grammar books on own (80.9%)
- Done non-compulsory assignments (84.5%)
- Read newspapers/magazines in English (70.2%)
- Practiced using English with friends (67.0%)

When the researcher attempted to uncover the reason for the less practiced activities during the interview, three main reasons emerged. There was a general consensus among learners about the lack of motivation and time and, to a lesser extent, the lack of feedback from the teacher for some activities like doing non-compulsory assignments (item 2), or reading newspapers/magazines in English (item 3). They also justified their low uptake of some activities like reading grammar books (item 1) by saying they were not in the habit of studying supplementary materials without their teacher's guidance, since there should be some resource to refer to, when they encountered a problem. Regarding item 6, practicing English with friends, interviewees put the blame on their peers, mentioning that when they planned some time to practice with their friends, learners got cold feet. Their peers invented such excuses as the lack of time and available resources to fall back on or that they had a lot of work to catch up on. The following remarks reflected these results:

Learner 15: I think to learn autonomously you should do a lot of self-study at home such as reading or writing.

Learners 14 & 67: [...] yes always our teacher recommends doing this or that but the thing that matters is lack of enough time.

Learner 8: When I'm doing an exercise I should make sure my teacher is presence [sic] otherwise I feel awkward.

Learners 9 & 12: We are three and we study together but we cannot get many out-of-class activities done as sometimes finding the time that is available for all of three of us [sic] is not possible [...]

Learner 11: To me doing non-compulsory assignment seems useless when there is no grade for the effort you put in that job.

Learner 6: I'm sick of learning those boring grammar points in the classroom let alone doing them in my free time, it's just nonsense. I prefer listening to my favorite songs and memorizing them, I think it helps me a lot with my English.

Learner 9: Most of my classmate [sic] and I take careful heed of internet websites especially those which are related to technical devices [...] a great fun.

Learner 22: I have a thick note book in which I write any new vocab from anywhere, I take my time to put them in order, to me it's the best way not to forget them as you can have some brush-up.

Learners 13 & 43: Every other session we ask our teacher to let us sing or play our favorite song in the classroom, I think it can cheer you up after those boring grammar stuff.

Learner 18: Watching movies is done rarely in our classes but I myself go for it whenever I have time it helps me a lot with my pronunciation and also English culture.

Learner 59: I suppose the main obstacle for me and my classmate is not having time to do out-of-class activities, many of us are school students.

Learner 12: If I find interest in some activity I make sure to do it, to me motivation is the best thing you should have when learn [sic] English.

Learner 39: When you are motivated everything is done much easier though I'm not motivated enough in learning English, I'm really afraid of making a fool of myself in the classroom.

Learner 10: [...] yes it seems a good idea to do self-study but when you problems [sic] or something you cannot work it out the teacher [sic] presence can be really reassuring.

Learner 8: Whenever I decide to practice English with my friends they just behave in a way that I get discouraged though it can be really difficult without your teacher's guidance.

Regarding the highly practiced activities, non-participant observation results parallel those from the interviews and questionnaire. In some classes, learners asked their teacher to voluntarily sing their favorite songs; also, in another class, they made copies of the lyrics and asked their teacher to complete it while listening to the song. Regarding the use of Internet, it was observed that learners downloaded their favorite subjects such as a celebrity's biography or a technology-related article from the Internet and were interested to share it with the rest of the class. As for watching English movies, some classes had a discussion about the movie they had watched a session before and the teacher worked on some idioms extracted from the movie; this part was interestingly more engaging for the learners.

## 5 Discussion

This study investigated EFL learners' perceptions towards practicing autonomy in their learning endeavor. The results from this study extend the existing literature on autonomous learning, particularly concerning attitudes EFL learners' hold in a number of ways. Firstly, it shifts the focus of literature from the tertiary setting towards the EFL context of a professional training institute, which provides high exposure to the English language.

Regarding learners' perceptions of their own responsibilities and those of their teachers', the findings from the analysis of the questionnaire, semi-structured interview and observation data reveal that, in the context of this research, participants generally hold a less positive attitude towards autonomy. They consider their teacher to be a leading figure who is expected to make decisions in most areas of learning while mentioning factors which modify their autonomous behavior. More specifically, the findings show that whereas participants perceive themselves to be mainly responsible for out-of class areas of learning, they see the teacher as more responsible for methodological areas. However, they report their readiness to share responsibility with their teacher in raising their interest in learning English, making them work harder, and deciding the objectives of English course, which echoes the results of other studies (Benson, 2011; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Little, 1991) and reveals that autonomy is materialized through the cooperation of both the teacher and learner.

The teacher can encourage learners to realize their potential by providing them with more interaction time, by pointing out that peer-editing can be constructive rather than critical, and more importantly, by reminding them of the roles they can play in their learning procedure. Learners would be well advised to view the teacher as the last resort to fall back on and to see mistakes not as failures, but as an unavoidable part of the learning process.

The results of the study corroborate those of Spratt et al. (2002), Chan et al. (2002), Yildirim (2008), and Ahmadi (2012), whose findings showed that learners perceived the teacher as more responsible in the same areas discussed above. Nevertheless, Boud (1988) considers learners' capability to hold responsibility for their own learning and not to wait passively to be taught in class to be key characteristics of autonomous learning. Similarly, Allwright (1988) interprets responsibility for second language learning as the competence to detect needs, establish goals, take part in activities, use teachers for the best, stimulate learning opportunities outside the classroom, and periodically assess learning progress. The autonomous behavior pattern which learners display in this study can imply that autonomy is not like a one-size-fits-all cookie-cutter presented in one shape and level for all learners, but that it can be of different degrees, is context-sensitive, and is something that learners respond to differently. Elaborating more on its multi-dimensionality, Nunan (1996) argues:

There are degrees of autonomy, and the extent to which it is feasible or desirable for students to embrace autonomy will depend on a range of factors to do with the personality of the students, their goals in undertaking the study of another language, the philosophy of the institution (if any) providing the instruction, and the cultural context within which the learning takes place. (p. 13)

Some students show autonomous behavior in many contexts, but they do not practice it to the same degree in the various contexts. They can be highly autonomous, partially autonomous or less autonomous. Moreover, Benson (1996) argues: "So far, we have no theory of autonomous language learning [...]. For some, learner autonomy is an ideal state, seldom actually achieved, where students are fully responsible for decisions about their own learning. For others, it represents a set of skills that can be learnt, and for others still, autonomy is an inborn capacity that is suppressed as we go through the processes of institutional education" (p. 28). The aforementioned argument implies that learners are capable of dealing with learning tasks which fit into their language background. In the context of this study, learners appear to switch between autonomous to less autonomous behaviors, as they may find certain learning areas within their grasp, and yet in others, they need their teacher's guidance and feedback. Therefore, their dependence on their teacher should not be interpreted as their lack of autonomy, but as their mindful choice in situations where things are not within their understanding.

Learners' reluctance to perceive themselves as responsible in certain areas of their learning can be attributed to their expectations from their teacher's knowledge and experience, lack of awareness towards the learner autonomy context, having a sense of neutrality towards their learning, and also the constant feedback they receive from their teacher – which by itself can imply a sense that the answer is always provided without the need to do things on their own, and also their passive-oriented cultural and educational background in which high importance is attached to conventional language teaching and learning.

Learners in this study claim to be quite highly motivated or motivated, which unfortunately does not seem to translate to their decision-making abilities or autonomy-related activities. The most likely explanation for this pattern of behavior can be the fact that most learners are extrinsically motivated as they are learning English, say, to get a better job, immigrate to other countries, or for the sake of grades. With respect to decision-making abilities, the results show that learners perceived their capability as poor mainly in in-class activities and more methodical areas in the learning process, which can be accounted for by their lack of knowledge and experience, their passive orientation, and not being provided with enough room to get involved in their learning, as they expect their teachers to play their prescribed roles. The other explanation may be that learners were not presented with enough scaffolding by their teachers, since their teachers might not feel convenient to let learners be involved in decisions made in the classroom (Chan, 2001, 2003). In this light, the findings of the present study lead to the conclusion that autonomous learning may not work in the abstract, and to make it perceptible, teachers might be well-advised to start from the learners themselves and to prepare them through learner training.

The results also reveal that learners did not show autonomous learning behavior, as evidenced by a low frequency of learning activities such as reading grammar books, newspapers, magazines on their own, doing non-compulsory assignments, and practicing English with friends. The same activities were among those less practiced in Yildirim's (2008) study. Interview results show that the lack of motivation, time, facilities, exposure to English out of class, teacher and peer feedback were the main reasons behind the low uptake of these activities.

## 6 Conclusion

In short, the gap between learners' perceived high motivation level to act independently and their actual performance throughout their learning process seems to indicate that EFL learners enjoy a low degree of autonomy and are apparently aiming only to satisfy the prerequisites for passing the course, falling back on superficial learning approaches, which prevent the investment of extra effort for a more proactive rather than reactive way of learning. This might be taken as a kind of survival autonomy.

They have a clear image of their teachers as a leading figure in the classroom with the power to make decisions, give instructions, feed them with input, and, when necessary, encourage them to learn. The findings also detect the areas where learners are ready to bear responsibilities, which, unfortunately, outnumber the areas where learners pass on the responsibilities to their teacher. It

seems to be important to boost learners' confidence level and re-orient their learning approaches towards a more proactive rather than a reactive way of learning.

We suggest that research of this nature can be the starting point to handle the crux of promoting autonomy in the EFL context. Moreover, studying learners' attitudes towards autonomy enable practitioners to look at this construct through learners' eyes and to develop sensitivity to the practicality of the educational means provided to promote it. Furthermore, exploring learners' beliefs facilitate the moderation of the potential mismatch between teachers' meaning and learners' pre-suppositions. As Kumaravadivelu (1991) argues, "the narrower the gap between teachers' intention and students' interpretation, the greater the chances of achieving desired learning goals" (p. 98). Further work can be done to explore other stakeholders' attitudes towards autonomous learning as well.

In order to provide scaffolding for less proactive learners, learner training can be conducted especially for less proficient learners to be familiar with the concept. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Holec (1981) are of the opinion that learner training can help learners to detect and analyse their needs and learning styles, and to be inspired to develop a sense of responsibility. Follow-up research can be set up to investigate potential ways of training learners towards autonomy. Learners need to bridge the gap between their eagerness to learn and reluctance to practice, considering the fact that learning demands a fair amount of all participants' involvement. Exploring their beliefs can also enable them to choose the learning channels through which they can develop a sense of autonomy in their learning.

The whole idea of learning and teaching needs to be revisited and reoriented, and the educational system in Iran needs to take a huge leap towards training learners to become more autonomous and "to give them the ability to help themselves, and to continue to learn independently" (Stern, 1992, p. 258). If we want self-sufficient learners who are capable of evaluating any situation they are faced with and who draw a line at any inconsistencies or shortcomings in the learning environment and society at large, we should realize autonomy in our system.

## 7 Limitations and delimitations

The limitations of this study might be intrinsic to the qualitative approach employed here. To guarantee impartiality, the researcher tried to be critical and reflective in the collection of the study data. Moreover, institutional limitations led to a drop in the number of classes observed, and to follow ethical norms, none of the classes were videotaped during non-participant observations.

The sample and the setting of the study were delimited to an English institute and their learners, as it was the aim of the study to shed more light on such English learning centers. The sample population was delimited to adult learners, as autonomous learning is often practiced at this level (Voller, 1997).

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Learner questionnaire (Spratt et al., 2002)

#### Section 1: Responsibilities

When you're taking English classes, whose responsibilities should it be to:

		Not at all	A little	Some	Mainly	Completely
1. Make sure students make progress during lessons?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
2. Make sure they make progress outside class?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
3. Stimulate their interest in learning English?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
4. Identify their weaknesses in English?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
5. Make them work harder?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
6. Decide the objectives of their English course?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
7. Decide what they should learn next in your English lessons?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
8. Choose what activities to learn English in your English lesson?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
9. Decide how long to spend on each activity in class?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
10. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
11. Evaluate their learning?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
12. Evaluate the course?	Yours					
	The teacher's					
13. Decide what they learn outside class?	Yours					
	The teacher's					

#### Section 2: Abilities

If you have the opportunity how good do you think you would be at:

	Very Poor	Poor	O.K.	Good	Very Good
14. Choose learning activities in class?					
15. Choose learning activities outside class?					
16. Choose learning objectives in class?					
17. Choose learning objectives outside class?					
18. Choose learning materials in class?					
19. Choose learning materials outside class?					
20. Evaluate their learning?					
21. Evaluate the course?					
22. Identify their weaknesses in English?					
23. Decide what they should learn next in your English lessons?					
24. Decide how long to spend on each activity in class?					

**Section 3: Motivation**

25. How would you describe yourself?
- Highly motivated to learn English
  - Well motivated to learn English
  - Motivated to learn English
  - Slightly motivated to learn English
  - Not at all motivated to learn English

**Section 4: Activities**

In the last academic year, how often have you:

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
26. Read grammar books on their own?				
27. Done assignments that are not compulsory?				
28. Noted down new words and their meanings?				
29. Written English letters to pen pals?				
30. Read English notices around them?				
31. Read newspapers in English?				
32. Sent e-mails in English?				
33. Read books or magazines in English?				
34. Watched English TV programs?				
35. Listened to English radio?				
36. Listened to English songs?				
37. Talked to foreigners in English?				
38. Practiced using English with friends?				
39. Done English self-study in group?				
40. Done grammar exercises?				
41. Watched English movies?				
42. Written a diary in English?				
43. Used the internet in English?				
44. Done revision on their own initiative?				
45. Attended a self-study center (e.g. CILL)?				
46. Collected texts in English (articles, brochures, labels, etc.)?				
47. Come to see you about their work?				
48. Asked you questions when they don't understand?				
49. Noted down new information?				
50. Made suggestions to you?				
51. Taken opportunities to speak in English?				
52. Discussed learning problems with classmates?				

**Appendix B: Semi-structured interview schedule**

1. Let's start by discussing the roles you consider for your teacher and yourself during the process of language learning?
2. What is the main factor or factors driving you to learn English?
3. How do you rank your decision-making abilities?
4. Are there any factors which cloud your decision-making abilities?
5. What activities do you do to help you be an autonomous learner? What is the reason behind the low uptake of the less-practiced activities?
6. Are there any factors which help you or prevent you from practicing autonomy?

**Appendix C: Observation protocol**

What I observed	My reflections