The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners Autonomy, Commitment and Writing Ability

Elnaz Masoumzadeh 1 *

1. Head of English Language Department, Bahar-e Zabanamoozan English Language Institute, Ardebil, Iran.
* Corresponding Author’s Email: elnazmasoumzade@gmail.com

Abstract – Among various variables affecting the language learning, autonomy and commitment have important roles. Autonomy as one of the important elements in learning language means the independence and self-confidence of learners in learning and using language. Commitment is the loyalty of learners to the learning, class, teacher and books. This study aims to investigate the relationship between autonomy, commitment and writing ability of university EFL learners. To do so, A sample of 120 was selected randomly from among male and female university students. To collect data, two questionnaires, one for autonomy and one for commitment were employed. The collected data were analyzed by the SPSS software. For evaluating the writing ability of the subjects, learners were supposed to write a paragraph with a similar and specific topic. The writings, then, were evaluated by two raters and inter rater scale was used to validate the result. This study is a correlational study in which both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis are used.

Keywords: learner autonomy, learner commitment, writing ability

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has been a major area of interest in foreign language learning for many years. Many ideas and definitions have been written about what learner autonomy is, the basic elements for promoting it, and its implications for teaching and learning. In Longman dictionary autonomy is defined as “the freedom that a place or an organization has to govern or control itself or independence”, and autonomy is defined as “the ability or opportunity to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else.” According to Benson and Voller (1997, as cited in Naizhao & Yanling 2008, p. 6), the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways: Situations in which learners study entirely on their own; A set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; An inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; The exercise of learners’ responsibility for their own learning; The right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. Autonomy means having the ability to learn independently and having self-confidence to solve your problem related to language in daily life.

In terms of its rationale, claims have been made that it improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and that it allows learners to make best use of learning opportunities in and out
of the classroom. Teachers’ voices have, however, been largely absent from such analyses, and little is actually known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers.

Increasingly the necessity of a global communications dictate that the requirements of education are less focused on the production of individuals with specific skills, and more on lifelong learning and the production of autonomous individuals who are capable of training themselves to meet changing economic needs and circumstances (Benson, 2000, p. 111).

In the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning, as the theory and practice of language teaching enters a new century, the importance of helping students become more autonomous in their learning has become one of its more prominent themes (Benson, 2001, p. 1) and a number of justifications for advocating learner autonomy in language learning have been proposed (Finch, 2000). There are two general arguments in favor of trying to make learners more autonomous.

First, if they are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective, because more personal and focused, than otherwise; in particular, what is learned in educational contexts is more likely to serve learners' wider agendas. Second, if learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is by definition solved; although they may not always feel entirely positive about all aspects of their learning, autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks. In the particular case of second and foreign languages, there is a third argument. Effective communication depends on a complex set of procedural skills that develop only through use; and if language learning depends crucially on language use, learners who enjoy a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment should find it easier than otherwise to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective spontaneous communication depends (Little, 2002).

As Gremmo observes (1995, p. 151), the last 25 years have seen an increasing amount of attention to learner autonomy, self-directed learning, self-access systems and individualized/independent learning in second language learning (e.g. Esch 1994; Cotterall 2000). In other words, learner autonomy is one of the most important issues that determine whether an individual reaches his/her potential or falls short of that potential. The personal and social expectations and socio-economic circumstances into which the learners are born may limit them. Learner autonomy, achieved through learner training and strategy training, which have been described as methods of developing the skills that learners need for autonomy (Benson, 2001, p. 11), above all else, can enable each individual to come to terms with or surpass his/her circumstances.

Almost all research in the field of autonomy is based on the three hypotheses: the nature of autonomy and its components, “the possibility of fostering autonomy among learners and the effectiveness of some approaches to fostering autonomy in terms of language learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 183). Empirical studies on what makes autonomous learning materials effective are scarce (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Lee 1996, p. 167, cf. Wenden 1987b, 1991a; Oxford 1990b), despite the finding that continuing interest in learning depends to a large extent on whether learners find the materials they use interesting and useful (Frankel 1982; Hughes 1982). Benson (2001, p. 189) stated that many advocates for autonomy are concerned primarily
with the ability to learn effectively in terms of personal goals. One of the reasons why the relationship between autonomy and language proficiency has become a critical issue in recent years is that researchers are increasingly beginning to understand that there is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning.

However, to date this relationship has largely been explored at the level of theory, and lacks substantial empirical support. Another reason is that world-wide concern with accountability in education is increasingly obliging teachers to demonstrate the effectiveness of their practices in terms of proficiency gains. For both practical and theoretical reasons, therefore, there is a pressing need for empirical research on the relationship between the development of autonomy and the acquisition of language proficiency.

Commitment is another important issue which is studied and investigated during years in language teaching and learning fields. According to Longman dictionary commitment is the hard work and loyalty that someone gives to an organization, activity or etc. Commitment is a promise to follow a certain course of action or a loyalty to a system of thought and action as it appears in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Mowday, et al (1982) defined commitment as “The relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization.” Commitment is the loyalty of learners to class, learning materials and teacher and totally to learning.

According to Hoy, Tarter and Kottkamp (1991), effective teachers need high level of organizational commitment. This suggests that high level of student’s achievement requires dedicated teachers who contribute effectively. There is no doubt that high level of student’s achievement is strongly related to high level of organizational commitment. According to McNeil et al (1986), commitment has been defined as “the tendency to be involved in positive activities rather than feeling purposeless .In addition, those who are characterized as being committed usually have the ability to set goals for themselves and recognize their own personal value system; On the other hand, good working conditions are very important to elicit their commitment and perform their job properly.” They added that the concept of working conditions deals with organizational effectiveness, environment, climate, and ideology.

Writing ability is one of the major elements in language learning. It is very important for learners how to learn it and how to use it. It is obvious that for learners, writing is a means of recording and reformulating knowledge and developing ideas. It may also be a means of personal discovery, of creating, and of self-expression. Wade (1995, as cited in Al-Hazmi, 2006) persuasively states that writing is an essential ingredient in critical thinking instruction, since it promotes greater self-reflection and the taking of broader perspectives than does oral expression.

Suitable written assignments, she believes, can stimulate classroom writers to enhance their active learning spontaneously. Writing, especially the process approach, is, by nature, a self-critical one. It lends itself to the kind of introspection that would prompt students to reflect on their understanding, and to communicate their feelings about what they know, what they are doing, what they are struggling with, and how they are experiencing their learning (White & McGovern, 1994).
Since learner autonomy is one of the key goals of higher education (Baume, 1992), students should be involved in processes where they can be self-governing, make choices about what is to be learned, and take significant responsibility for their own learning. According to Baume, by being involved in their own learning process, students can connect their beliefs, ideas, and thoughts with the world outside the classroom. In that way, learning becomes lifelong rather than a way of memorization.

Researchers like Little (1991) and Dam (2000) believe that students should take the control of their learning, have a high meta-cognitive awareness in order to address their weaker points easily, and take precautions accordingly to be more successful. Commitment the other factor which will be investigated in this research is the loyalty of learners toward class, teacher and learning. This study aims to investigate the relationship between autonomy and the writing ability of learners and also tries to investigate whether there is relationship between commitment of learners and their writing ability or not.

Among various variables affecting the learning of a language, commitment and autonomy play salient roles. The main objective of the present study is to find out whether there are any relationships between EFL learners' autonomy, their commitment, and their ability in writing skill. Just passing their courses and not learning to be autonomous will not result in what is expected; they need to be autonomous and have self-confidence to promote their level of education in language learning. Besides, what motivates this study is the belief that in order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning, it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use (Holmes & Ramos, 1991).

According to other researches there is a positive relationship between autonomous learners and their language proficiency. So this study tries to find the relationship between commitment, autonomy and writing ability of university students to help them find ways of being autonomous.

Considering the fact that commitment and autonomous learning are two important attributes of a successful educated person, it seems imperative to do a piece of research on the applicability of these two attributes while learning a foreign language. Being autonomous, one may become as an independent learner who can engage more confidently in debates and analyses of the learned materials within his/her various areas. Autonomy and commitment are important factors in language learning. They help learners to improve their learning by using methods of being autonomous. Hence, it is significant to work on the way a learner may provide him/herself with the ability of to be as autonomous as possible and learns to be committed to the class, teacher and learning and their effect on writing ability. The following research questions were posed in order to pursue the objectives of the study:

1. Is there any significant relationship between learner commitment and writing ability of university students EFL learners?

2. Is there any significant relationship between learner autonomy and writing ability of university students EFL learners?
2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

To accomplish the purpose of the research, a sample of 120 university EFL learners from different English writing classes were selected randomly. The sample was composed of both male and female EFL learners. They answered to two questionnaires and wrote a paragraph on a special topic. The research was conducted through quantitative data analysis to examine students’ autonomy and commitment, and examining their writing ability by evaluating written paragraphs, to elicit in-depth data about the relationship between their autonomous learning and commitment with their writing ability.

2.2. Instrumentation

In order to gather the required data, two questionnaires were employed. Learner Autonomy Questionnaire was designed by Chan, et al., (2002). This questionnaire consists of three main sections assessing responsibility, ability, and activity of the students as three main themes representing autonomy. This questionnaire examined the students' autonomy in language learning. The second questionnaire was the commitment Questionnaire validated by Davis (2014) which examined students' commitment to class, teacher and learning. The third part of this study was the writing part to evaluate students' writing ability.

2.3. Procedure

Initially, 120 male and female university EFL learners, who studied English writing in different universities, were selected through convenient sampling. Two questionnaires, one for examining the autonomous English learning of students were employ and the other one for examining the range of students’ commitment toward learning. They answered to these two questionnaires. Then, the third part which was writing a paragraph about a special topic which is selected by researcher. Students supposed to write a paragraph to show their writing ability. Data were analyzed using SPSS software in order to determine the range of autonomy and commitment of learners and writings will be evaluated in inter rater scale by two rater to examine the writing ability of learners. Finally the relationship between autonomy and writing ability of learners will examine and also the relationship between commitment and writing ability as a second research question will examine.

3. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum of the scores of the participants on writing test corrected and rated by two raters, is shown in Table 1 below.
Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the obtained scores on writing test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rater 1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>3.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>3.371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A Pearson-product moment correlation coefficient was performed in order to test the inter-rater reliability of scores on pretest given by two raters in two groups of the study. The results of correlation for recast group, as Table 2 shows, confirmed that there is a significant relationship ($r = 0.98, p < 0.01$) between the scores of pretest given by two raters in recast group. Thus, the inter-rater reliability of scores was acceptable.

Table 2: Inter-rater Reliability of the writing test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pretest Recast (Rater 2)</th>
<th>Pretest R (Rater 2)</th>
<th>Pretest R (Rater 1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.985**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest Recast (Rater 1)</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.985**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The mean (arithmetic average) of two sets of writing scores was calculated and considered for analysis. It is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The mean of the raters on writing test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing (Mean)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>3.325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to answer the first and main research question of the study, to see whether there is any significant relationship between learner commitment and writing ability of university students, a Pearson correlation was performed between EFL learners’ autonomy and their writing scores. Table 4 indicates the results of Pearson correlation.
Table 4: Pearson correlation between EFL learners’ autonomy and writing scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>learner commitment</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.689</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of Pearson correlation \( r = .68, p < .05 \) indicated that there was a significant relationship between learner commitment and writing ability among university EFL learners. Thus the first research question of the study was verified.

In order to investigate the second research question of the study, to find whether there is any significant relationship between learner autonomy and writing ability of university students EFL learners, a Pearson correlation was performed. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Correlation between EFL learners’ autonomy and writing ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Autonomy</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

The results indicated that generally there is a significant and positive relationship \( r = .69, p < .05 \) between Iranian EFL learners' autonomy and their writing ability. Thus, the second research question of the study was verified.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of statistical analyses revealed that there is a significant difference between learner commitment and autonomy and their writing ability. The findings of the present study support those of Freeman (2001) who found that novice and experienced teachers’ needs and attitudes were significantly different from each other. The novice teachers needed more practical experiences of teaching while experienced teachers had sufficient training. The present study had similar findings to those of Freeman’s (2001) study.

The findings of this study were in line with a number of outstanding studies done by Ryan (1997), Nunan (1999), Fenner and Newby (2000) and Benson (2001) who showed that involving students in the decisions such as individual/pair group work, use of materials, type of class activities and type of homework activities provides them with choice of different approaches and understandings to foster learner autonomy.
These findings partially appear to be consistent with those of Collins (1996) and Gilroy (1993) who found that teaching transmitting information as well as preparing students to acquire knowledge on their own is relied on the autonomous teachers. Similarly, Draves (1980) found that only if teachers become self-regulated learners can teacher autonomy and accountability be practiced because one can hardly be autonomous or accountable for one’s own learning if the process is planned and organized by others.

In this respect, the results of this study are in line with those of Balçıkanlı (2010) who investigated student teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy in the Turkish educational context. The overall study findings indicate that student teachers are positive towards the adoption of learner autonomy principles.

The findings of this study contradicted those of Reinders and Lazaro (2011) who found that teachers felt that learners did not understand the importance of developing autonomy, lacked the skills to learn independently, and were not accustomed to being asked to take responsibility for their learning.

The findings of this study developed the idea that students should be involved in decisions on the choice of learning tasks, in line with similar findings of Wenden (1987) and Cohen (1998) who suggested that students need to be encouraged to develop their own strategies in learning a foreign language.

Based on the results of statistical analyses, one conclusion that can be drawn is that most Iranian EFL teachers regarded the learner autonomy. EFL teachers tended to agree on the point that autonomy has significant capability in engaging learners in actual practice of language learning.

One of the most important findings of the study was the overwhelming agreement of teachers with the contribution of the autonomy in helping students for using learning strategies, thinking skills, and problem-solving techniques. The results suggested that the knowledge of autonomy can motivate EFL teachers to become effective in English language classroom and linking the learning to daily life. Therefore, the teacher’s adequate knowledge of autonomy would cause the successful implementation in the language classroom on the strict condition that they refrain from any situational constraints.

REFERENCES


Benson, P. (2001). What is autonomy? Hong Kong: The English Center, the University of Hong Kong.


