

# On The Effect of Self-Motivation Instruction on the Language Learners' Belief on Autonomy

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## Abstract

Dörnyei (2005) proposed a new form of motivation which aims at equipping the learners with a lifelong approach to motivation which is self-induced by the learner and it is not needed for any extrinsic mediation, having understood how to keep yourself motivated. This study was an attempt to find out the effect of self-motivation strategies instruction on the learners' belief on learner autonomy in L2 learning. To find out the possible effect of our independent variable we selected one intermediate level class in grade 2 (25 males) in high school out of the whole population of high school students in west Azerbaijan, Iran, via availability sampling. Having ensured the homogeneity of the class members' English proficiency through Nelson test, we gave them a questionnaire on the learners' belief on autonomy in learning L2 to answer. Then within two months, in a separate class the students were given instructions on how to employ self-motivation strategies while learning English. After two months of instruction, they were given the same questionnaire again to get to know the possible effect of our independent variable. Having analyzed the obtained data in SPSS software, the results showed that our hypothesis was rejected and our null hypothesis was verified.

**Keywords:** Self-motivation, Autonomy, Learner beliefs

## 1. Introduction

Learner Autonomy has been a buzz word in foreign language education in the past decades, especially in relation to lifelong learning skills. It has been the major aim of any educational setting to improve the learners' level of responsibility taking toward their own learning. This has changed the old practices in language learning and has given origin to self-access language learning centers around the world such as the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan, the ASLLC at the Hong Kong

Institute of Education, the SAC at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and ELSAC at the University of Auckland. Nowadays, language teaching is seen as language learning and it has placed the learner as the center of our attention in language learning education.

### *1.1. What is learner autonomy?*

The term learner autonomy for the first time was proposed in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. He defined learner autonomy as the ability to take

charge of one's own learning. Likewise, different other people have provided different definitions touching other aspects of the term autonomy.

David Little (1991) defines it as "essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning."

Leslie Dickinson (1993) puts it as "a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions."

Phil Benson (2001) considers it "as recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems."

One of the key features to consider in defining Learner Autonomy is whether we view it as a means to an end (learning a foreign language) or as an end in itself (making people autonomous learners). These two options do not exclude each other, both of them can be part of our views towards language learning or learning in general.

### ***1.2. Principles of learner autonomy as defined by Frank Lacey (2007) are:***

1. Autonomy means moving the focus from teaching to learning.
2. Autonomy affords maximum possible influence to the learners.
3. Autonomy encourages and needs peer support and cooperation.
4. Autonomy means making use of self/peer assessment.
5. Autonomy requires and ensures 100% differentiation.

It is argued that we can trace the rate of autonomy through the learners' logbooks which are the reliable documentation of learning and they can be important sources of feedback and reflections.

Littlejohn (1985) states that if learners are given an elbow room to feel themselves in the process of decision makings regarding their language competence, it is more likely to add to their enthusiasm about learning.

Little (1991) tended to follow a more psychological trend and privileged the

cognitive processes involved in autonomous study. He defined autonomy as: a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action.

Scharle & Szab (2000) discuss autonomy as a process through three phases: *awareness, change of attitude, and transferring of roles*. Awareness means understanding that learning has to be done by students themselves. It leads towards a change of attitude in students who then assume different roles in the learning process.

Benson (2001) states that "autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times". Benson develops the definition of autonomy associating it with the taking the control of a threefold process: *control over learning management, control over cognitive processes, and control over learning contents*.

Bailly and Ciekanski (2006) point out that learner autonomy refers to various forms of independent or self-directed learning involving limited teacher intervention.

Jacobs and Farrell (2003) suggest that the communicative language teaching (CLT) paradigm shift led to eight major changes in approaches to language teaching/ learning and the most important change is the learner autonomy.

### ***1.3. Characteristics of autonomous learners***

Cotter All (1995) states that when the learners are involved in making choices and decisions about the pace, sequence, mode of instruction, and content of what they are studying, learning is more meaningful and more effective (Moreover, such learners feel more motivated in their learning. Secondly, the practicality emerges from the need to provide innovative language teaching situations where traditional approaches are not practical. Thirdly, the philosophical rationale behind autonomy is the belief that the individual has the right to be free to

make his or her own choices not only in learning a language but also in other areas. Knowles (as cited in Cotter all 1995) has emphasized that it is important to prepare learners for a swiftly changing future, where independence learning will be indispensable for effective functioning in society.

Autonomous learners have some specific characteristic which make them different from non-autonomous learners. Autonomous learners accept responsibility for their own learning and for the learning of group. They tend to negotiate with each other and with their teachers about what is to be learned, when and how. They become actively involved in the management of their learning process and exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.

According to Dickinson (1993) autonomous learners can be characterized in four points:

1. They identify what is going on, in other words what has been taught, in their classes.
2. They are capable of formulating their own learning objectives, in parallel with or even in addition to their teachers.
3. They are able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies
4. They can monitor the effectiveness of their use of strategies and make necessary changes for them.

#### ***1.4. Teachers and learner autonomy***

Teachers are playing a very demanding role through providing assistance and creating room for autonomy development. Little (1995) argues that learner and teacher autonomy are interdependent: we cannot expect a teacher to teach the learners how to handle their own learning independently where the teachers do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner. Teachers must be able to apply to their teaching program self-managing processes that they themselves employ in their own learning.

Teachers need to gain experiences in autonomous skills in their teacher training courses in order to get a positive view of leaner autonomy because the learners are

going to take their teacher as a model for their own learning. Work on learner autonomy is not just limited to the classroom rather out of the classroom there are some practices needed to be done (Little, 1991).

So far different strategies have been employed to have this aim be realized and different papers have tried to explore the effect of various factors on autonomy. Below the brief review of the studies done in this area will be briefed in the review part.

#### ***1.5. What is self-motivation?***

A person's self-concept has traditionally been seen as the summary of the individual's self-knowledge related to how the person views him/ herself at present. In their seminal paper, Markus and Nurius (1986) distinguished between three main types of possible selves:

1. 'Ideal selves' that we would very much like to become
2. 'Selves' that we could become
3. 'Selves' we are afraid of becoming

The ideal or hoped-for selves might include 'the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self', whereas the feared selves could be 'the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self'. While these two extremes are easy to grasp and illustrate, what exactly are the selves of the third type, the 'selves that we could become'? In one sense, this description can be seen as merely a synonym of the generic term 'possible self' (because 'possible' is what 'we can become'), which was surely not the authors' intention.

The ideal self refers to the representation of the attributes that one would ideally like to possess (i.e. representation of hopes, aspirations, or wishes), while the ought self refers to the representation of attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e. representation of someone else's sense of duties, obligations or moral responsibilities) and which therefore may bear little resemblance to one's own desires or wishes.

The primary and obvious prerequisite for the motivational capacity of future self-guides is that 'they need to exist'. It has been observed that people differ in how easily they can generate a successful possible self.

### **Review of related literature**

Abbas Ali Zarei and Nasrin Zarei (2015) in a study investigated the effect of Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level on their motivation and autonomy. They employed 141 English major participants, both male and female, at Imam Khomeini International University and Kar non-profit university in Qazvin, Iran and asked them to fill in two questionnaires on motivation and learner autonomy. Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and an autonomy questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004) were used to assess these variables. Also, the participants' proficiency level was checked using their scores on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP). The collected data were analyzed using the Kruskal-Wallis procedure, and the findings revealed that the students' language proficiency did not influence their motivation and autonomy.

Nuray Okumuş Ceylan (2015) in a study aimed to find out whether training learners on language learning strategies fosters their learner autonomy or not. She carried out at Kocaeli University in 2013- 2014 education year with Prep School students. It is an experimental study in which randomly chosen four experimental and four control groups take part. At the beginning of the fall term, language learning strategies and learner autonomy surveys were conducted as pre- tests to identify students' use of language learning strategies and their level of learner autonomy. Then, the experimental groups were trained on language learning strategies for the two weeks and observed until the end of the first term on their use of the language learning strategies. The control groups did not receive the training. At the end of the first term, language learning

strategies and learner autonomy surveys were conducted as posttests. The literature on language learning strategies in Turkey suggests that employing language learning strategies provides students with the necessary help a teacher can give by making them teachers of their own through making them aware of the language learning process itself and their strengths and weaknesses. As this study concludes the more strategies the students employ or the more frequently more autonomous they might become by starting to shoulder the responsibility of their own learning process.

Chang Shih Chuan (2010) in an experimental study employed two non-English major classes in the experiment. The learner development program lasted for one semester. During the course, the SILL questionnaire and language proficiency test were used and both the methods of interview and classroom observation were employed. Besides, students were asked to write regular journals to keep track of their learning experience. Comparisons were made in the following three aspects: the language performance in the test; a change of learning strategies; stimulation of interest. The results showed that using the content of regular school classroom teaching as a meaningful context for the development of responsibility could not only enhance the learning effect, but also saved time for the optional strategy training. According to the scores in the post-test are concerned, the experimental group had a high mean score than the control group. The two sets of questionnaire results showed that the experimental group benefited from the program by using more learning strategies. Besides, most of the students in the experimental group reported a higher interest in language learning after the experiment. However, the control group showed no great difference in all these aspects.

Cem Balçıklı (2010) in a study in the ELT Department, Gazi University, administered

a questionnaire to 112 student teachers. Twenty volunteer student teachers were interviewed in groups to identify their further general attitudes towards learner autonomy. The overall study findings indicate that student teachers are positive towards the adoption of learner autonomy principles. Most student teachers, however, do not want their future students to take part in the decision making process concerning the time and place of the course and the textbooks to be followed. In light of the findings, teacher educators are recommended to encourage their student teachers to engage in out-of-class tasks; to involve them in decision-making on the learning / teaching processes and to employ portfolios and teacher logs for the development of practical knowledge and thinking operations.

ÉvaIllés (2012) explores the suitability of the learner autonomy perception in successful performance of students in different circumstances. It is argued that the current training-oriented view of learner autonomy in ELT, with its focus on learning processes, should be amended to enable learners to cope with the challenges of communication in the twenty-first century. In this article, an approach that shifts the attention to language use is suggested, where autonomy is developed through tasks and activities that engage learners on their own terms and allow them to effectively exploit their linguistic resources in online negotiation of meaning.

### **Research question**

What is the effect of self-motivation instruction on developing learners' belief on autonomy in L2 learning among the male students at high school level?

### **Significance of the study**

In Iranian educational context, teachers from the very old times have preserved their authorities in the classroom in order not to lose the control of the classroom. Having a well-managed classroom has not been of any disadvantages, however. Learners

have always been dependent on the teachers to teach, to correct, to decide and to make modifications if needed. No part of the educational system has asked for the learners' ideas regarding the content of the books, suitable methodology for teaching, and the assessment procedures. In other words, learners have played no role in any steps of educational system. Hence, Iranian EFL learners know nothing about autonomy and the teachers are afraid of leaving some responsibilities on the learners in the new paradigm of student centered era. This treatment was the first one in this area drawing on the findings of self-motivation principles to give the treatment a more scientific framework.

### **Methodology**

To carry out this study, we selected some Iranian second grade students in high school level for this treatment in availability sampling format, all at the same level of proficiency in English and almost at the same age. Due to some limitations in assigning the participants to different classes we kept the class size intact and in a separate class from English classes, the English teacher provided the learners with autonomy questionnaires (designed specifically for their belief on autonomy in L2 learning) and asked them to choose the best choices indicative of their individual autonomy characteristics. Having obtained the questionnaires result, we entered the data into the SPSS software in the form of pretest data.

Within two months, with the cooperation of the school authorities one separate class was allocated to self-motivation principles instructions. In each session the instructor was giving a lecture on one of the principles of self-motivation and the possible strategies to gain practical experience in the principle. The teacher used to provide the learners with the examples of strategies used by successful learners who had employed those strategies and improved their learning

potentialities. Pictures, videos, and real anecdotes of successful learners were making the best portion of the class instruction. Each session, every individual learner was asked to make some practice on the instructed strategy at home and prepare it for the next session. As an example of a strategy, the participants were asked to make plans for their future and bring it with them to the class to share them with their classmates. The teacher used to ask some learners by random to go to the board and deliver what homework he has prepared. This was a kind of feedback for the teacher regarding the success of his instruction. At the end of the two months, the teacher gave the same autonomy questionnaires to the learners to fill and the obtained result entered the same SPSS software in the form of post-test data. Data analysis was done through SPSS default and the result showed

that the obtained result was not significant to prove our hypothesis. Therefore our null hypothesis was proved meaning that our instruction was not significantly effective in rendering the learners belief toward autonomy in L2 learning.

The items which are described below with the scores obtained, having responded to by the participants in 5 scale Likert format show the exact pre-test and post-test results. It is very interesting and sometimes surprising to notice that in some cases the instructions have affected diverse, that is, it has not improved the learners autonomy rather it has lowered the learners belief in autonomy. It can be either due to the counter effective nature of the instructed strategy or the carelessness of the participants in responding to the questionnaire items (one of the shortcomings of all questionnaires when administered).

**Table 1.** *Item by item analysis of all questionnaire items by the score obtained in Likert 5 scale*

	<b>Items (learners belief on autonomy in l2 learning)</b>	<b>Pre-test ( sum)</b>	<b>Post-test</b>
1	I avoid difficult things when I am studying.	74	80
2	I know how to study languages well.	78	65
3	I know how to study other subjects well.	59	47
4	To learn successfully you need a good teacher	60	36
	I am .....	49	44
5	a. better than average at language learning.		
	b. average at language learning.		
	c. worse than average at language learning		
6	It is important for me to be able to see the progress I make.	38	45
7	I need the teacher to tell me how I am progressing.	79	66
8	I usually know what progress I have made without the teacher telling me.	72	64
9	I find it helpful for the teacher to give me regular tests.	45	43
10	I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned.	67	59
11	I like studying alone.	44	54
	For this question, circle a, b or c	54	51
	I like asking the teacher questions .....		
12	a. often		
	b. sometimes		
	c. never		

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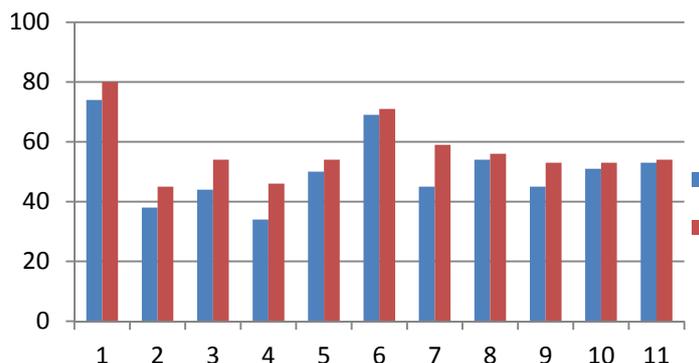
13	I like trying new things out by myself.	67	51
	For this question, circle a, b or c	57	57
	I know which aspects of my English I want to improve .....		
14	a. often		
	b. sometimes		
	c. never		
15	I have been successful in language learning in the past.	67	54
16	I expect to be successful in my language learning in the future.	34	46
17	I have a clear idea of what I need English for.	50	54
18	I like to look for solutions to my problems by myself.	55	46
19	I know when I have made an error in English.	66	58
	For this question, circle a, b or c	53	46
	I check my own writing for errors .....		
20	a. often		
	b. sometimes		
	c. never		
21	Learning a language is very different from learning other subjects.	52	41
	For this question, circle a, b, c, d or e	0	0
	Learning a language is like learning .....		
	a. Mathematics		
22	b. History		
	c. to play the piano		
	d. to ride a bicycle		
	e. none of the above		
	Using English outside the classroom is .....	69	71
	a. very important		
23	b. important		
	c. unimportant		
	d. very unimportant		
	Studying grammar is .....	89	83
	a. very important		
24	b. important		
	c. unimportant		
	d. very unimportant		
25	I like the teacher to set my learning goals.	76	64
26	I like the teacher to tell me what my difficulties are.	45	59
27	I like the teacher to tell me what to do.	57	54
28	The teacher should make me work hard.	54	56
29	I like the teacher to tell me how long I should spend on an activity.	72	63
30	I like the teacher to offer help to me.	45	53
31	The teacher should always explain why we are doing an activity in class.	51	53
	For this question, circle a, b or c	53	54
32	I like to ask the teacher for help .....		
	a. often      b. sometimes      c. never		

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The graphic representation above shows that the bars in the first column have experienced some changes and in the second bar they have grown in magnitude. This means that our treatment has been very much effective in these 11 items. Our self-

motivation instruction has changed the learners' beliefs on these 11 items significantly.

In the table below those items which proved counter effective and lowered the participant's autonomy are given in a separate section for more close considerations.



**Figure 1.** *The graphic representation of the items proved successful in autonomy improvement*

**Table 3.** *Items proved counter effective in this study*

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I know how to study languages well.

I know how to study other subjects well.

To learn successfully you need a good teacher

I am .....

- better than average at language learning.
- average at language learning.
- worse than average at language learning

I need the teacher to tell me how I am progressing.

I usually know what progress I have made without the teacher telling me.

I find it helpful for the teacher to give me regular tests.

I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned.

I like trying new things out by myself.

For this question, circle a, b or c

I know which aspects of my English I want to improve .....

- often
- sometimes
- never

I have been successful in language learning in the past.

I have a clear idea of what I need English for.

I like to look for solutions to my problems by myself.

I know when I have made an error in English.

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For this question, circle a, b or c  
 I check my own writing for errors .....

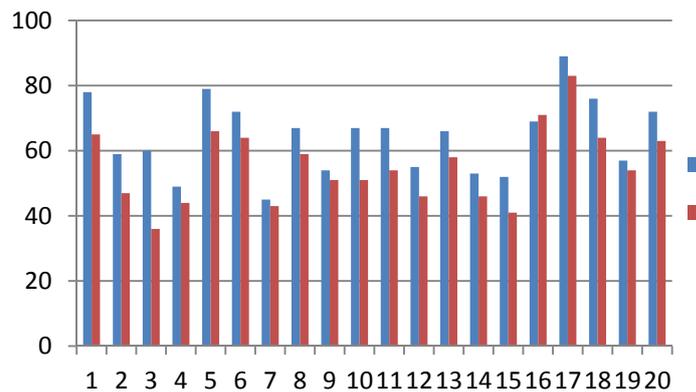
- a. often
- b. sometimes
- c. never

Learning a language is very different from learning other subjects.  
 Studying grammar is .....

- a. very important
- b. important
- c. unimportant
- d. very unimportant

I like the teacher to set my learning goals.  
 I like the teacher to tell me what to do.  
 I like the teacher to tell me how long I should spend on an activity.

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The graphic representation above shows that, the second bars (the posttest bars) are lower than the first bars (pretest bars) in magnitude meaning they have been counter effective. Our treatment has put either bad effect on the learners causing them to make some changes in their beliefs or participants have treated the items superficially.

**Discussion**

In discussing the obtained results, we can see that our instructional strategies in self-motivation have not been able to prove successful in developing the learner’s belief in autonomy in general. Though some particular items exercised improvements individually. These results might lead us to avoid recommending such strategies to language

learners in classroom situations as a tool for autonomy improvements. However, the inherent shortcoming of questionnaires in general where the participants treat the items superficially while responding either in pre-pest or post-test, hinted the authors that such studies need to be administered in an interview format or the participants responses should be verified via empirical evidences and claiming such strategies effective less in autonomy improvement might be a hasty conclusion. To provide strong support for our interpretation, it is better to scrutinize some of the items in close investigation and see what has happened in the process of this treatment.

Having analyzed the data via SPSS using paired sample T-test, it is understood that

some particular students were answering the questionnaires with no care since they had made some changes on their previous mentalities which do not seem to be the logical effect of our treatment. That is to say they had chosen some choices for some items in the post test for which they had chosen a rather reasonable choice in the pre-test questionnaire and in no way can this new choice be marked by any normal person.

For example in item no 2 it says:

\*\*\*\*I know how to study languages.

Some students had chosen the first one (strongly agree) in the pretest questionnaire: however, after the treatment in the posttest questionnaire they had chosen the second one (agree). In reality, it can never happen that some students do unlearning as a result of some treatment whose aim is to enhance the potentiality of the learners in autonomy. The analysis of such kind of choice selection shows that some learners either in the pretest questionnaire or in the posttest questionnaire had chosen some choices with no care. It can be considered as one of the limitations of this paper not to have taken a large number of subjects in this study. That was due to the fixed number of the students in those classes and the school authorities did not allow for any changes in the number of the students in the class. It is important to follow those fixed school regulations. If we had decided to put aside such choices out of the whole data, the number of the subjects would have decreased to lower than 19 and our research would have suffered in terms of generalization. Considering those who had successfully taken part in the treatment and had been more careful in choosing the best choices in both of the questionnaires, we can say that the analyzed data showed a significant effect of self-motivation instruction on gaining autonomy.

It is recommended that in future similar studies the researchers take every possible steps to crosscheck the participant's responses

either by interviewing or validating by the empirical evidences. It is also suggested to do such studies in higher level or different age groups where the learners are able to make plans for themselves in strategy framework and have enough potentiality to make sound decisions regarding their ought to selves.

It is also recommended to carry out such related studies on some female students to check for the effect of gender in this treatment.

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