Iranian EFL Students' Emotional Intelligence and Autonomy in Distance Education

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Abstract

The present study aimed to clarify EFL learners' conceptions of autonomy and whether their autonomy was correlated with their emotional intelligence. The research was carried out with the participation of 110 learners at Distance Education University in Urmia, Iran. Questionnaires were emailed to the participants. Results of statistical analyses revealed substantial correlations between learners' conceptions of autonomy and their emotional intelligence. 'Independence', 'Stress Tolerance', 'Problem-solving', 'Happiness', 'Self-actualization', 'Self-awareness', 'Optimism', 'Self-regard', 'Empathy,' and 'Impulse Control' became the most determining elements of emotional intelligence (EI) for learners. Overall, the findings led the researcher to conclude that learners' EI is a key factor influencing the extent to which they are ready to learn autonomously, and that teachers could therefore strive to ascertain learners' intelligence type before they train them to become autonomous.

Keywords: autonomy, emotional intelligence, learner-centered learning, English as a foreign language (EFL)

1. Introduction

The formation of learners' autonomy – which refers to the ability to manipulate one's own social surroundings and activities –has been generally regarded as the main intention of academic programs. The concept of learner autonomy accompanied with the other individual learner characteristics has been only recently attended as an important area of investigation and discussion (see Luzon, Ruiz-Madrid, & Villanueva, 2010). The results of research in this area can have significant implications for education stakeholders such as theorists, practitioners, school administrators, teachers, and most importantly, the learners. Therefore, from an academic perspective, these issues are brought about by research on the high academic achievement and performance (e.g., Corno, 1992; Zimmerman, 1990) and the popular worth and preference of this specification in learners (e.g., Anderson & Prawat, 1983; Bacon, 1993). The presence of a number of educational mission declarations asserting their attempts and attainments in improving this characteristic in learners also requires the supposition of autonomy for learners. In an educational setting, there are different terms used for the concept of autonomy such as self-managed learning (Greenberg, 1987; Risemberg & Zimmerman, 1992; Wolters, 1998), self-directed learning (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992), self-controlled learning (Anderson & Prawat, 1983; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990), self-initiated learning (Lindner & Harris, 1993; Purdie & Hattie, 1996), self-motivated learning (Alderman, 1999; Ames, 1992; Stipeck, 1993; Young, 2005). Regardless of these various phrases used for the issue of autonomy, only self-regulated learning has gained significance in representing the issue of autonomy in its academic meaning (Boekarts, 2002; Corno, 2001; Zimmerman, 2001).

In addition to the educational facets, there is also another type of autonomy, i.e., personal autonomy, which young persons are encouraged to acquire from home, school, and their work context (Corno, 1992; Greenberg, 1987; Warton & Goodnow, 1991). Such autonomy empowers them to operate and act appropriately in diverse educational and social contexts (Anderson & Prawat, 1983; Greenberg, 1987; Hamilton, 1978). Since classroom is a socially-constructed context, autonomy for learning might encompass factors related to participation in academic learning tasks (Anderson & Prawat, 1983; Hamilton, 1978; Warton & Goodnow, 1991).

According to some researchers, the issue of personal autonomy is found in those persons who are responsible individuals and who can handle their mentality, reflections, and personal lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990;

Greenberg, 1987). This implication of autonomy has been explored by numerous words such as exerting control and personal agency (Anderson & Prawat, 1983; Boekaerts, 1997). Terms such as self-administration (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997), autonomous decision making (Alderman, 1999; Pintrich, 1995), personal self-regulation (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Nota, Soresi, & Zimmerman, 2004; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001), and independence (Greenberg, 1987; Wang & Peverly, 1986) have also been used.

1.1 Learners' Realization of Autonomy for Learning

Learners' own considerations of their degree of autonomy carries importance (Bacon, 1993; Keith et al., 1999) as it leads to the reporting of the learning-related behaviors and attitudes .It also enables teachers to direct their learners towards higher levels of confidence in the classroom (Loughran & Derry, 1997; Warton, 1997). Scholars agree that the association between learners' conceptions of autonomy and their observation of themselves as learners is significant in reaching the goals of education (Bacon, 1993; Keith et al., 1999; Warton, 1997). Despite the research needed in this area and the acknowledgement of the significance of this issues, researchers have largely neglected the identification of learners' conceptions of autonomy.

One of the first and pioneering studies in this respect is the research conducted by Bacon (1993), who observed the classrooms for a long period of time. He identified the following thematic classes as representative of the main elements in learners' conceptions of autonomy for learning: 1) Do the Work: this implies the accomplishment of class learning activities and assignments in the particularly determined time, 2) Obey the Rule: which means paying attention to the rules and codes set by the school and monitored by the teacher such as not talking in the classroom, 3) Pay Attention: this means listening to the teacher and establishing an eye contact with the teacher, 4) Learn or Study: which incorporates the acquisition of the knowledge matter, 5) Try or Make an Effort: this incorporates the students' effort or attempt to accomplish a task, and 6) Responsibility as Something that is Given or Taken: meaning that learners need to gain responsibility by choosing the quantity and quality of their work and the learning of responsibility as bestowed upon the learner by a person or authority.

Sierra (2010) in another recent study investigated the ways learners' conceptions of shared autonomy for learning impact their responses to their academic experience (Study 1) and students' learning outcomes (i.e., course grade) (Study 2). The results of this research indicated that learners' conceptions of shared autonomy for their learning led to encouraging responses towards their experience and an increased degree of learners' comprehension of course materials by means of course letter grades. The findings of this study point to an adoption of a more learner-centered classroom in which collaborative learning can be pursued by requiring learners or learner groups to use technological resources such as digital lecture recordings. The findings of the study requires the selection of a learner-centered classroom in which cooperative learning can be followed by asking learners or learner groups to employ technological resources such as digital lecture recordings.

1.2 Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Traditionally, human understanding, reasoning, judgment, problem-solving ability and success were just viewed through the lens of a single intelligence type, i.e., Intelligence Quotient. In fact, most of the psychologists' work in the realm of intelligence until the 1910s focused on cognitive aspects of human capabilities. Goleman (1995) states that most of the psychologists in the 1910s unanimously agreed on the definition of intelligence in association with only a narrow perspective of a persons's cognitive abilities. These abilities were related to memory, imagination, drawing upon previous knowledge and experience, and picking out the reasonable ways of grappling with problems of life with the final aim of adapting to new situations and circumstances.

The work of Thorndike (1920) in the field of psychology and the social sciences added a new dimension to the contributing axes of intelligence and its impact on related factors in humans' success and development. Thorndike (1920) introduced the concept of social intelligence, stating that social intelligence opened the new horizon of looking at features of intelligence. He defined social intelligence as "the ability to empathize with others and act wisely in human relationships" (p. 29). Gardener's way of looking at intelligence types paved the way for the emergence of the notion of Emotional Intelligence. Drawing on the Gardner's proposed intelligences in general, and interpersonal and intrapersonal types in particular, Mayer and Salovey (1993) introduced their own model of Emotional Intelligence which came to be the base on which other studies were developed.

Bar-On's model (1996) considers five main categories of intelligence: intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. He asserts that people who are emotionally intelligent are successful in managing these five characteristics. According to Bar-On and Parker (2000), emotional-social intelligence is considered as a cross-section of interconnected emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators that conclude how well we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate to them, and cope with

daily demands, challenges and pressures. The emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators included in this wide definition of the construct are based on the 5 meta-factors that were confirmed by a series of second order factor analyses in the development of the Bar-On psychometric measure of this construct. Bar-On's EQ-i (1997) consists of 5 composite scales: intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood. Each of these five scales is composed of specific factors, with a total number of 15 items. These factors are: problem-solving, happiness, independence, stress tolerance, self-actualization, emotional self-awareness, reality testing, interpersonal relationships, optimism, self-regard, impulse control, flexibility, social responsibility, empathy, and assertiveness.

Although emotional intelligence can be identified as one of the contributing factors to the autonomy of the language learners, very few studies have investigated the relationship between the two in general and the specific components in particular. Benson (2006) argues that in language learning, autonomy is related to the ability of processing independently by using language and applying it to communicate individual meanings in authentic contexts (autonomy as a communicator). In the context of classroom organization, it relates to the learners' capacity to be responsible for their own learning and to use relevant strategies (autonomy as a learner). Benson (2006) goes on to argue that autonomy consists of a higher-level purpose in broader contexts. It includes higher generalized autonomy as individuals (autonomy as a person). Benson's classification of autonomy clearly shows the relevance of autonomous behavior to the formation of emotional intelligence, and that these two go hand in hand. Learners who are high in their independent language learning are also successful in the realization and comprehension of their learning abilities, their goal and use of strategies to cope with the challenges of learning a target language. In spite of the significance of this link and the need for the examination of the specific contributing components of EI to learner autonomy, very few studies have been carried out. One study by Buvoltz, Powell, Solan, and Longbotham (2008) investigated the relationship between undergraduate learners' autonomy and its relationship with EI. The study evaluated the relationship with regard to its impact on the learners' retention. 129 college learners were asked to provide answers to an EI self-assessment and an autonomy questionnaire. The results revealed that the two constructs were positively correlated. To answer which components of EI and autonomy could contribute to retention, correlation analyses were conducted. Results indicated that "the impulse control, hope, optimism, self-confidence, adaptability, achievement drive, communication, conflict management, and collaboration competencies associated with EI might contribute to increases in intentions toward LA" (p. 38).

The present study fills the gap in the literature on the role of EI in educating autonomous learners by providing both a more accurate and detailed representation of the EI components and their relationship with autonomy. For this purpose, the following research question was asked:

Is there any significant correlation between Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence (including the components) and their autonomy in distance education?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The study consisted of 110 EFL learners in Distance Education University in Urmia who were selected on the basis of convenience sampling.Since the courses were conducted by distance learning methods, the questionnaires were emailed to the participants. They were told that the questionnaires were for purposes of research only, and, given that their responses were not influential upon their course achievement and scores in any way, they likely accepted it at its face value.

Participants were not told the precise purpose of the study and were assured that the information collected would not impact their course grades. No participants withdrew from the study. Of 125 learners who were contacted via email to fill out the questionnaires, 116 were returned of which 6 did not have complete answers. Therefore, 110 learners were considered as the participants of this study. The demographic information in the beginning of the EI questionnaire indicated that the participants' age ranged from 19 to 27 and there were both male (47%) and female (53%) learners.

2.2 Materials

Bar-On's EQ-i

Bar-On's EQ-i (1997) is a self-report measure of emotionally intelligent behavior that provides an estimate of emotional intelligence, and was used for that purpose. The original questionnaire consists of 133 items and is considered the only questionnaire available meeting high values of psychometric properties (Bar-On, 1997). The questionnaire consists of 5 scales: intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general

mood. Each of these five scales is composed of specific factors, with a total number of 15 items. These factors are: problem-solving, happiness, independence, stress tolerance, self-actualization, emotional self-awareness, reality testing, interpersonal relationships, optimism, self-regard, impulse control, flexibility, social responsibility, empathy, and assertiveness. The EQ questionnaire implemented in the present study included 90 Likert-type items which were translated into participants' native language (Farsi) as was the standardized and validated version of EQ test (Samouei, 2003) .Since the questionnaire was adapted, its reliability was estimated which turned out to be appropriate enough (α = .95) to be utilized in the present study.

2.3 Autonomy Questionnaire

A Likert-type 32-item questionnaire designed by Xu, Peng and Wu (2004) asking about the learners' conceptions of autonomy for learning was used in the present study.The questionnaire was originally written in English, but since it was assumed that students might have different levels of English proficiency, it was translated into Farsi by a native Persian speaker with high English language proficiency. The English version was later on evaluated by an English professor with high English language proficiency to confirm the accuracy of the translation.

2.4 Procedure

Prior to the conduction of the study, a pilot study was carried out to investigate the reliability of the instruments and found a Cronbach alpha of 0.95 and 0.81 for Bar-On's EQ-i and autonomy questionnaires respectively.

As was mentioned previously, the questionnaires were administered to the participants via email and the returned and complete questionnaires were included in this study. It needs to be noted that participants' first language and educational background (as already measured by university entrance examination) were similar.

2.5 Data Analysis

The normal distribution of the scores was tested in terms of skewness and kurtosis by means of the Kolmogrov-Smirnov test. A non-significant result (p> 0.05) in the K-S test indicated normality. A Pearson correlation coefficient was carried out to provide an answer to the research questions of the study.

3. Results

In order to investigate the relationship between participants' emotional intelligence and their autonomy, a Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted for each of the EQ components. The results are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Problem-Solving	22.69	3.00	110
Happiness	23.62	4.62	110
Independence	22.10	4.00	110
Stress Tolerance	18.87	4.28	110
Self-Actualization	23.07	3.99	110
Self-Awareness	22.30	3.86	110
Reality Testing	19.06	3.86	110
Interpersonal Relation	23.93	3.67	110
Optimism	22.57	3.82	110
Self-Regard	22.88	4.03	110
Impulse Control	18.24	5.28	110
Flexibility	19.96	3.29	110
Social Responsibility	24.98	3.26	110
Empathy	24.90	3.27	110
Assertiveness	19.96	4.31	110
Total EQ	329.18	39.16	110
Autonomy	69.56	8.23	110

Table 2. Pearson correlation results for EQ and autonomy

		Autonomy
Problem-Solving	Pearson Correlation	.230*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016
	N	110
Happiness	Pearson Correlation	.200*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.036
	N	110
Independence	Pearson Correlation	.681*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040
	N	110
Stress Tolerance	Pearson Correlation	.247**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009
	N	110
Self-Actualization	Pearson Correlation	.167*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.051
	N	110
Self-Awareness	Pearson Correlation	.196*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040
	N	110
Reality Testing	Pearson Correlation	.163
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.088
	N	110
Interpersonal Relation	Pearson Correlation	.075
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.437
	N	110
Optimism	Pearson Correlation	.173*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.050
	N	110
Self-Regard	Pearson Correlation	.192*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.044
	N	110
Impulse Control	Pearson Correlation	.238*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012
	N	110
Flexibility	Pearson Correlation	.140*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.146
	N	110
Social Responsibility	Pearson Correlation	.156
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.104
	N	110
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.224*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.019
	N	110
Assertiveness	Pearson Correlation	.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.132
	N	110
Total EQ	Pearson Correlation	.260**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006
	N	110

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As Table 2 shows, there is a significant, direct, and positive relationship between participants' autonomy and their problem-solving ($p = .01$, $r = .23$), happiness ($p = .03$, $r = .20$), independence ($p = .04$, $r = .68$), stress tolerance ($p = .009$, $r =. 24$), self-actualization ($p = .05$, $r = .16$), self-awareness ($p = .04$, $r = .19$), optimism ($p = .05$, $r = .17$), self-regard ($p = .04$, $r = .19$), impulse control ($p = .01$, $r = 23$), and empathy ($p = .01$, $r = .22$). Only the independence component of EQ is strongly correlated with the autonomy, with the other components have a weak or moderate positive correlations with autonomy. Moreover, there is also a significant relationship between the total EQ scores and the autonomy of the learners ($p = .006$, $r = .26$).

4. Discussion

The results of the Pearson correlation indicated that the 'Independence' component of EI was the only element strongly related to autonomy, as expected. Other positively correlated elements included 'Stress Tolerance', 'Problem-solving', 'Happiness', 'Self-actualization', 'Self-awareness', 'Optimism', 'Self-regard', 'Empathy,' and 'Impulse Control'. This finding highlights the point that learners' realization and comprehension of their learning abilities (i.e., self-regard, self-actualization, self-awareness), their being positive about their goal (i.e., happiness, optimism, empathy) and their development of strategies to cope with the challenges of learning a target language (i.e., stress tolerance, problem-solving, and impulse control) illuminate that teachers need to work on these areas in order to enhance learners' involvement with learning (Keith et al., 1999; Loughran & Derry, 1997) and their success in general classroom tasks and attitudes (Bacon, 1993; Keith et al., 1999).

Regarding the importance of learners' activities and behaviors, these factors mirror one of the determining aspects of the study experience which education authorities cite about the efficacy of education. It involves encouraging learners to move toward attaining their academic abilities and capacities in a supportive environment where behavior is efficiently managed.

Accordingly, that the learners in this study have been found to score high on the above-mentioned components of EI, confirms previous findings that being an autonomous learner includes the behaviors associated with the investment of effort and active involvement in learning (Keith et al., 1999; Loughran & Derry, 1997; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). This viewpoint strengthens the presumption that being an autonomous learner is closely related to the commitment of ones' self to the tasks and activities assigned by the teacher.

Participants did not find the other statements in the questionnaire as important factors determining one's EI. These factors included: 'reality testing', 'interpersonal relations', 'flexibility,' and 'assertiveness'. The logic behind the non-significant correlation of these elements with autonomy could be that the learners' reality testing, interpersonal skills, flexibility and assertiveness were not related to their autonomous behavior in language learning.

The analysis of the data provided by the autonomy questionnaire showed that participants in the present study have ranked themselves as highly autonomous learners in all of the subscales, and no one of the subscale items was more dominant than the other. In other words, learners identified themselves as 'clearly evaluating their teacher's aims and requirements', 'establishing studying goals and plans', 'implementing learning strategies', 'monitoring strategy use', and 'evaluating English learning process'. This result is opposite that of other researchers who put forward learners' lack of autonomy (Anderson & Prawat, 1983; Bacon, 1993; Younger & Warrington, 2007). Learners' practice of language learning with autonomy is therefore quite naturally related to their emotional intelligence levels.Therefore, it can be inferred that they are positively oriented towards learning English as a foreign language, since they have positive attitudes to their learning experience. This result is in contrast with the findings of other researchers who have identified problems with the negative attitudes of learners towards schools and learning and their social cooperative behaviors (Bacon, 1993; Keith et al., 1999). The inconsistencies pinpointed above between the findings of the present research with those of the other researchers call for further studies useing alternative measurements to evaluate the learners' autonomy for learning such as diaries or observations by the teachers.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present study was an attempt to explore the Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence capacities with regard to their autonomy in learning English as a foreign language. For this purpose, respondents' answers to EI and autonomy questionnaires were examined and the results indicated positive, direct and moderate to strong correlations between EI components and autonomy. The results of the present study can also be employed by practitioners in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) in terms of the significance of learners' independent act of language learning and a global movement towards more learner-centered and distance or online-learning environments, especially in Iran.

These findings that the learners' autonomy was related to their emotional intelligence have important implications for the stakeholders who attempt to create these qualities in learners. Teachers' role in this respect is crucial, since they can either boost or hinder learner autonomy. As Little (2009) rightly asserts , "in autonomy classrooms the target language is the preferred medium of communication, which means that the teacher has to scaffold negotiation with and between learners, insisting that they participate actively in the process" (p. 224). In addition to encouraging the learners to have real opportunities in their individual programs, teachers need to reevaluate their interpersonal relations with them, specifically in relation to how they examine and respond to learners' different behaviors, how they communicate and model to them, and how they use effective language and actions. Reinders (2010) suggests a learner-centered classroom practice which is practical easy to implement in language classrooms to better accommodate learners' autonomy development. Teachers can attempt these stages and future research is motivated to examine the role of this practice in the development of learners' autonomy in Iranian classrooms. The stages of this practice are delineated in Figure 1.

LEARNING STAGES		TEACHER-DIRECTED	LEARNER-DIRECTED
Identifying needs		Placement tests, teacher feedback.	Learner experiences difficulties in using the language.
Setting goals		Determined by the course, relatively fixed.	Contextually determined. Very flexible.
Planning learning		Determined by the teacher. Somewhat flexible.	Contextually determined. Very flexible.
Selecting resources		Provided by teacher.	Self-selection by learner.
Selecting learning strategies		Teacher models and instructions.	Self-selection by learners.
Practice		Exercises and activities provided by teacher.	Implementation (language use) and implementation.
Monitoring progress		Regular classroom feedback and comments on assignments and tasks.	Self-monitoring, peer feedback
Assessment and revision		Tests, curriculum changes	Self-assessment, reflection

Figure 1. Stages in the development of learner autonomy (adopted from Reinders, 2010)

This movement towards an internalization of autonomy for learning calls for a modification of the theory and practice of the current education system in Iran. Such modifications should entail a new approach to the structure of the schools and curriculum, involving a re-examination of the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and a reconsideration of the sole authority of schools and teachers in the identification of what youngsters need to know and how they might come to know it.

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