The Impact of Practicing Autonomy on the Writing Proficiency of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri and Laleh Aeen
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch

The present study examined the impact of practicing autonomy on the writing proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To this end, Preliminary English Test (PET) by Thomas and Sharon (2006) was administered to 92 intermediate language learners as a pre-test. Accordingly, 60 homogeneous learners comprised the research sample. The participants were randomly divided into two similar groups, one as an autonomous group and the other as a non-autonomous group. Each group consisted of 30 learners. The autonomous group practiced autonomy in writing and the non-autonomous group followed a traditional approach to writing. Then, the participants were post-tested on writing. In order to compare the results of the treatment in the autonomous group with the non-autonomous group, t-test was used. The null hypothesis was rejected because the autonomous group outperformed the non-autonomous group.

Key Words: EFL, Autonomy, Writing proficiency

1 Introduction

In the past, the Grammar Translation Method was so prominent in language teaching and learning. Under the influence of this method, teachers had a lot of responsibilities in language teaching. They had the main roles in the classrooms and learners were obedient to their authorities. They did whatever teachers asked them to do. Teachers were providers of knowledge and learners were receivers. Learners had passive roles, were completely dependent on their teachers in the process of language learning and lacked initiative. Classrooms were product-oriented and teacher-centered. Learning was really boring in such classes.

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According to WU Li-li (2008), at the present time, with the language teaching being more and more communication oriented, the traditional classroom teaching is encountering a great challenge and is being substituted by the learner-centered one. The learner-centered approach in EFL has generated the concept of learner autonomy in EFL. Holec (1981, as cited in WU Li-li, 2008, p. 43), one of the earliest supporters of autonomy in language teaching, has described it as the "ability to take care of one's learning". Although different scholars express their dissimilar understanding of the expression, the common agreement on its importance looks extensively admitted. A common argument for justifying learner autonomy both in general education and language learning is that autonomous learners become highly motivated and the autonomy leads to better and more effective work. That is, an extremely motivated learner is more initiative and creative in learning; consequently, they will make the classroom instruction more useful.

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 (cf. White & McGovern, 1994).

2 Writing

According to Brown (2001), trends in the teaching of writing in ESL and other foreign languages have, not astonishingly, coincided with those of other skills. As communicative language teaching collected impetus in the 1980s, teachers learned more and more about how to teach fluency, not just accuracy, how to employ authentic texts and contexts in the classroom, how to center on the aims of linguistic communication, and how to take advantage of learners' intrinsic motives to learn. Those same trends and main beliefs that undergirded them also applied to advances in the teaching of writing in second language contexts.

According to Al-Hazmi (2006), research into EFL writing methodology since the 1980's has overpoweringly supported the process approach to writing. As Asiri (2003, cited in Al-Hazmi, 2006, p. 37) states:

"modern methodologies of teaching writing in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom emphasize co-operative learning between teachers and learners, and emphasize that learners should be given more opportunities to think critically, to initiate learning, and to express themselves."

3 Autonomy

According to Lavasani (2008), second language acquisition antedates institutionalized education by a lot of centuries and even in the contemporary world millions of people carry on to learn second and foreign languages without the advantage of official training. Though there is a great deal that we can learn from their attempts, the theory of autonomy in language learning is fundamentally involved with the systematizing of institutionalized learning. As such, it has a history of about three decades.

According to Benson & 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.

However, no study has yet been conducted on the effect of practicing autonomy on the writing ability of language learners. Therefore, the present study tried to find out the impact of practicing autonomy on the writing proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To achieve the aim of the study the following research question was formulated: Does practicing autonomy have any effects on the writing proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

4 Method

4.1 Participants

Ninety- two female intermediate learners, who were studying English in a language institute in Shiraz, were selected through convenient sampling. In order to homogenize the participants, the writing section of the Preliminary English Test (PET) by Thomas & Sharon (2006), was administered to all the 92 intermediate language learners as a pre-test and merely those students whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean of the

normal distribution curve were chosen for the study. Accordingly, 60 learners constituted the participants in the research. Later, the participants were randomly divided into two similar groups, one as an autonomous group and the other as a non-autonomous group. Each group contained 30 learners.

4.2 Instrumentation

The writing section of the PET, the writing rating scale and some writing tasks were used in this study, which are described below.

4.2.1 The writing section of the Preliminary English Test (PET)

Two writing tests, with similar structure, were conducted to both groups (autonomous and non-autonomous). One of the writing tests was employed to homogenize the participants and also as a pre-test to see how the participants performed at the beginning of the study to be compared to their performance at the end. The second writing test was administered as a post-test to test the null hypothesis of the study. The elicitation techniques accepted for the writing tests were a combination of writing notes, e-mails, responding to an invitation, a letter and story writing. The two writing tests were selected from the writing section of Preliminary English Test (PET) by Thomas & Sharon (2006). Each of them contained 15 items. The participants had one hour and thirty minutes to write each of the writing tests.

4.2.2 The writing rating scale

In order to rate the two writing tests (pre-test and post-test) objectively, a rating scale had to be employed. The 'Writing Scoring Profile' (Khabiri, 2003), was used. This writing scale is divided into five parts, each of which is concerned with one of the significant components of writing ability, namely content, rhetorical features, cohesion, adequacy of vocabulary for purpose, sentence structure, and mechanical accuracy. According to this rating scale, all of the components received a rate from 0 to 3, except for cohesion and mechanical accuracy which received a rate ranging from 0 to 1.

4.3 Procedure

Initially, 92 female intermediate learners, who were studying English in a language institute in Shiraz, were selected through convenient sampling. The writing section of the PET was administered as a pre-test to see how they performed at the beginning of the study to be compared to their performance at the end. The learners had to write a few notes, e-mails, a story and a letter. In order to homogenize the participants, only 60 learners whose scores were

one standard deviation above and below the mean of the normal distribution curve were chosen.

Next, the learners were randomly divided into two similar groups, one as an autonomous group and the other as a non-autonomous group. Each group contained 30 learners. Before starting the treatment the researcher checked the normality of the pretest to see whether the samples were normally distributed at each group or not. As the sample in the pretest was not normal, the parametric tests were not appropriate and the researcher used the non-parametric alternative to the *t*-test which was Mann-Whitney. The writing rating scale taken from the "Writing Scoring Profile" (Khabiri, 2003) was used to rate participants' writings objectively. An experienced language teacher with an MA degree in language teaching co-operated with the researcher. Consequently, two ratings were provided for each participant by the researcher and researcher's colleague. The average score of these two ratings was the final score of each learner. In order to understand whether the ratings allocated by the two raters were consistent or not, a correlation was run between the two raters. Inter- rater reliability was also computed. In this way, the two raters could be certain about their interpretation of the writing scale.

Then, both groups were given the treatment. Some writing tasks were used. Both the autonomous and non-autonomous groups started an English course which lasted for ten weeks (one hour and a half a day, two days a week). Some writing tasks such as writing a composition, picture story writing, describing a view and reporting a book were given to both groups. The autonomous group, which consisted of thirty students, was divided into six groups. Each group contained five students. They worked together in their groups and decided on their favorite subjects, pictures, views and books to write about. The time allotted for this activity was fifteen minutes. The students were assigned thirty minutes to do their writing assignment. They went over the contents of their writing to check the vocabulary and grammatical items. If they had any problems, they would solve them themselves. This activity increased collaborative learning which promoted autonomy. Then, they were assigned five minutes to evaluate and assess their own writing by working cooperatively. To have the peer-correction, the last ten minutes, the paper of each group was distributed randomly among all the six groups. In this way, the teacher felt sure that the learners experienced the sense of autonomy and independence in the groups. At the end of each session, to check each individual's work, the teacher collected all the papers and corrected them, herself.

For the non-autonomous group, which consisted of thirty students, all the mentioned writing tasks were taught. They followed a traditional approach to writing and they did the tasks individually not in groups. The learners were not allowed to choose the topics of the compositions, favorite pictures, views and books to write about. This activity was done by the

teacher. Each learner wrote her own writing. If they had any problems, the teacher solved them. The students were supposed to finish the writing tasks in the period of one hour and a half. Error correction was again done by the teacher and an experienced language teacher with an MA degree in language teaching co-operated with the researcher. Consequently, two ratings were provided for each participant by the researcher and researcher's colleague. The average score of these two ratings was the final score of each learner. In order to understand whether the ratings allocated by the two raters were consistent or not, a correlation was run between the two raters. Inter- rater reliability was also computed. In this way, the two raters could be certain about their interpretation of the writing scale. The tasks which were used in this study were: writing a composition, picture-story writing, describing a view and reporting a book presented in the following sections.

4.3.1 Writing a composition

According to Lavasani (2008), the advantages of this task, the way it was taught to the autonomous group (as described earlier) would be:

- increasing the level of motivation and confidence
- evaluating and assessing their own writing
- practicing learners' independence of the instructor
- increasing collaborative learning (working together to create a product)
- improving writing proficiency of learners

On the other hand, the non-autonomous group would neither work together nor had any choices of selecting the topic of their compositions. They wrote compositions about the topic which was chosen by the researcher. If they had problems, they received help.

4.3.2 Picture story writing

According to Lavasani (2008), the advantages of this task, the way it was taught to the autonomous group (as described earlier) would be:

- stopping learners being afraid of criticism or of exposing themselves
- increasing learners' pace of fluency in writing
- taking charge of their own learning
- encouraging the chance of working together which would promote autonomy
- promoting the sense of creation in learners by setting up their own goals and plans for self-directed learning

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Unlike the autonomous group, the non-autonomous group did not have any choices of selecting pictures. They wrote stories about the pictures that they had been given. They did not work in pairs or groups. Each learner wrote one story independently. The task was completely managed by the researcher to make sure that the element of autonomy was absent. In this task, the stories were corrected after the learners had finished them.

4.3.3 Describing a view

According to Lavasani (2008), the advantages of this task, the way it was taught to the autonomous group (as described earlier) would be:

- increasing learners' involvement in their learning process
- providing chance for the learners to work cooperatively
- practicing depending on themselves and creating different materials
- creating an opportunity for all the learners to improve their writing ability.
- promoting learners' transcendence so they would move beyond classroom and set for their independent learning

On the other hand, in the non-autonomous group they did not have the chance of selecting their favorite views. A view was selected by the researcher and each person was asked to write about it independently.

4.3.4 Reporting a book

According to Lavasani (2008), the advantages of this task, the way it was taught to the autonomous group (as described earlier) would be:

- increasing learners' awareness about learning strategies and objectives
- providing chances for all the learners for being involved in learning
- practicing being independent of their instructor and at the same time improving self –confidence

Unlike the autonomous group, the non-autonomous group did not have the chance of selecting their favorite books. One book which they had recently read was selected for them. She asked them to write the book reports individually. If they had any problems in writing them, they received help. In this way, the task would be done in the absence of autonomy.

Subsequent to the completion of the treatment, another writing test as a post- test with the same structure of the pre-test (a combination of writing notes or e-mails, responding to an invitation and a letter or story writing) was conducted to both groups.

5 Results

Prior to discussing the results, it should be noted that the design of this study was experimental with a pre-test, the treatment for the autonomous (experimental) group which was the writing tasks. They were taught and practiced to them in order to enable them to take charge of their own learning and at the same time develop their autonomy. However, the non-autonomous (control) group practiced the tasks in the traditional way, without learner autonomy. It had also a post-test. The effects of independent variable (practicing autonomy) on the dependent variable (writing proficiency) were tested by the researcher.

5.1 Inter-rater consistency for the pre-test

To check the reliability of the writing section of PET which was used as a pre-test, the researcher calculated the correlation between the two raters.

Table 1. Inter-rater Consistency of the Pre-test

Rater1	Rater2	Correlation
.900(**)	.900(**)	Pearson Correlation
.000	.	Sig. (2-tailed)
92	92	N

As the table shows, the correlation between the two ratings came out to be statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significant (r= 0.90); and when put in the formula given by Henning (1987), the inter-rater reliability (rtt) was found to be 0.94.

5.2 Inter-rater consistency for the post-test

To check the reliability of the writing section of PET which was used as a post-test, the researcher calculated the correlation between the two raters.

Table 2. Inter-rater Consistency for the Post-test

Rater1	Rater2	Correlation
.951(**)	.951(**)	Pearson Correlation
.000	.	Sig. (2-tailed)
60	60	N

As the table shows, the correlation between the two ratings came out to be statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significance (r = 0.95) and when put in the formula given by Henning (1987), the inter-rater reliability (rtt) was found to be 0.97.

5.3 Homogenizing the participants

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of PET

Statistics		
GRADES		
N	Valid	92
	Missing	92
Mean		4.4443
Std. Deviation		2.00706

Regarding the results, the mean of the scores for 92 participants came out to be 4.44 and the standard deviation came out to be 2.007. So, to homogenize the participants those whose scores fell one standard deviation above and below the mean (i.e., between 6.451 and 2.437) out of 10, participated in the study. This resulted in 60 participants who were divided into two groups of autonomous and non-autonomous.

5.4 Normality of the pretest

Table 4. Normality of the Pretest

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
pretest	.114	60	.049	.944	60	.008

Before starting the treatment, the researcher checked the normality of the pretest to see whether the samples were normally distributed at each group or not. According to the table, the results were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level (df = 60 p= 0.008<0.05). As the sample in the pretest was not normal, the parametric tests were not appropriate and the researcher used the non-parametric alternative to the t-test which was Mann-whitney.

5.5 Mann-whitney

Table 5. Mann -Whitney

Ranks					
	CODE	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
GRADES	autonomous	30	30.22	906.50
	non-autonomous	30	30.78	923.50
	Total	60		

According to the table, the results were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level (p= 0.9>0.05). So, there was not a significant difference between the autonomous and non-autonomous groups.

5.6 Normality of the post-test

Table 6. Normality of the Post-test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
total posttest	.082	60	.200[*]	.981	58	.473

Before running the *t*-test, the researcher checked the normality of the post-test to see whether the samples were normally distributed at each group or not. According to the table, the results were statistically significant at the 0.05 level (df = 60 p= 0.473>0.05). As the sample in the post-test was normal, the researcher used *t*-test.

5.7 Independent *t*-test of the post-test

Table 7.Independent t-test of the Post-test

Group Statistics					
	CODE	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
GRADES	autonomous	30	6.1042	1.27648	.23305
	non-autonomous	30	4.0000	1.21103	.22110

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
GRADES	Equal variances assumed	.046	.832	6.550	58	.000	2.1042	.32125	1.46112	2.74721
	Equal variances not assumed			6.550	57.840	.000	2.1042	.32125	1.46108	2.74725

According to table, the results of the *t-* test indicated that at the 0.05 level of significance there was a significant difference between the mean rank of the non-autonomous group and that of the autonomous group on the writing post-test (N1= 30, N2= 30, P=.000 < 0.05). In other words, the writing proficiency of the non-autonomous and autonomous groups differed significantly at the end of the treatment period, (i.e., mean rank of non-autonomous group= 4.00 and mean rank of autonomous group= 6.10).

6 Conclusion

There has recently been a proliferation of studies investigating the impact of autonomy on different fields and language skills (see for example, Murry, 1999; Thang, 2001, 2003 & 2005; Lavasani 2008).

In this study, the impact of practicing autonomy on the writing ability was investigated. The result indicated that practicing autonomy had a significant impact on the writing achievement of the EFL subjects at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The autonomous group outperformed the non-autonomous group.

The result of this study is in accordance with the view that developing some degree of autonomy is essential if learners are to become effective language users (cited in Littlewood, 1996; Nunan, 1995; Breen, 1984). Knowles (1975, as cited in Naizhao & Yanling 2008, p. 13) has stated this point expressively:

> "There is convincing evidence that people, who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught".

However, these findings, of course, were related to the population that the researcher had experimented with, which may not be generalizable to other participants elsewhere.

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Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri
English Language Department
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch
Pardis Sadra, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
E-mail:bagheries@gmail.com
Tel: 00989171140529

Laleh Aeen
English Language Department
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch
Pardis Sadra, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
Email:lmooncute@yahoo.com
Tel: 00989173025722