

EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards Self-Directed Language Learning in Diverse Academic Settings

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Abstract

The current research gathered and compared Iranian instructors' perspectives regarding self-directed language learning in a variety of academic contexts including language institutes, schools and universities. To do this survey-based study, 120 EFL teachers with BA, MA, or PhD degrees between the ages of 23 and 54 from Urmia, West Azarbaijan, were chosen through convenience sampling to participate in this study. The researchers adopted a teacher questionnaire from the questionnaire used by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Camilleri (1999). Based on the findings of current study, it was concluded that most of Iranian EFL teachers have positive and favorable attitudes toward self-directed learning and its different constructs. They mostly even in different educational settings positively stated that learners needed to form specific habits such as studying in library, being provided with opportunities for completing tasks alone and moving education to out of classroom. The extent to which teacher in different settings agreed to them was not statistically different. The results of the current study can help teacher trainers to integrate the self-directed learning into their educational curriculum to encourage teachers to use and implement it.

Key Terms: EFL, self-directed language learning, perceptions, EFL teachers, academic settings

Introduction

Learning English as a second or foreign language is a complex and challenging endeavor that requires significant time and effort. Individuals embarking on this linguistic journey often find themselves faced with numerous obstacles and difficulties. The process of acquiring English proficiency involves mastering vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and language usage, among other skills. As a result, a wide range of approaches, schools of thought, methodologies, and strategies have emerged to address the diverse needs and learning styles of English language learners. Various approaches to teaching and learning English as a second language have been developed over time. These approaches encompass a spectrum of methodologies, ranging from traditional grammar-based instruction to communicative language teaching. Some methodologies emphasize teacher centeredness, while others prioritize learner centeredness. In recent years, they have evolved from an instructor-centered to a student-center or competency-based approach. Students based on this perspective are the key portion and center of the classroom.

According to Khodabandehlou, et.al (2014), the objective of education in the twenty-first century is to generate student-centered learners who will continue to study throughout their lives.

In student-centered education, the learner is expected to be more engaged, innovative, and capable in identifying and solving problems as part of the learning process (Salkhanova, 2016). According to Kurdi (2009), utilizing student-centered education would increase students' motivation to study since they will be in charge of maintaining their own objectives. Self-directed language learning is among the student-centered methodologies which has gained considerable attention among scholars and practitioners. Self-directed learning is classified as a state concept in which outside impacts direct self-direction; a characteristic concept in which innate, personal traits direct the learning; or the interactions between the two in the adult education field, much like the debate over the impact of genetic and environmental factors in the realm of child development (Long, 2000). For almost thirty years, learner autonomy has been recognized as an important notion in the field of EFL learning. Learner autonomy, its reasoning, and its consequences have all been extensively discussed. Rao (2016) argues that if students are given the opportunity to act independently, such as participating in the decision-making process about their language ability, they will be more enthusiastic about their education. It is a must in regular classroom activities. As a result, the instructor can choose from a variety of learning methodologies to assist learners enhance their self-reliance and capacity to study on their own.

Self-directed learning is also known as active learning, self-planned studying, self-regulated learning, independent learning, active learning, cooperative learning, and autonomous learning. The problem with most self-directed learning classifications is that they represent learning as isolated, but self-directed learning is frequently done in collaboration with a variety of individuals such as lecturers, educators, teachers, mentors, resource professionals, and peers. Self-directed learning as a form of autonomous learning is founded on the notions of autonomy and self-reliance. Student independence, according to Hardy-Gould (2013), occurs when learners assume responsibility and ownership for their own acquisition, both in respect to what they acquire and how they acquire it. One of the problems identified is that failure or success in non-autonomous organizational education appears to be dependent on the instructor. The instructor is regarded as the only source of information in the classroom, and students are merely passive and inactive participants in the education process (Liu & Chen, 2015). Hence, they suffer particular shortcomings within the learning process. On the other hand, there exists another problem that some teachers do not trust in other sources of knowledge out of the classroom while others believe in autonomy and self-directed learning hence, tend to apply specific strategies in their classes to guide and lead their students toward developing self-directed learning strategies and skills. In addition, the academic setting i.e. the level and age of teachers affect their perspective on the effectiveness or necessity of self-directed learning strategies on behalf of their learners and themselves. Particularly, in an EFL context like Iran that other sources of learning such as online or computer based ones have recently emerged, different teachers have got different perspectives on self-directed language learning (Farivar & Rahimi, 2015). In their study, Farivar and Rahimi (2015) found a significant discrepancy between language instructors' theoretical perspectives regarding the usefulness of self-directed language learning and their reported classroom practices when looking at inconsistency between instructors' theoretical views and their performance. As a result, the current research will gather and compare Iranian instructors' perspectives regarding self-directed language learning in a variety of academic contexts including language institutes, schools and universities.

The teacher's involvement in student-centered learning is extremely important to adopt in order to fulfill the students' objectives. The method that the instructor uses to ensure that learners are successful in attaining their objectives is to implement appropriate curriculum based on the

students' needs (Ningrum & Sobri, 2015). However, as discussed above, there seems to be varying perspectives among EFL teachers in different language learning settings, hence, regarding the significance of self-directed learning and autonomy in language teaching and learning, teachers' perspective in different academic settings can be collected and reported to pave the way for highlighting the significance of this issue and be a basis for future educational decision making and syllabus design. As a consequence, the instructor may customize approach guidance to the class level and include strategy assistance into lesson plans in a consistent manner, empowering students to take responsibility for their language acquisition (Phipps & Borg, 2009). Regarding the importance of self-directedness in language learning and evaluate teachers' perspective toward this issue, this study aimed to investigate teachers' attitude toward self-directed language learning among their learners and whether they are in favor of this approach or not. In addition, the researchers tried to compare their attitudes in different educational setting i.e. schools, language institutes and university. The Objectives of the Study are as following:

- To investigate EFL teachers' attitude toward self-directed language learning at schools, language institutes and universities.
- To examine the differences between teachers' attitude toward self-directed language learning at different educational contexts.

Method

Design

Based on the purpose of the current study, data was collected without the researchers' involvement via questionnaires. Survey research is defined by Check and Schutt (2012) as "the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions" (p. 160). This kind of study permits the use of several techniques for participant recruitment, data collection, and measurement. Survey research can employ quantitative research techniques (such as using numerically scored items on surveys), qualitative research techniques (such as utilizing open-ended questions), or both (i.e., mixed methods) (Singleton & Straits, 2009).

Participants

The initial sample of the study consisted of 120 EFL teachers including 60 male and 60 female EFL instructors aged 23 to 54. In addition, the participants were with different years of teaching experience in their work place i.e., universities, language institutes, or high schools. The chosen participants were teaching at universities in Urmia (Azad, State, and...universities), schools in District 1 of Urmia, and language institutes in Arad, Jahadeh Daneshghahi, Shokouh, Himora, and other settings in Urmia, West Azarbaijan. Out of 120 teachers, only 102 completed questionnaires as part of the study. Using a convenient sampling technique, instructors with similar mother tongues and cultural backgrounds were chosen as the sample. All of the instructors were from Urmia or had lived in Urmia for more than five years, so they all had the same cultural background, but the sample enjoyed diversity in terms of criteria like language experience, teaching experience, and gender. Azari and Kurdish were the teacher's mother tongues.

Instruments

The following tools were used in this study to achieve its goal of analyzing the attitudes of Iranian male and female EFL teachers regarding their students' self-directed language learning:

A Researcher-Made Demographic Questionnaire

Prior to the main study questionnaire, the researchers developed this questionnaire, which was distributed to the participants. It was utilized to look at the participants' backgrounds in terms of native language, socioeconomic background, teaching experience, years as an instructor, and work environment.

A Questionnaire on Teachers' Perspective toward Learners Self-Directed Language Learning

In order to find out the perceptions of EFL instructors about learners' self-directed learning at language institutes, schools, colleges and universities of Urmia, the researchers have adopted a teacher questionnaire from the questionnaire used by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Camilleri (1999). The questionnaire has focused on the teachers' opinions about learner self-directed language learning eliciting their opinion using 37 items. The statements are in the form of 37 closed-items in a five-point Likert-scale as Strongly agree (5), Agree (4), Unsure (3), Disagree (2), Strongly disagree (1). According to Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), the reported reliability of the questionnaire is .72 which is within desirable range of reliability. The researchers used an online version of the questionnaire which was prepared by her in google forms. The link was sent to all the participants through WhatsApp groups and SMS.

Data Collection Procedures

First, 120 EFL teachers with BA, MA, or PhD degrees were chosen through convenience sampling to participate in this study after obtaining the approval of the institutions, schools, and colleges. All of the participants were made assured that the study would keep their identities confidential and would not make use of any information exposing their identities. Prior to the study, a demographic questionnaire was given to the participants to gather the necessary data on their cultural background, mother language, social background, number of years of teaching experience, and the setting in which they were working at the time to ensure their demographic homogeneity and to spot any significant difference in if any existed. The researchers then created an online version of the Teachers' Perception of Learners' Self-Directed Language Learning Questionnaire in Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was sent to the participants by SMS or WhatsApp groups. The participants were also questioned on how long they had been working as full-time English teachers in order to acquire the necessary information regarding their teaching experience. It's important to note that the entire data collecting procedure took roughly 20 days. Only 102 questionnaires were ultimately received by the researchers, including 46 from female instructors and 56 from male teachers.

Results

Based on the data gathered from the demographic questionnaire given to the participants and the information shown in Table1, it was revealed that the number of male and female teachers from schools, institutes and universities who participated the study were 23, 16, 10 and 15, 24, 14 respectively.

Table 1

The Demographic Information of Participants

Teaching Setting	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Schools	23	15	38
Language institutes	16	24	40
Universities	10	14	24
Total	49	53	102
Percentage	48%	52%	100%

Generally, it was calculated that 48% of the total number participants were male while the other 52% were females. In the rest of data analysis, the participants' answers to the items of the questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale consisting of 37 items covering Social, Technical, Psychological, Political, Cultural, Language proficiency, the Role of Teacher, Learner Centeredness perspectives and perspectives on benefits of Self-directed language learning constructs were analyzed to address the research objectives. The items related to the different aspects of implementing self-directed language learning fall into these categories hence, the analyses were done using these categories to reveal teachers' attitudes toward efficiency, feasibility and effect of this method from social, psychological, technical, etc. The following Scale Range was used for analyzing the data.

Table 2

The Scale Range Used for Analyzing the Data

Scale	Range
Strongly agree	4.21 - 5
Agree	3.41 - 4.2
Unsure	2.61 - 3.4
Disagree	1.81 - 2.6
Strongly disagree	1 - 1.80

In order to investigate the EFL teachers' attitudes toward self-directed language learning at schools, their answers to the items in the implemented questionnaire were analyzed regarding the frequency of the items and percentages. Later, the researchers used the mean score of the answers given to each item of the questionnaire to check the general perception of the school teachers to the mentioned constructs of the self-directed language learning. The results are abridged in Table 3.

Table 3

The Descriptive Analysis of the Answers Given to Items by the School Teachers

School Teachers					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Technical	38	2.25	5.00	3.6842	.60873
Psychological	38	2.00	4.80	3.5368	.66431
Social	38	2.60	5.00	3.7632	.67200
Political	38	2.20	5.00	3.6789	.68108
Teacher	38	1.50	5.00	3.6382	.85364
Culture	38	2.00	5.00	3.5658	.92394
Age	38	2.00	5.00	3.5526	.79893
Proficiency	38	2.00	5.00	3.5175	.77768
Learner	38	2.50	5.00	3.9737	.79651
Benefit	38	1.67	4.67	3.3421	.76125
Valid N (listwise)	38				

According to the results shown in Table 3 and considering the reference ranges, it can be concluded that overall perception of the school teachers towards learners self-directed language learning is positive and favorable. Accordingly, examining the results meticulously, it is inferred that in the case of analyzing each construct, teachers' perceptions were different but positive and favorable. It means that mostly they agreed to the constructs. However, only regarding the benefits of self-directed learning to language learning, the teachers generally were unsure and had a neutral perspective. A similar procedure was taken to check the general perception of the institute teachers toward the mentioned constructs of the self-directed language learning. The results are abridged in Table 4.

Table 4

The Descriptive Analysis of the Answers Given to Items by the Institute Teachers

Institute Teachers					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Technical	40	2.50	4.75	3.7875	.64686
Psychological	40	2.20	4.60	3.5500	.68948
Social	40	2.00	5.00	3.6400	.70921
Political	40	2.20	4.60	3.4600	.64562
Teacher	40	1.00	4.75	3.4750	.91252
Culture	40	2.00	5.00	3.4500	.67748

Age	40	1.67	5.00	3.4417	.82132
Proficiency	40	1.00	4.67	3.3417	.77529
Learner	40	2.00	5.00	3.8375	.81953
Benefit	40	1.33	4.67	3.2667	.78519
Valid N (listwise)	40				

Comparing the mean scores of the answers to the used criteria, it was seen that all the participants' teachers in institutes had a positive and favorable perspectives toward the self-directed learning constructs except for the effect of proficiency on development of self-directed learning and the benefits of self-directed learning on language learning. It is concluded that institute teachers generally were not sure about the benefits their learners can get from the self-directed learning approach in learning languages, they also showed a neutral positions and perspective toward the feasibility of developing self-directed learning to different proficiency level as well as its effect on developing this ability. Table 5 shows the results regarding universities.

Table 5

The Descriptive Analysis of the Answers Given to Items by the University Teachers

University Teachers

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Technical	24	2.75	4.50	3.5625	.55291
Psychological	24	1.80	4.80	3.3667	.78832
Social	24	2.00	4.60	3.3000	.68271
Political	24	2.00	3.80	3.0167	.45269
Teacher	24	2.25	4.00	3.2604	.55892
Culture	24	2.00	4.00	3.1667	.58359
Age	24	1.67	4.33	3.0278	.76718
Proficiency	24	2.33	4.33	3.1389	.57245
Learner	24	2.50	5.00	3.6875	.73444
Benefit	24	1.67	4.00	2.9306	.52914
Valid N (listwise)	24				

According to the results shown in Table 5. and considering the reference ranges, it was concluded that overall perception of the university teachers towards learners self-directed language learning was neutral and unsure except for psychological factor, learner centeredness and technical constructs. Accordingly, it is inferred that in the case of analyzing each construct, teachers' perceptions were negative regarding the benefits of self-directed learning to language

learning, the teachers generally disagreed to the point that self-directed learning can help language learning of the students.

As the other objective of the study, the answers of teachers in different educational settings were compared to find out whether teacher teaching in different academic setting have similar or different perceptions. To do so, the normality of the data was examined using a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Checking the Normality of Mean Scores

		Technical	Psychological	Social	Political	Role of Teacher	Culture	Age	Proficiency	Learner-centeredness	Benefit of SDLL
N		102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102
Normal Parameters	Mean	3.6961	3.5020	3.6059	3.4373	3.4853	3.4265	3.3856	3.3595	3.8529	3.2157
	Std. Deviation	.61200	.70176	.70554	.66466	.82491	.76881	.81884	.74119	.79163	.73517
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.151	.096	.094	.090	.103	.191	.134	.113	.156	.133
	Positive	.090	.077	.080	.090	.078	.191	.104	.093	.104	.133
	Negative	-.151	-.096	-.094	-.080	-.103	-.152	-.134	-.113	-.156	-.100
Test Statistic		.151	.096	.094	.090	.103	.191	.134	.113	.156	.133
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.000 ^c	.022 ^c	.026 ^c	.039 ^c	.009 ^c	.000 ^c	.000 ^c	.003 ^c	.000 ^c	.000 ^c

Based on the results shown in Table 6. and considering the significance level set for this study, it was concluded that all the score sets deviated from a normal distribution since the significance levels all were lower than .05. therefore, the researchers used Kruskal–Wallis one-way analysis of variance as the nonparametric equivalent of ANOVA. The results are abridged in Table 7.

Table 7

Checking the Differences among the Groups of Teachers in Each Construct

	Technical	Psychological	Social	Political	Role of Teacher	Culture	Age	Proficiency	Learner - centeredness	Benefit of SDLL
Kruskal-Wallis H	2.455	1.056	5.996	15.055	4.152	3.354	6.158	4.353	2.120	4.902
df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.293	.590	.060	.001	.125	.187	.046	.113	.346	.086

Investigating the existence of any difference among the perception of teachers from different academic settings regarding the constructs of self-directed learning revealed that all three groups had similar perceptions toward the different constructs of self-directed language learning. However, the results showed that teachers had different perceptions toward the role and impact of political and age factors on the process of developing it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study revealed that Iranian EFL teachers generally hold positive attitudes towards self-directed learning and its various components. They emphasized the importance of cultivating specific habits among learners, such as studying in the library and engaging in independent task completion outside the classroom. These attitudes were consistent across different educational settings, with no significant statistical differences observed.

Moreover, the study demonstrated a united agreement among teachers from diverse educational settings regarding the positive impact of psychological factors, including self-confidence, self-directedness, self-monitoring, and motivation, on the development of self-directed learning. Enhancing these factors was seen as crucial for facilitating the implementation and improvement of self-directed learning. However, all participants acknowledged that despite the need to reduce dependency on teachers and shift away from teacher-centered instruction, the involvement of teachers remained indispensable in the process. It was widely recognized that implementing this approach required the active participation and guidance of teachers. Furthermore, when comparing teachers' perceptions, notable variations were found in the extent and degree of agreement regarding the mastery of self-directed language learning by learners of different ages, be it young or adult. Similarly, differences in teachers' perceptions towards the political construct were also observed.

These findings highlight the importance of recognizing teachers as key players in fostering self-directed learning while acknowledging the need to empower learners to take control of their own learning processes. The recognition that implementing self-directed learning requires a reduction in dependency on teachers and a move away from teacher-centered

instruction reflects a shift towards learner-centered pedagogy. However, the teachers' acknowledgment of the continued need for teacher involvement indicates a balanced perspective. This suggests that teachers see themselves as facilitators and guides in the self-directed learning process, providing support and guidance, when necessary, rather than completely relinquishing their role.

The variations observed in teachers' perceptions regarding the mastery of self-directed language learning by learners of different ages highlight the need for further investigation and understanding. Factors such as prior experiences, cultural beliefs, and educational contexts may contribute to these differences. Addressing these variations and tailoring approaches to meet the needs of learners of different age groups would be valuable for effective implementation of self-directed learning practices. The differences in teachers' perceptions towards the political construct indicate that the integration of self-directed learning may be influenced by broader socio-political factors. It suggests that educational policies and cultural factors may shape teachers' perspectives and readiness to adopt self-directed learning approaches. Understanding these contextual factors is crucial for successful implementation and sustainability of self-directed learning initiatives.

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