

On the Relationship between Learner Autonomy and Language Learning Strategies among Iranian EFL Students

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Abstract – The present study was an attempt to investigate the level of autonomy and gender differences in language learning strategies among Iranian EFL students. Furthermore, it tried to explore the relationship between students' autonomy and learning strategy use. To achieve this purpose, 150 university students studying English at Ilam Islamic Azad University, Ilam Payam-e-Noor University, and Ilam State University were addressed. To this end, the instruments used to gather data were Learner Autonomy questionnaire (Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan, 2002) and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990). Descriptive statistics revealed that the students showed to have autonomy in language learning and perceived themselves capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. The results also showed statistically significant differences between males and females in their learning strategy use, with female subjects employing learning strategies more frequently compared to their male counterparts. The results of Pearson product-moment correlation indicated that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between autonomy and language learning strategies.

Keywords: learner autonomy, language learning strategies, gender, strategy inventory of language learning (SILL).

I. INTRODUCTION

Since language learning has found a fundamental and significant place in people's lives, learner autonomy has been the major focus of many researchers. In recent years, learner autonomy has played an important role in language learning and teaching process with the shift from teacher-based learning to learner-based learning. One of the main principles of learner autonomy is moving the focus from teaching to learning and from the teacher to the learner. This shift of responsibility from teachers to learners is generally referred to as "learner autonomy" (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2007). In the traditional classrooms, the teacher was the authority and the supplier of knowledge who decided what to learn and how to learn and students were inactive and passive receiver of information (Tudor, 1993). Since the 1970s, learner autonomy slowly came into existence that became the focus of many educational studies and stimulated many researchers to try to achieve a better realization of the concept and theory of learner autonomy (Bocanegra & Haidi, 1999).

Defining learner autonomy is not simple as there are many different definitions of the term. the concept of learner autonomy was originally defined in the early 1980s by Henry

Holec, who is perceived as father of learner autonomy, "to take charge of one's own learning", which he then specifies as "to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (p.43). He sees ability and responsibility as operating in five main areas: "determining objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating what has happened"(1981, p.3). Benson (2001) defines autonomy as "it is the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 147). According to Little (1991), autonomy is "essentially the matter of the learners' psychological relation to the process and content of learning, a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision- making and independent action" (p.4). To develop this point, Littlewood (1996) defined autonomy as "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently". According to Dickinson (1995), autonomy is "An attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning" (p.167). Similarly, Dam defines autonomy as "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person" (1990, p.102).

In the field of language learning and teaching, many researchers have been trying to discover and understand why some learners are more proficient and successful in learning than others and to investigate the reasons of their failure. They have contributed this inequality in students' language proficiency to some factors like learners' level of autonomy, language learning styles and strategies, motivation, age, gender and so on. According to Benson (2003) and Little (1991), students who think and work strategically have more willingness and motivation to learn and have more self confidence in their own ability to learn language. As Quinn (1974) proposed, the process of language teaching and learning should be autonomous because language learning is a life-long effort and process. Students should learn how to become autonomous and take the responsibility of their learning since they will not have access to their teachers helping them during their life (as cited in Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci, 2011). According to Cottrel (2000), teachers should encourage their students to become "an author of one's own world" (Pennycook, 1997). According to Weaver and Cohen (1994), learners should be encouraged to "learn how to learn" and "learn how to use" a foreign language. This implies that students should be assisted to develop the ability to take charge and control their own learning and to learn to employ the most effective learning strategies order to maintain their learning process autonomously outside the classroom context without teachers' help.

Teachers play a significant role in moving their students towards autonomy and should perform their role differently if intending to successfully promote their students' autonomy in the process of language learning. In other words, learner autonomy as precondition of effective learning mostly depends on teachers' assistance and guidance. According to Thanasoulas (2000), autonomous learning is not "teacher-less learning". As Sheerin (1997, cited in Thanasoulas, 2000) states, "teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat" (p.33). Furthermore, as Kumaravadivelu (2006) claims, learners cannot achieve autonomy by working alone; they need the help and cooperation of their teachers. According to La Ganza (2008), "learner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner

and the teacher" (p.65), i.e. without teachers' guide "the whole process will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder" (Yan, 2012, p. 559). In an autonomous classroom, the teacher role is as a guide, facilitator and counselor that should help students to accept responsibility for their own learning and help them to be involved in setting their own goals, planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning and also assessing their progress (Voller, 1997).

As the saying goes: you can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. Applied to language learning and teaching, this can be interpreted to mean that teachers can provide all the necessary information, but learning can only happen if learners want to learn. Like the horse which must do the drinking itself, even with the best teachers and techniques, only students themselves can actually do the learning. According to Nyikos and Oxford (1993), "learning begins with the learner" (p.11). And, in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they need to understand and accept the fact that success in learning depends on themselves rather than their teachers or others.

There are different definitions of autonomous learners provided by various scholars and authors. Thanasoulas (2000) describes an autonomous learner as "one who should have insights into his/her learning styles and strategies, take an active approach to the learning task at hand, be willing to take risks (to communicate in the target language at all costs), complete homework whether or not it is assessed and place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy" (p.32). Holec (1987) describes good learners as "learners who are capable of assuming the role of manager of their learning. They know how to make all the decisions involved. In other words, they know how to learn" (p.147).

Language learning styles and strategies are among the main features that help determine how and how well – our students learn a second or foreign language (Oxford, 2003). Language learning strategies are defined by Oxford and Nyikos (1989) as "operations used by learners to aid the acquisition, storage, and retrieval and use of information" (p.291). This definition is further expanded to include "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations" (ibid, p. 8). According to Wenden (1987), "learning strategies are the various operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning" (pp. 7-8). When students face with a problem in learning, they make use of different resources to solve that problem. These different resources are considered as Language Learning Strategies. As evidence shows, there has been a growing tendency among scholars and researchers to find out what kinds of strategies learners use to learn second or foreign language and the major focus of most of the studies has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language" (Wenden and Rubin, 1987, p. 19). The fact that some students are better than others in learning a second or foreign language stimulated many researchers to try to investigate the characteristics of good language learners and recognize those learning strategies they use in order to help the poor students.

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) have been classified by various scholars including Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley et al. 1985; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992; Ellis, 1994, etc. Accordingly, Rubin (1987) classified learning strategies into learning strategies,

communication strategies, and social strategies. Oxford divides Language Learning Strategies into six categories including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The present study has been conducted on the basis of Oxford's classification because it is comprehensive, detailed and systematic (Vidal, 2002).

There is an old proverb which states, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime"(Wenden, 1985). This proverb taken from Chinese culture is related to language learning strategy use. Learning strategies are seen as important and vital factors in the promotion and enhancement of learner autonomy because the use of appropriate strategies allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning (Dickinson, 1987). Cohen (2007) argued that language learning and language use strategies can have a major role in helping shift the responsibility from teachers to learners. Rubin (1987) claimed that "students who use effective strategies are better able to work outside the classroom by themselves, once the teacher is not around to direct them or provide them with input" (p. 17). Learning strategies are known as signs of learner autonomy and play a significant role in promoting learner autonomy and consequently effective learning by helping the learners to employ learning strategies to work outside the classroom by themselves when not having access to their teachers to help them.

A. Statement of the problem

Learner autonomy and language learning strategies play significant role in language learning by making the learners take responsibility and make decisions for their own learning. Though there are a limited number of studies conducted on investigating learner autonomy and language learning strategy separately and also examining learner autonomy with other variables, there is an insufficient number of empirical research on the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies. Due to the importance of the topic and paucity of available evidence regarding learner autonomy and learning strategy in Iranian context, the present study intended to focus on this neglected area of research by investigating the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies among Iranian EFL university students.

B. Research Questions

1. How autonomous are the Iranian EFL university students in language learning?
2. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL male and female students in terms of their language learning strategy use?
3. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' autonomy and their language learning strategy use?

II. MEHTODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of the study comprised 150 Iranian EFL male and female undergraduate and M.A students majoring English Language Teaching, English Language Translation and English Language Literature. The sampled subjects were selected from Ilam Islamic Azad University, Ilam Payam-e-Noor University, and Ilam State University. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 40 with the mean of 24.160. The participants of this study came from different regions of the country and had different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, distinct dialects and native languages including Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, Lak and Lor.

B. Instrumentation

The data were gathered through administering two questionnaires.

1. *Learner Autonomy Questionnaire*

In order to evaluate the participants' level of autonomy, a questionnaire of autonomy developed by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) who state that the questionnaire design is strongly influenced by Holec's definition of autonomy, was administered. The questionnaire includes 52 items consisting of four sections (responsibility, ability, motivation and autonomous activities inside and outside of the class). The first section (13 items) focuses on the students' views of their responsibilities and their teachers' responsibilities; the second section (11 items) focuses on the students' views of their ability to perform learning autonomously; the third section (1 item) aims to measure the levels of student motivation to learn English. Finally, the fourth section (27 items) focuses on the students' autonomous activities both inside and outside the classroom. Since this questionnaire is designed for English native speakers, the Persian translated version of the questionnaire which had been prepared by Sheikhy Behdani (2011) was used. The reliability index of the questionnaire computed in Cronbach alpha turned out to be 0.83.

2. Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

In order to measure the strategy use of the subjects, Oxford's (1990b) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, version 7.0) was used. The SILL is a self-reporting questionnaire used for assessing the frequency of use of LLS by students. The SILL uses a 5-point Likert scale of never true of me, usually not true of me, somewhat true of me, usually true of me, and always true of me. This questionnaire consists of 50 items in six categories including memory (9 items), cognitive (14 items), compensation (6 items), metacognitive (9 items), affective (6 items) and social strategies (6 items).

The SILL was chosen for this study because it is "perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date" (Ellis, 1994, p. 539) and has been checked for reliability and validated in multiple ways (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The SILL content

validity is .99 based on independent raters (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). As for its reliability the Cronbach's alpha was used. The reliability estimates turned out to be 0.74, 0.66, 0.69, 0.75, 0.71, and 0.68 respectively, for the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The Persian translation of SILL by Borzabadi (2000) was used in this study in order to eliminate any ambiguity or question.

C. Procedure

A brief introductory session with the participants was arranged. Students were informed that their performance on the test was voluntary and would not affect their final course results. They were ensured that their identities would be anonymous and the results would be kept confidential. The participants were asked to answer the questionnaires truthfully. After giving an oral instruction on how to perform on the questionnaires, each student received a package containing the Persian translated version of the two questionnaires, Autonomy questionnaire and language learning strategies questionnaire. There was no limit time to answer the questions and the researcher attended there to answer any questions or ambiguities.

D. Data Analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 16 (Released, 2007). Quantitative data analyses were performed in this study. The quantitative analysis involved the descriptive statistics including the mean and standard deviation of students' level of learner autonomy and their language learning strategy use was calculated. Also, Pearson Product-Moment correlation was run to determine any significant relationship between learners' level of autonomy and their use of language learning strategies. Moreover, in order to determine any differences between male and female learners in terms of their language learning strategy use, an independent sample t-test was conducted.

III. RESULTS

A. Research Question One

In order to answer the first research question which was "How autonomous are the Iranian EFL university students in language learning?", descriptive statistics were calculated.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Autonomy

Autonomy	Mean	Std. Deviation
	169.506	26.357

To further and deeper investigate the participants' Autonomy level, descriptive statistics was conducted again this time by addressing the components of Autonomy (see figure 1).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of components of Autonomy

Autonomy Components	M	SD
Responsibilities	52.08	8.253
Abilities	41.26	7.353
Motivation	4.060	.9285
Activities	72.16	19.891

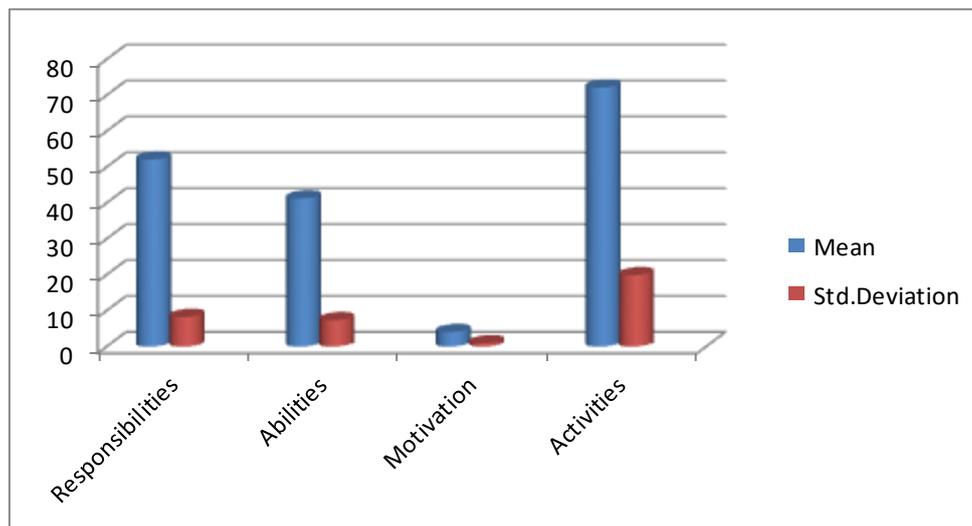


Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics for components of Learner Autonomy

As shown in table 1, students got the mean of 169.506 in their overall autonomy in language learning. In addition, according to Table 2 and figure 1 which illustrates descriptive statistics for components of learner autonomy, the participants got the mean of 25.08 in their views of their own responsibilities to learn English, which reveals that the participants perceived themselves more responsible than their teachers in learning language. Regarding students' views of their ability to learn autonomously, the subjects got the mean of 41.26, which showed that the students were capable of making decisions for their own learning and learning language autonomously. Considering students' Motivation to learn language, the participants got the mean of 4.06 which indicated that they had motivation to learn English. Regarding students' engagement inside and outside class activities, the students got the mean of 72.16 which showed that the subjects engaged in autonomous inside and outside class activities. The findings of the first research question are in contrast with the previous studies on learner autonomy showing that their participants did not take responsibility for their learning and considered them as their teachers' responsibility (e.g., Chan, Humphreys, and Spratt, 2002; Üstünlüoğlu, 2009; Raziye & Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, 2013).

B. Research Question Two

The second research question that the present study tried to address is "Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL male and female students in terms of their language learning strategy use?" To answer this question, an independent samples t-test was run to compare mean scores of males and females regarding their language learning strategy use. Figure 2 illustrates descriptive statistics for overall strategy use of males and females.

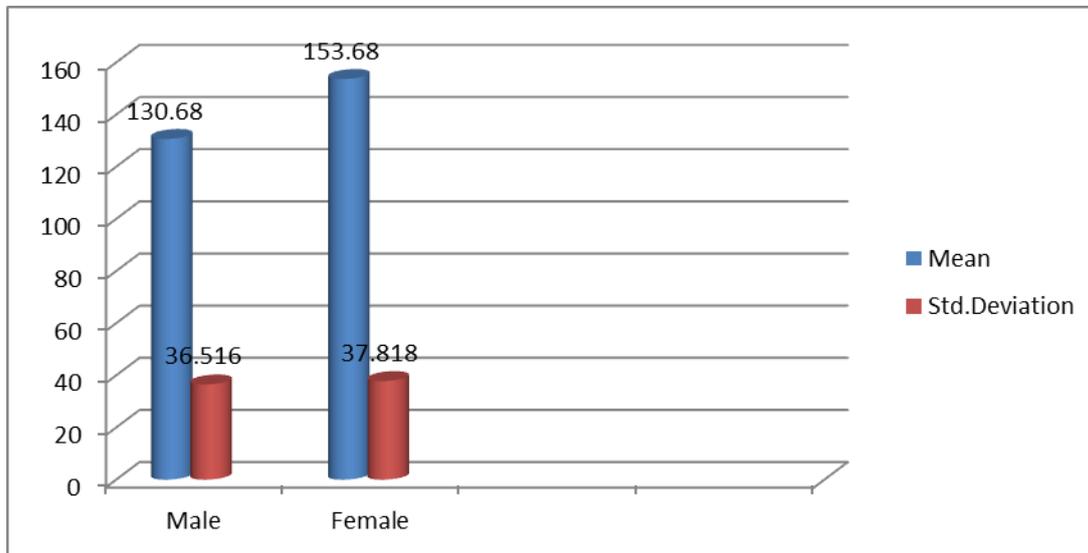


Figure 2: Descriptive Statistics for Overall Strategy Use and Gender

Figure 2 displays descriptive statistics for overall strategy use of males and females. According to this figure, female participants got the mean of 153.68 in their overall strategy use, which reveals that they used strategies more frequently than males who got the mean of 130.6. Table 3 shows the Mean and Standard Deviation of strategy categories in males and females.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for LLSs and gender

Strategy	Males		Females		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Memory	25.04	6.139	29.25	4.499	-4.794	.000
Cognitive	28.32	13.33	33.70	19.521	-1.973	.050
Compensation	20.21	4.064	25.22	3.335	-8.257	.000
Metacognitive	22.04	10.706	25.10	10.812	-1.754	.083
Affective	17.74	3.49	19.44	3.523	-2.953	.004
Social	16.80	6.157	20.90	4.120	-4.80	.000
Overall	130.68	36.516	153.68	37.818	-3.789	.000

According to table 4.12, the results of the six categories of learning strategies showed that male subjects used cognitive strategies (M= 28.32) and memory strategies (M=25.04) most frequently and social strategies (M=16.80) least frequently. Regarding female subjects,

cognitive strategies (M= 33.70) and memory strategies (M= 29.25) were the mostly used strategies and affective strategies (M= 19.44) were the least used ones.

As can be seen in table 3, the results of independent samples t-tests indicated that significant differences existed between males and females in the use of memory strategies (P =.000<.05), cognitive strategies (P=.050=.05), compensation strategies (P=.000<.05), affective strategies (P=.004<.05) and social strategies (P=.000<.05), except for metacognitive strategies (P= .083>.05). In other words, the difference between males and females in Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Affective and Social strategies were significant and meaningful, with females using learning strategies significantly more often compared with males. Congruent with most research findings (e.g., Politzer, 1983; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995), female participants of this study used learning strategies more frequently in comparison with male subjects. This finding may be due to the fact that females are more active to use learning strategies to make learning easier and the second reason may be because females showed to have more tendency and motivation to their language learning.

C. Research Question Three

The third research question that the current study tried to answer is "Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and their language learning strategy use? In order to answer this question, Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed to see whether any possible relationship existed between EFL learners' autonomy and their language learning strategy use.

Table 4 Correlations between Autonomy components and categories of Strategies

	Mem.	Cog.	Comp.	Met.	Aff.	Soc.	Overall
Learner Pearson Correlation	.568**	.583**	.519**	.622**	.554**	.619**	.701*
Autonomy Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

According to table 4, learner autonomy and overall learning strategy were positively and significantly correlated (r= .701, P= .000< .01). To further investigate the correlation between learner autonomy and learning strategy use, Pearson Correlation was conducted again this time by addressing the relationship between autonomy and the six categories of learning strategies. As can be seen in table 4, statistically significant relationship was found between students' autonomy and their learning strategy use. The first strongest correlation was found between students' autonomy and metacognitive strategies. The second strongest correlation was found between students' autonomy and social strategies and the third

strongest correlation was found between students' autonomy and cognitive strategies. The correlation between students' autonomy and memory, affective and compensation strategies stood in the fourth, fifth and sixth rank, respectively.

In summary, the findings of the study showed that the majority of the students were autonomous language learners and females reported to employ learning strategies more than males. Also, the correlation between students' autonomy and their learning strategies was statistically significant at both general and specific level (at the level of categories).

IV. DISSCUSSION

Regarding the first research question of this study, as displayed in figure 1, the mean score of students' overall autonomy in language learning was computed to be 169.506. In addition, the mean score of students' views of their own responsibilities was 25.08 which show that the majority of the students regarded themselves responsible to learn language autonomously. Furthermore, the mean score of students' views of their abilities turned out to be 41.26 which imply that the students perceived themselves capable of learning language autonomously. Also, the mean score of students' motivation to learn English was 4.06 and the mean value of students' engagement in autonomous activities was computed to be 72.16, which say that the students often employed inside and outside class activities autonomously.

The interesting fact is that the majority of the participants of this study who were university students perceived themselves autonomous language learners, but they still need their teachers' assistance and guidance to enhance their autonomy as much as possible and to develop the ability to take responsibility for their own learning and to control and maintain their language learning process outside the classroom, independent of their teachers.

The second research question tried to find out whether any significant differences exist between males and females in terms of their language learning strategies. As shown in table 2, the findings of the current study showed that the most frequently preferred strategies for both males and females were cognitive strategies and memory strategies respectively. On the other hand, males employed social strategies least frequently and the least used strategy for females was affective strategy. The findings also revealed that statistically significant gender differences were found in the use of learning strategy categories including memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, affective strategies and social strategies, except for metacognitive strategies. In other words, the difference between males and females in the use of Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Affective and Social strategies were significant and meaningful, with females using learning strategies significantly more frequently compared with males.

The important point is that, inconsistent with Radwan's study (2011), the result of this study revealed that memory strategies had the second highest frequency of use between both male and female students that can be attributed to the educational system of Iran in which the memory strategy of the students is strengthened as the result of emphasis on rote learning methodology.

The third research question intended to find relationship between autonomy and language learning strategies. As can be seen in table 4, learners' autonomy significantly correlated with their learning strategy use in a positive way, which means that the higher the students' level of autonomy, the more learning strategies they employ.

In addition, the results showed that the students' autonomy significantly correlated with memory strategies ($r=.568$). This means that autonomous language learners are more capable of making associating, placing new words into a context, semantic mapping and using mechanical techniques.

Students' autonomy also significantly correlated with cognitive strategies ($r=.583$). It means that autonomous language learners can do strategies such as practicing, repeating, reviewing, translating, transferring, reasoning and analyzing the language.

The findings indicated that the correlation between students' autonomy and compensation strategies is also significant ($r=.519$), which means that autonomous language learners are more capable of guessing intelligently, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing and using a circumlocution or synonym.

Also, a significant correlation was found between students' autonomy and metacognitive strategies ($r=.622$). It implies that autonomous students have the ability to self-monitor, self-evaluate, set goals and objectives, seek practice opportunities and identify the purpose of a language task.

In addition, the correlation between students' autonomy and affective strategies is also significant ($r=.554$), which means that autonomous students are capable of lowering their anxiety, using progressive relaxation, encouraging themselves and rewarding themselves.

The results also show that there is also a significant correlation students' autonomy and social strategies ($r=.619$) which suggests that autonomous learners have the ability to ask questions, ask for correction, cooperate with others and become aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

The findings of this question are compatible with Negari's study (2013), finding significant relationship between students' self-attitude to autonomy and all the subcategories of strategy use. This finding is in agreement with Little (1997) who proposed that the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies is so close that one can infer how autonomous learners are from the strategies they use in learning. He believed that emphasizing on language learning strategies will lead to learner autonomy. Also Scharle and Szabo (2000) believed that learning strategies are one of the most important building blocks of responsibility and autonomy.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study was carried out with the purpose of investigating the possible relationship of learner autonomy and language learning strategies among Iranian EFL students. The majority of the participants showed to have autonomy in language learning and regarded themselves capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. Also, significant

difference was found between males and females regarding their strategy use, with females employing more strategies compared to males. Finally, it was found that students' autonomy significantly correlated with their learning strategy use in a positive way. Like other studies, this study had some limitations that should be pointed out. A limitation of this study was the small sample size which restricts its generalizability to other samples and contexts. The other limitation was due to the fact that questionnaire was the primary data collection of this study, so further research can be conducted using other data collection instruments such as Interview, diaries, portfolios and so on.

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