

The Bonds between EFL Learners' Perceptions of Classroom Activities, Self-Regulatory Skills, and Language Achievement

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Abstract – This study investigated EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities, self-regulatory skills, and language achievement. To do so, two samples were utilized; the first sample comprised 155 students studying in the language institutes of Mashhad, and the second one, English learners at a university in this city. For measuring self-regulatory skills, 'Self-Regulation Trait' (SRT) questionnaire designed by Herl et al (1999) was employed. It contained four subscales (planning, monitoring, self-efficacy, and effort). To determine EFL students' classroom perceptions, the study employed the Persian version of the Gentry and Gable's (2001) 'Students Perceptions of Classroom Activities' scale translated and validated by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015). The scale measures four perceptions (interest, challenge, choice, and joy). The results indicated that all four perceptions had significant positive correlations with self-regulation. The highest correlations were found between challenge and self-regulation followed by the correlation between choice and self-regulation. Moreover, there were positive associations between language achievement, students' perceptions of classroom activities, and their self-regulation. The results of correlation between perception of choice and the subscales of self-regulation (planning, self-monitoring, effort, self-efficacy) indicted that interest had the highest link with effort; joy had the highest nexus with self-efficacy; choice had the highest association with effort, and challenge had the highest relationship with planning.

Keywords: Perceptions of classroom activities, Self-regulation, Language achievement.

1. INTRODUCTION

In general, the way in which learners attempt to work out the meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of the language they are learning is called learning strategy. In first language learning, the term 'strategy' is sometimes used to refer to the ways that children process language, without implying either intentionality or awareness. In second language learning, a 'strategy' is usually an intentional or potentially planned behavior carried out with the goal of learning. A number of wide-ranging categories of learning strategies have been identified, including cognitive strategies, social strategies, resource management strategies, and metacognitive strategies. Learning strategies may be applied to sample tasks, such as learning a list of new words, or more complex tasks involving language comprehension and production. Learning guided by metacognition, strategic action, and motivation to learn is called self-regulatory learning.

Metacognitive strategy is a category which involves thinking about the mental processes used in the learning process, monitoring learning while it is taking place and evaluating learner after it has occurred. Similar to metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive regulation or "regulation of cognition" contains three skills that are as follows (Schraw & Gregory, 1998):

1. Planning: refers to goal setting and appropriate selection of strategies and the correct allocation of resources that affect task performance before involving in learning.
2. Monitoring: refers to one's awareness of comprehension and task performance and the use and strategies while engaging in an activity.
3. Evaluating: refers to appraising the final product of a task and the efficiency at which the task was performed. This can include re-evaluating strategies that were used.

Flavell (1979) defined metacognition as an individual's knowledge and control over one's own cognitions. Also, Schraw (1994) defined it in this way "the ability to reflect upon, understand and control one's learning" (p. 460). Recent studies indicated that learners who are aware of their metacognition or are metacognitively aware perform better than unaware learners. Individuals high in metacognitive awareness are skilled at monitoring their progress towards goals, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and adjusting their learning strategies achieve favorable outcomes (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

In Piaget's work, metacognition is the knowledge of thought processes which involves being aware of an external object or something within oneself and the capability of communicating one's rationale. In his perspective, use of language as a communicative vehicle plays an important role in one's progression toward consciousness and knowledge of his thought processes.

Self-regulation as the sheer manifestation of metacognition was defined by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1988) as individual's being active in his own learning process behaviorally, metacognitively, and motivationally. The Pintrich's (1995) model of self-regulation includes three general categories of strategies: (a) cognitive learning strategies, (b) metacognitive or self-regulatory strategies to control cognition, and (c) resource management strategies. The model includes such cognitive strategies as rehearsal, elaboration strategies connected with academic performance. Rehearsal strategies is repeating the learned knowledge or words and underlining important parts in a text. It is for selecting the important knowledge and keeping them in short-term memory. Elaborative strategies is like paraphrasing or summarizing the learned knowledge, asking and answering questions and etc. cognitive strategies include the strategies necessary for data processing such as attention, coding, and elaboration.

James (1992) closely described the Self as cognition. He stated that "thoughts connected as we feel them to be connected are what we mean by personal selves" (p. 154). His famous phrase "stream of consciousness" referred to the Self. His choice of such phrases as "subjective life" emphasizes the cognitively active subject (James, 1992, pp. 158–159). James believed "The thoughts themselves are the thinkers" (James, 1992, p. 209). For James, self-regulation is what the Self does for flexibility in demands of the people to choose, follow up, and establish proper habits.

Since the popularization of self-regulation, its facilitative role in effective performance has been substantiated in different studies (e.g., Michou, Mouratidis, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2013). In the domain of language education, identical outcomes have been reported. For instance, Ghanizadeh and Mirzaee (2012) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-regulation, critical thinking ability and their language achievement. The data substantiated the theoretical expectation of a connection between self-regulation and critical thinking and academic gain. In addition, it was found that EFL learners' self-regulation can predict about 53 % of their language achievement. Monshi Toussi and Ghanizadeh (2012) substantiated a linkage between self-regulation and locus of control. They indicated a significant relationship between teachers' self-regulation and internal locus of control. In particular, it was found that about 48% of the variation in teacher self-regulation can be explained by taking their internal locus of control into account. In a recent study, Ghonsooly and Ghanizadeh (2013) investigated teachers' self-regulation and self-efficacy in teaching effectiveness. Ninety two teachers participated in this study. For this, they utilized Teacher Self-Regulation Scale (TSRS) designed and validated by Yesim, Sungur, and Uzuntiryaki (2009) and Teachers' sense of Efficacy Scale designed by Tschannen-Moran and WoolfolkHoy (2001). It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between teachers' degree of self-regulation and their sense of self-efficacy. Another example is a study conducted by Zafarmand, Ghanizadeh, and Akbari (2014) to find the relationship between EFL learners' goal orientation, metacognitive awareness, and self-efficacy in a single framework. The results demonstrated that among goal orientations, mastery goal is a positive and significant predictor of metacognitive awareness. Furthermore, it was found that metacognitive awareness plays a positive and significant role in self-efficacy.

The theoretical foundations of the present study are metacognitive strategy and the variables of student's perceptions of classroom activities including interest, joy, challenge, and choice (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Based upon other researchers, these perceptions include the difficulty of the tasks, and the type of evaluation system used (Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001). Ames (1992) pointed to perceptions of class activities and their effects on goal orientations, and mastery goals which could result in self-regulating learning and other academic performances.

The concept of effective learning environment (ELE) is defined as an open system of changeable factors that affect the effectiveness of student learning from the perspective of learners, teachers and staff (Appatova & Prats, 2008). Kolb and Kolb (2005) stressed the significance of the learning environment concept as a framework for understanding the interface between student learning styles and the institutional learning environment.

Most researchers and teachers are aware of stimulative, supportive, and challenging learning environment. Environment and social situations have effects on reinforcing self-regulation (Reeve, 1998). It can meaningfully improve performance and growth for every student in the specific class context. Previous research frequently focused on the students' outcome and their perception of the class, using class as a determining variable, making practical attempt to improve learning environment, and exploring students' result in their preferred environment. Effective learning environment is an open system of different factors

that affect the effectiveness of students' learning from the view of learners, their parents, the authorities, the staffs, and etc. This climate as an educational one can have two dimensions: physical factors, psychological, or emotional factors. These factors seem to be contingent on different learning styles and learning activities.

Many studies have shown the importance of learner's perception of classroom activities. For example, Kareshki in 2011 conducted a research on about 600 Iranian students in order to find the relation among classroom perceptions and metacognitive. Their result showed that metacognition was predicted by the perceptions of class activities. Also, the mutual correlations between all components of classroom perceptions, (interest, joint, challenge and choice), with metacognitive skill were positive and statistically significant.

Gentry, Gable, and Rizza (2002) investigated whether differences existed in perceptions of class activities for students in Grades 3–8 and between genders. The frequency that students perceived opportunities for interest, challenge, choice, and enjoyment in their classrooms was assessed by using 'My Class Activities' instrument designed by Gentry and Gable (2001). In general, middle school students found their classroom activities less frequently interesting and enjoyable, and fewer choices, than did elementary students. These variables reduced steadily from lower to upper grades. The girls' class activities were more frequently interesting and enjoyable than boys' classes.

Another research in Hong Kong conducted by Chi-Kin Lee, Yin, Zhang (2009) investigated the influence of classroom environment on students' motivation and use of self-regulated learning strategy. The finding demonstrated that high teacher support and involvement is a salient feature of classroom environment in Hong Kong which might reflect some culture-specific features of teacher-centred classroom environment in there.

Mucherah and Frazier (2013) explored teachers' perceptions of their classroom environment and students' goal orientation. For them, goal orientation refers to a pattern of beliefs which has four dimensions: mastery goals, performance goals, work avoidance, and social goals. They found that there is a significant difference between male and female teachers in teacher support; men are more supporter than women. Generally, they reported teachers who are successful in establishing effective environment create more time for learning and help students become self-managing. They concluded that teachers' perception of the fit between their class environment and goal orientation are important for learning outcome. Their perception of class climate can differ based on subject matter. Huang (2011) aimed at examining correlations between achievement goals and achievement emotions. The results indicated that mastery goals correlated highly with interest and enjoyment rather than anxiety. Another study conducted by Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, and Harackiewicz (2010) corroborated the findings of the previous study. They found positive correlations between mastery goals and interest.

In the domain of foreign language learning, Aryan and Shahrokhi (2015) examined the students' perception class activity by investigating the role of gender and grade level. Pre intermediate and intermediate students of English were on one hand and upper intermediate and advanced level on the other. It was found that upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English found their classroom activities less interesting and enjoyable and with fewer

opportunities for choice, than did pre intermediate and intermediate students. Moreover, female learners perceived their class activities more interesting and enjoyable. In a similar study, Jahedizadeh and Ghanizadeh (2015) explored EFL learners' perception of classroom activities and their goal orientations (mastery, performance approach, and performance avoidance). The findings verified the hypothesized association between students' perceptions of classroom activities and their goal-orientations.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Two different samples participated in the present study. The first sample comprised 155 EFL students studying in the institutes. They were 40 boys and 115 girls. Their age varied from 13 to 28. The second sample included EFL learners at universities. They were 52 girls whose age varied from 20 to 30.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Students' perceptions of classroom activities

To assess students' perceptions of classroom activities, the researchers used the translated version of 'Students Perceptions of Classroom Activities' scale designed and validated by Gentry and Gable (2001) which was translated to Persian and validated by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015). Validity evidence for construct interpretation was investigated through confirmatory factor analysis. A chi-square/*df* ratio (2.38) and the RMSEA (.062) as well as the GFI (.78) were indicative of model fit. Furthermore, all items had accepted factor loadings. The Cronbach's alpha estimates for each perception ranged from .71 to .80. (interest = .86, challenge = .73, choice = .71, joy = .79).

The 'Students Perceptions of Classroom Activities' instrument contains 31 statements evaluating four dimensions (interest, challenge, choice, and joy). The scale measures the four dimensions via a 5-point Likert-type response format (never, seldom, sometimes, often, and always). The participants were provided with directions on how to complete the scale. Sample items for '*interest*' dimension included: 1) What I do in my class fits my interests, and 2) I have an opportunity to work on things in my class that interest me. Sample items for '*challenge*' dimension are: 1) I find the work in this class demanding, and 2) I am challenged to do my best in class. Sample items include in '*choice*' dimension are: 1) I can choose materials to work with in the class, and 2) I can choose an audience for my product. Sample items for '*joy*' dimension are: 1) The activities I do in my class are enjoyable, and 2) I like the projects I work on in my class.

2.2.2. Self-regulation questionnaire

Self-Regulating Trait (SRT) questionnaire was used to determine the EFL students' self-regulatory strategies. This questionnaire was designed by O'Neil et al. (1998). It consists of

32 Likert-scale questions ranging from *almost never*, to *sometimes*, *often*, and *almost always*. The scale seeks to measure metacognition and motivation dimensions. Each dimension comprises two sub-scales. Meta-cognition covers the constructs of planning and self-monitoring, and motivation contains effort and self-efficacy. The four scales are measured by 4 Likert-type items each. The following table depicts the subscales of the SRT:

Table 1: The Subscales of SRT along with the Corresponding Descriptions

Factor		Definition	Items
Metacognition	<i>Planning</i>	The extent to which one has an assigned or self-directed goal and a plan to achieve the goal.	1-5-9-13-17-21-25-29
	<i>Self-monitoring</i>	The extent to which one needs a self-checking mechanism to monitor goal achievement.	2-6-10-14-18-22-26-30
Motivation	<i>Effort</i>	The extent to which one works hard on a task.	3-7-11-15-19-23-27-31
	<i>Self-efficacy</i>	The extent to which one has confidence in being able to accomplish a particular task.	4-8-12-16-20-24-28-32

According to Herl et al. (1999), the reliability and validity of the scale have been verified in multiple studies.

2.3. Procedure

The study was undertaken in 7 private language institutes (GLI, two branches of Rashed, Kish, Azaran, Jahade Daneshgahi, and Kish air) and a university in Mashhad (Imam Reza International University), Iran. Convenience sampling was used to collect data and all the participants kindly accepted to take part in the current study. The researchers explained the purpose of completing the questionnaire for the participants and asked them not to write their names. The data collection was done between November and December 2015.

3. RESULTS

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of self-regulation and its corresponding subscales (planning, self-monitoring, effort, and self-efficacy). According to the table, self-regulation has mean value of about 24 and standard deviation of 14. In our sample, the maximum mean score of self-regulation equals 128 and the minimum is 60. Among the subscales of self-efficacy, effort obtained the highest mean ($M=23.83$, $SD=4.50$).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Self-regulation and its Subscales

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Planning	208	13.00	32.00	23.2260	4.10866
Self-monitoring	208	12.00	32.00	23.6442	3.98043
Effort	208	10.00	32.00	23.8317	4.50609
Self-efficacy	208	9.00	32.00	24.1923	4.29262
Self-regulation	208	60.00	128.00	94.8942	14.25368
Valid N (listwise)	208				

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of language achievement measured by their GPA. As it is indicated, the mean score is about 17.50 out of 20 ($M=17.47$, $SD=1.58$).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Students' GPA

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
GPA	208	12.00	20.00	17.4752	1.58195
Valid N (listwise)	208				

Table 4 represents the descriptive statistics of the four perceptions goals. As table shows, among the four perceptions, challenge and interest received the highest means respectively, interest ($M=29.24$, $SD=6.11$), challenge ($M=26.24$, $SD=4.35$). Choice had the lowest mean score ($M=21.10$, $SD=3.41$).

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of Classroom Activities

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interest	208	8.00	41.00	29.2452	6.11899
Challenge	208	46.00	36.00	26.4423	4.35907
Choice	208	12.00	28.00	21.1010	3.41132
Joy	208	10.00	35.00	26.2885	5.86758
Valid N (listwise)	208				

To probe the relationship between perceptions of classroom activities and self-regulation, multiple correlations were run. The results of Pearson Product Moment correlations are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: The Correlation Coefficients between Perceptions of Classroom Activities and Self-regulation

	Interest	Challenge	Choice	Joy
Self-regulation	.549**	.916**	.865**	.545**

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05

As indicated in the table, all the four perceptions had significant positive correlations with self-regulation. The highest correlations were found between challenge and self-regulation ($r = 0.916$, $p < 0.05$) and between choice and self-regulation ($r = 0.865$, $p < 0.05$).

To examine the association between each perception and the subscales of self-regulation, the Pearson Product Moment correlation was run. The results of correlation between interest and the four components of self-regulation are represented in table 6. As the table reveals, interest has the highest correlation with effort ($r = 0.495$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, students who perceive their class activities interesting tend to exert more effort in attaining their academic goals and work harder.

Table 6: The Correlation Coefficients between Perception of Interest and Self-regulation Subscales

	Planning	Self-monitoring	Effort	Self-efficacy
Interest	.472**	.458**	.495**	.426**

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05

Identical analysis was performed for the relationship between perception of challenge and subscales of self-regulation. The results are shown in table 7. According to this table, challenge has the highest correlation with planning ($r = 0.815$, $p < 0.05$). It implies students who believe their classrooms activities are challenging have an assigned or self-directed goal and a plan to achieve the goal.

Table 7: The Correlation Coefficients between Perception of Challenge and Self-regulation Subscales

	Planning	Self-monitoring	Effort	Self-efficacy
Challenge	.815**	.763**	.785**	.730**

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05

The results of the correlation between perception of choice and subscales of self-regulation are presented in table 8. According to this table, choice has the highest correlation with effort ($r = 0.756$, $p < 0.05$). It means students who think they have more opportunities over their classrooms activities work harder and make more structured attempts at meeting course objectives.

Table 8: The Correlation Coefficients between Perception of Choice and Self-regulation Subscales

	Planning	Self-monitoring	Effort	Self-efficacy
Choice	.696**	.720**	.756**	.745 **

Table 9 presents the results of correlation between perception of joy and the components of self-regulation. As the table reveals, joy has the highest correlation with self-efficacy ($r = 0.513$, $p < 0.05$). This finding demonstrates that enjoyable feelings and perceptions toward classroom activities enhance students' confidence in their abilities to accomplish their academic tasks efficiently.

Table 9: The Correlation Coefficients between Perception of Joy and Self-regulation Subscales

	Planning	Self-monitoring	Effort	Self-efficacy
Joy	.429**	.437**	.454**	.513 **

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05

To explore the relationship between GPA, perceptions, and self-regulation, the Pearson Product Moment correlation was applied to the data. The results presented in table 10 revealed that GPA is positively associated with all perceptions as well as with self-regulation. The magnitude of correlations is almost average and quite identical across the variables.

Table 10: The Correlation Coefficients between GPA and Perceptions of Classroom Activities and Self-regulation

	Interest	Challenge	Choice	Joy	Self-regulation
GPA	.549**	.523**	.541**	.552**	.521 **

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05

4. DISCUSSION

The present study sought to find the relationship between learners' perception of classroom activities, self-regulation, and their language achievement. It was found that all four perceptions (interest, joy, challenge, and choice) had positive and significant correlation with self-regulation. The highest correlations were detected between challenge and self-regulation followed by the correlation between choice and self-regulation. Moreover, there were positive associations between language achievement, students' perceptions of classroom activities, and their self-regulation. The above finding is in line with previous research. For instance, Kareshki (2011) reported that there was a positive significant relationship between high school students' class perception and metacognitive skills. In 2010, a longitudinal study has been done by Harackiewicz and Hulleman to highlight the role of achievement goals and task values in increasing students' interest. They assumed that a student tries to achieve something interesting in classroom environment. It can be finding new friends, getting good grades, or learning something exciting. These achievements provide reasons for engaging in classroom activities. Moreover, Flum and Kaplan (2006) suggested that a student who is interested in the topic, activity or classroom environment, focuses on task mastery and skill development which consequently encourage the learner to explore all aspects of an activity and adapt a mastery-goal orientation to develop the skill. In the realm of foreign language learning, Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015) conducted a study to explore EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities by examining the role of these perceptions in shaping their educational goals. The findings attested to the hypothesized association between students' perceptions of classroom activities and their goal-orientations (mastery, performance approach, and performance avoidance). The highest correlation was obtained between mastery goal and interest; the lowest correlation was observed between avoidance goal and joy. In a related study, Jahedizadeh, Ghonsooly, Ghanizadeh, and Akbari (2015) probed EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities across three different milieus of English learning in Iran, namely, high schools, universities, and language institutes. The results indicated that there were significant differences in most perceptions across the three contexts. In particular, it was found that there is a significant difference between interest level of students at universities and institutes. Regarding challenge, significant differences were found between university and school students as well as university and institute students. As far as choice is concerned, it was found that school and university students as well as university and institute students differ in their perceptions.

In this study, the results of correlation between perception of choice and subscales of self-regulation (planning, self-monitoring, effort, self-efficacy) indicted that choice had the highest correlation with effort. It implies that if students have more opportunities in their class activities, they will exert more effort in attaining academic goals. This finding is in line with another study (Garner & Alexander, 1989) that learners who are aware of their own metacognition and have access to varied activities perform better than unaware ones.

Based upon this study, challenge had the highest correlation with planning. It shows that by making the tasks more challenging, we can assist students in structuring plans for their own learning which will result in regulating themselves. In other words, if teachers try to use

challenging tasks in their classes, it will help students to be more regulated in their academic endeavors.

As stated before, interest had the highest relationship with effort. Based upon this finding, it can be inferred that students who perceive their class activities more interesting and enjoyable try to work harder in achieving their academic goals and can attain the language better than others. It is in harmony with Zimmerman's (1999) contention that enjoyable and favorable learning environments can strikingly determine students' diligence and persistence in their studies.

It was also indicated that among the subscales of self-regulation, joy had the highest nexus with self-efficacy. This finding demonstrates that enjoyable feelings and perceptions toward classroom activities enhance students' confidence in their abilities to accomplish their academic tasks efficiently. Consistent with this finding, Pintrich and DeGroot (1990), as well as Kitsantas (2000) found a positive relationship between self-efficacy and satisfaction of learning settings leading to academic achievement.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study indicated that students' views and perceptions should be taken into account when designing effective educational purposes for language achievement. The finding showed that there is a significant relationship between learners' perception of classroom activities, their self-regulating, and the achievement of language. Incorporating more interesting, challenging, and varied tasks and activities in curriculum can serve to enhance students' self-regulatory strategies and their language achievement.

One of the most important roles of the EFL teachers in their classroom is help their students to attain their learning objectives. This may happen by making the learning environment more interesting and enjoyable. It means that enjoyable class can help students to learn better. Also, providing more opportunities and challenging tasks can help to achieve this purpose.

Based on the findings of the present study, the following inspiration and suggestions may provide prospected researchers with new lines of research in this area. For example, future researchers can focus on learners self-regulating and their language achievement in different educational contexts. They can also explore in what ways the relationship challenging learning environments can enhance students' self-regulating.

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