

The Relationship between Goal-orientation and Autonomy in EFL Learners: The Case of Iranian Learners

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Abstract – Given the importance of learner autonomy and its relationship with goal orientation, this study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between goal-orientations and autonomy in Iranian EFL learners. To this end, two sets of questionnaires were distributed among 60 EFL learners in Kermanshah, to elicit their beliefs on the relationship between goal-orientation and autonomy, and also to predict which goal types contributes significantly to autonomy. Goal orientation was measured with a scale adapted from VandeWalle's (1997) work-specific goal orientation scale which consisted of thirteen questions on three subscales: performance – prove goal orientation, performance-avoid goal orientation, and learning goal orientation. Learners' autonomy was assessed by the use of another questionnaire designed by Chan, et al., (2002) on Learners' Autonomy and consisted of three main sections assessing responsibility, ability, and activity. The results of Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant relationship between goal-type and autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran. The result of multiple linear regression analysis showed that all three components of goal orientation predict 88.9 percent of the autonomy. The avoiding orientation was excluded from the model due to its non-significant contribution to the regression model. Finally, the results of ANOVA test indicated that the regression models –both first and second step – enjoyed statistical significance. That is to say, the components of goal orientation significantly contributed to autonomy. The result of this study can have pedagogical implication for language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers in that they can use goal-orientation and autonomy as two determining variables in the process of teaching-learning.

Keywords: Goal orientation, Autonomy, Goal type, intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation

1. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching, as an interdisciplinary field, is a hybrid field in which areas such as linguistics, psychology, sociology and culture-related issues are involved (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). These areas have, in most cases, had a remarkable influence on the learning/teaching process. Tremendous and dynamic changes in the realm of language education from time to time have motivated and urged scholars to plan to present some theories to motivate learners find their ways on the process of foreign/second language education (Freeman, 2001). This

shift helps students become more effective learners and facilitates the activation of a learner-centered philosophy. It is also believed that learners who have developed skills in learning-how-to-learn will be able to exploit classroom learning opportunities effectively (Lortie, 1969), and will be more adequately equipped to continue with language learning outside the classroom.

During the lifetime of ELT, new approaches have always been emerging in language teaching, but no matter which methodology and what techniques are used, there is, all around the world, and to different degrees, a tendency to see learners as passive receivers of new information, as individuals who are unable to develop the necessary skills to learn to assess and control their own progress themselves both inside and outside the language teaching context (Rivers, 1992; Holden & Usuki, 1999). In the field of language learning which requires assistance of a person who has the language in his command and can professionally lend a hand with the language learner, this can be felt more significantly, because in spite of the attempts made by instructors and students, the English proficiency levels are so diverse that always creates challenge in the learning context. Depending on the type of teacher and learner personal characteristics, varying types of improvement of development can come about.

A growing number of research studies are focusing on investigating the causes of this failure, with many writers offering suggestions for improvement (Rivers, 1992; Brindley, 1990). For sure one of the areas of study related to the mentioned variations in language proficiency and ability is autonomy on the part of the learners. Autonomy has been defined as the degree of responsibility students take for their own learning, as proposed by Brindley (1990), Munby (1991), and the Council of Europe (2002). Also, the Common European Framework (2001) defines the concept of language learning autonomy as consisting of both those items which need to be learned in order for adequate communication to come about, and the knowledge and skills which need to be developed by an effective autonomous learner.

Following the idea of teaching by domination of teacher as the most powerful entity of the classroom, schools have always been designed to teach skills before actions, and actions before goals without paying heed to the fact that their actions might not be supported by the results of research findings in the field (Johnson, 1992; Seedhouse & Walsh, 2010). To put another way, teachers and educational authorities, due to their power status and idiosyncratic judgements, have always tried to lead the way without paying attention to what does research findings claim regarding the right path to development (Freeman, 2002; Freeman & Johnson, 2005; Golombek & Johnson, 2004). The school's way of doing things is so ubiquitous that it clouds our thinking on areas of learning that have nothing to do with school.

Goals are integral to the understanding of motivated behavior with different research disciplines emphasizing different levels and types of goals and their consequences. In recent years, goal orientation has emerged as a potent individual difference variable for explaining self-regulation decisions such as goal choice. As an example, Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck, 1999; Elliott & Dweck, 1988) conceptualized the broader goals pursued by individuals as a dimension of personality. Due to giving more weight to internal, personal

factors in language learning, there is a commonsense agreement among those engaging in the field that personality-related attributes are significantly influential in goal orientation of the learners.

Besides goals, self-regulation involves students being proactive with regard to their learning behavior or strategies to achieve self-set goals (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Such self-regulative processes can be affected by students' goal orientations, intrinsic or extrinsic. *Intrinsic goal orientation* is motivation that stems from primarily internal reasons (e.g., being curious, wanting to challenge, wanting to master the content, wanting to satisfy the inner self and so on), whereas extrinsic goal orientation is caused by primarily external reasons (e.g., getting good grades, competing with others, and seeking approval or rewards).

Regarding the above-mentioned taxonomy of goals to internal and external ones, research shows that students with an intrinsic goal orientation tend to value a deeper level of understanding of tasks than those with an extrinsic goal orientation, and that conversely, those with an extrinsic goal orientation tend to use more surface-level processing strategies such as memorization or guessing (Lyke & Kelaher Young, 2006). This is probably because internally driven goal types have their roots in long-term, persistent learning which in itself has already been an attribute of the learner besides the attributes such as honesty, desire to earn extra money, desire to make consistent improvement, etc. That is why some scholars strongly hold the idea that intrinsic goal orientation, compared to extrinsic goal orientation, would also likely promote both short-term and long-term persistence toward the learning subject (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Therefore, development of intrinsic goal orientation is more desirable for improving academic self-regulation, the issue which will be put more under the spotlight when learner autonomy will be dealt with.

As noted above, two different approaches can be identified in achievement goal research, with one focusing on task-specific or situational goals (Elliot, 1999) more focusing on external causes of goal orientation, and targeting what people wish to achieve, and the other examining relatively stable personal dispositions, goal orientations, which refer to reasonably stable tendencies to pursue certain goals (Nicholls, 1989) for a longer period of time with more consistency and sustainability.

Despite the conceptual differences, research following these perspectives has yielded somewhat similar results (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Pintrich, 2000). According to this view, a learner can pursue mastery with differing criteria, thus distinguishing between mastery-intrinsic and mastery-extrinsic goal orientations. Mastery-intrinsic goal orientation represents the traditional conceptualization of mastery and learning focus such as learning goals or task involvement (e.g., Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984), while mastery-extrinsic goal orientation refers to an emphasis on external criteria, such as good grades or absolute success at school, as intrapersonal standards (i.e., without explicit reference to social comparison or competition) for learning or improvement (Niemivirta, 2002). Furthermore, in line with other achievement goal research, two types of performance goal orientations are distinguished, namely performance-approach and performance-avoidance orientations.

While the performance-approach orientation reflects the aim of demonstrating competence and tries to reflect on the extent of the ability of the learner in fulfilling the goal,

the performance-avoidance orientation has a focus on avoiding judgments of incompetence trying to deny any lack of potential ability in performing a certain task. Finally, in order to address more comprehensively learners' strivings in achievement situations, we also look at work-avoidance orientation that deals with the aim of minimizing effort and avoiding challenges instead of striving for competence (Meece, 1991). The point to notice, however, is that there exists a relationship, whether weak or strong depending on the type of the goal, and autonomy of the persons regarding their taking actions in their cruise on the pathway towards the specified goals. The principle of autonomy being ever-present in all impulses and movements is more impacting when one wants to deal with the notion of language learning.

Autonomy is one of the concepts which originated from learner-centered methodology, and since then, there has been an increasing emphasis on the development of autonomy and autonomous second language learning in different educational settings. The most commonly cited definition proposed by Holec (1981) as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" and as "an ability or capacity that needs to acquire" rather than a process". There are principles that are pivotal to the concept of autonomy, one of them is the acceptance of responsibility by the students as Scharle and Szabo (2000) said "success in learning, very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude" (p. 4).

This view is consistent with Macaro's (1997) idea of autonomy believing that "the philosophy behind the concept of autonomy considers the human being as a producer in the society rather than a product of it; he also indicated that autonomy is an ability both how to make decisions and being allowed to make these decisions" (p. 168). Also, Benson (2008) argues that autonomy is directly related to learning so the role of the learner and his/her contribution in the process of second language learning is very important. The practice of autonomy in the classroom creates a whole new environment especially in those contexts in which the educational system is teacher fronted and consequently the autonomy-related activities of the students is overshadowed by the always-present power of the teacher. This might be the reason for criticizing the classroom contexts where the teacher's power does not let the students to become autonomous.

No matter how the issue is looked into and from which research paradigm the people engaged in the field are going to hang on to the research to resolve the problem, the mere concern is that both goal orientation and learner autonomy are not regarded as ineffective or ignorable when one thinks of effectiveness and efficiency which is supposed to come about as the result of tremendous load of classroom practice on part of both teachers and learners. Regarding what mentioned above on both goal-orientation and learner autonomy and to add more flesh to the bare bone of mentioned previous studies in the field of personal characteristics, more specifically on the relationship between goal-orientation and learner autonomy, the present study is going to investigate the relationship between goal-orientation and autonomy among EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran.

In the EFL context of Iran, the two concepts of goal-orientation and autonomy have always been left untouched by both learners and teachers due to not paying the required attention on learner characteristics in overcrowded language learning and teaching classes. One the one hand, learners participate in different classes especially language classes without

specifically setting out what they are going to get out of such classes and by way of having habit of imitating what the others usually do and giving in either because of lack of enough motivation on part of the teacher or by way of expediency.

Furthermore, autonomy and claiming independent responsibility for the learner's success (or possible failure) is a factor which has not been well-practiced in the history of education in Iran in general, and in the language learning in the EFL contexts in particular. The great majority of the learners believe that the teacher is the mere factor in their determining what to do, what to read and exercise, and how to behave in the language classes, thereby forgetting or even not realizing the importance of their autonomy as a source of their success in their learning (Mahdavian & Nabatchi Ahmadi, 2011).

More importantly, the relationship between the degree of goal-orientation and autonomy as two close-knit concepts in learning in general and language learning in particular has not been well investigated. This might be due to the societal structure of the country where the hierarchy of domination and rank-order is pervasive in all macro- and micro-structures both inside and outside the class (Mahdavian & Nabatchi Ahmadi, 2011). To this end, the primary purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between goal orientation and autonomy in language learning among EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran. Furthermore, this study aims at identifying the type of goal orientation which might contribute to more success in language learning. The following questions were posed in order to address the objectives of the study:

1. Is there any relationship between goal-orientation and autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran?
2. Which goal type makes more contribution to autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran?

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were 60 Iranian advanced EFL learners between the ages of 15 to 22 and at advanced level of language proficiency who were selected based on their interest to participate in the study. The interested participants had already been selected by random sampling from different EFL classes. They were selected from students in Jahad Language School, English College, and Iran Language Institute in Kermanshah and were given the questionnaires to be completed.

2.2. Instrumentation

Two types of questionnaires were used to elicit the idea of EFL learners both regarding the relationship between goal orientation and autonomy and also the amount of shared variance each goal type highlighted in the questionnaire could contribute to such autonomy.

2.2.1. Goal- orientation questionnaire

Goal -orientation was measured with a scale adapted from VandeWalle's (1997) work specific goal orientation scale (see Appendix). The questionnaire's 13-item measure contains 3 subscales: (a) Four items assessing performance-prove goal orientation, (b) Four items assessing performance-avoid goal orientation, and (c) Five items assessing learning goal orientation (VandeWalle, 1997). Participants respond to each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree). This questionnaire has already been developed and validated by VandeWalle et al. (2001).

2.2.2. Learners' autonomy questionnaire

Learners' autonomy was assessed by the use of a questionnaire designed by Chan, et al., (2002) on Learners' Autonomy. This questionnaire consists of three main sections assessing responsibility, ability, and activity of the students as three main themes representing autonomy. In section one of the questionnaire which deals with responsibilities, 10 questions are devised which elicit the viewpoint of the participants on whether it is the responsibility of the teacher, the learner or both to assess learners' progress both inside and outside the class, figure out interests, identify weak points, to recognize the objectives, decide on determined class activities, estimate required time for each activity, choose learning materials and , finally, to evaluate learners' progress.

In section two of the autonomy questionnaire which deals with ability as a subcomponent of learner autonomy, 10 questions devised based on a 5-point Likert scale elicit students' viewpoints on their performance in class, in case they have sufficient opportunity, on choosing learner activities for inside and outside the class, choosing learning objectives and learning materials for inside and outside the class, deciding learning sequences, deciding time allotment for each activity, identifying weaknesses and evaluating their learning.

In section three of the questionnaire, which addresses activity as another subscale of learner autonomy, 22 questions elicit the participants' responses on the frequency with which they choose voluntary assignments, note down new words and their meaning, read newspapers in English, visit the teacher at work, listen to English songs, talk to foreigners, do grammar exercises with friends, practice English with friends, do group studies, attend self-study centers, ask for clarification from the teachers, make suggestions for the teacher, plan the studies, make inferences about the lessons, classify materials while they study, summarize, take notes, use other resources while they are studying, and use in a cooperative way with their friends were answered.

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire sheets were filled by 60 EFL learners .At first the participants were asked to complete the questionnaire related to goal orientation which was taken from VandeWalle's (1997) goal orientation scale. Then, they were asked to complete the

questionnaire related to Learners' autonomy which was designed by Chan, et al., (2002) on Learners' Autonomy. Both of the questionnaires were given to the student in one session. After they had completed the questionnaire on goal-orientation types, the questionnaire on autonomy was given to them.

3. RESULTS

In order to answer The first and main research question of the study to see whether there is any relationship between goal-type and autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran, Pearson correlation was performed between EFL learners' autonomy and goal orientation. Table 1 indicates the results of Pearson correlation.

Table 1: Pearson correlation between EFL learners' autonomy and goal orientation

		Goal Orientation
Autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.919
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	60

The results of Pearson correlation ($r = .91$, $p < .05$) indicated that there was a significant relationship between goal-type and autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran. Thus the first research question of the study was verified.

The second research question of the study is an attempt to investigate which goal type makes more contribution to autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran. A multiple linear regression was run to predict autonomy by using the components of the goal orientation. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.943 ^a	.889	.883	9.635	
2	.941 ^b	.885	.881	9.708	2.051

a. Predictors: (Constant), Avoid, Learning, Prove

b. Predictors: (Constant), Learning, Prove

c. Dependent Variable: Autonomy

All three components of goal orientation predict 88.9 percent of the autonomy ($R = .943$, $R^2 = .889$) on the first step. The avoiding orientation was excluded from the model due to its non-significant contribution to the regression model to reduce the percentage of prediction to 88.5 percent ($R = .941$, $R^2 = .885$). In other words, the avoiding orientation predicted .4 percent of learner autonomy. The Durbin-Watson index of 2.05 indicated that the error variances were not correlated; an assumption that must be met for any regression model.

The ANOVA test of significance is conducted to see whether such prediction is of significance. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: ANOVA^a Test of Significance of Regression Model

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	41475.944	3	13825.315	148.932	.000 ^b
1 Residual	5198.456	56	92.830		
Total	46674.400	59			
Regression	41302.877	2	20651.439	219.143	.000 ^c
2 Residual	5371.523	57	94.237		
Total	46674.400	59			

Dependent Variable: Autonomy
 Predictors: (Constant), Avoid, Learning, Prove
 Predictors: (Constant), Learning, Prove

The results of conducting ANOVA test ($F = 148.93$, $p < .05$) and ($F = 219.14$, $p < .05$) indicated that the regression models –both first and second step – enjoyed statistical significance. That is to say the components of goal orientation significantly contributed to autonomy.

Next, to better understand the contribution of each prospective variable to learner autonomy and also to build the regression equation, the regression coefficients (Table 4) can be used. The unstandardized (B) and standardized (Beta) coefficients indicate how each component of goal orientation helped to predicted autonomy.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients^a

Model		Coefficients ^a				Collinearity Statistics		
		Unstandardized Coefficients		standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
		B	Std. Error	Beta				
1	(Constant)	.875	6.158		.142	.887		
	Learning	5.015	.669	.454	7.499	.000	.543	1.840
	Prove	6.334	.842	.512	7.527	.000	.430	2.325
	Avoid	.878	.643	.092	1.365	.178	.434	2.302
2	(Constant)	2.874	6.027			2.874	6.027	
	Learning	5.306	.639	.480	8.305	.000	.605	1.654
	Prove	6.951	.715	.562	.719	.000	.605	1.654

Based on these results, it can be concluded that learning orientation ($B = 5.30$, $Beta = .480$) is a unit of change in learning orientation resulted in 5.30 units change in autonomy. The Beta value of .480 indicated that one full standard deviation (SD) increase in learning orientation resulted in .480 SD change in autonomy. The results of the t-test ($t = 8.30$, $p < .05$) indicated that learning orientation significantly contributed to autonomy.

Proving Orientation ($B = 6.95$, $Beta = .562$) is a unit of change in proving orientation resulted in 6.95 units change in autonomy. The Beta value of .562 indicated that one full SD increase in proving orientation resulted in .562 SD change in autonomy. The results of the t-test ($t = 9.70$, $p < .05$) indicated that proving orientation significantly contributed to autonomy.

The above mentioned indices were reported based on the second step results; however, the indices for the avoiding orientation was reported based on the first step results because it was excluded from the model.

Avoiding orientation ($B = .87$, $Beta = .092$): A unit of change in avoiding orientation resulted in .87 units change in autonomy. The Beta value of .092 indicated that one full SD increase in avoiding orientation resulted in .092 SD change in autonomy. The results of the t-test ($t = 1.36$, $p > .05$) indicated that avoiding orientation had a non-significant contribution towards autonomy, and due to its lack of its significant contribution, it was excluded on the second step.

Two more indices were displayed in Table 4.6, i.e. tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF). Since values of tolerance were higher than .10 and the values of VIF were lower

than 10, it can be concluded that the regression model did not suffer from multicollinearity; that is too high correlation among all variables.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of experiments reported in the previous section of the study provide us with some interesting findings. As it is clear, there is a statistically significant and practically meaningful relationship between goal orientation and learner autonomy among Iranian advanced EFL learners. This can be a good indication to the fact that goal orientation in the EFL context of Iran must be looked at very differently from what is traditionally going on regarding the issue. The results of the Pearson correlation were an indicator to the fact that one can be sure of a relationship between goal type and autonomy. So the concept of goal type should be regarded as a fundamentally important concept and also be cautiously related to autonomy among Iranian EFL learners in higher levels of proficiency.

All three factors, namely learning goal orientation, performance prove goal orientation, and performance avoidance goal orientation, had a significant relation with autonomy among advanced EFL learners. Based on VandeWalle's (1997) three-factor model, this can be an indication to some realities. With regard to learning, this shows that Iranian advanced EFL learners prefer challenging work assignments in case they are beneficial for learning, look for opportunities to develop new skills and their knowledge, take risks to develop their abilities, and enjoy to work in situations which are highly challenging. Concerning prove performance, advanced Iranian EFL learners mostly prefer to work in a challenging way to show to the others how well they perform on tasks and what kinds of abilities they have. When it comes to performance avoidance orientation, Iranian advanced EFL learners prefer to avoid performing the tasks which manifest that they are incompetent in some areas, and to hide the fact that they lack some required abilities.

These findings are in line with the recent research findings which try to highlight the importance of achievement motivation and the results which are yielded regarding the goals students pursue in learning situations (Anderman, Austin, & Johnson, 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002). To put it another way, one can claim that Iranian EFL learners in advanced levels are so highly motivated to perform capaciously in English classes that they mostly make attempts to show their positive traits and hide any lack of possible disability. More interestingly, the tendency of Iranian EFL learners to conceal their weak points and manifest their performance and abilities supports the previous research findings which claim that motivation and goal orientation as two interdependent concepts have an interactional give and-take with the classroom context. As Anderman and Anderman, (1999) have claimed, goal orientation of the language learners, despite being dependent on the interaction of contextual and individual factors, can be the consequence of the role of the classroom environment as a determinant of students' orientations. Due to excessive emphasis given to speaking ability of the learners, since Iranian people by custom know speaking skill as the indicator of someone's language ability, Iranian EFL learners make attempt to show their taken-for-granted abilities and hide their own disabilities in language classes for the following reasons. First, Iranian culturally avoids and escapes from incompetency or at least

showing their true inner self. So, they both in micro-context of the classroom and macro-context of society, try to manifest that they are able and competent thereby concealing their weakness. This, in turn, causes them to avoid difficult tasks so that their drawbacks are not revealed. Second, when it comes to the micro-context of classroom education, Iranian EFL learners have the desire to make teachers have a positively false interpretation of their true abilities no matter what the real cost of the issue might be.

Based on the results of statistical analyses, one conclusion that can be drawn is that there is a significant relationship between goal types (learner orientation, performance orientation, and avoidance orientation) and learner autonomy (responsibility, ability, and activity) of advanced Iranian EFL learners in language learning institutes. To put it another way, the results of Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant relationship between goal-type and autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran.

However, regarding the fact that which goal type makes more contribution to autonomy in language learning among advanced EFL learners in the EFL context of Iran, the results of multiple linear regression showed that, among the goal types, avoidance orientation contributed just .4 percent autonomy while the other two (learning orientation and performance orientation) predicted great majority of the autonomy. Also, the results of one-way ANOVA indicated that the regression models –both first and second step – enjoyed statistical significance. That is to say the components of goal orientation significantly contributed to autonomy. To make a long story short, both learning orientation and performance orientation had a significantly meaningful relationship with autonomy while no significant predication of the relationship between avoidance and autonomy was reported.

From theoretical point of view, the present study illuminated the fact that the relationship between goal types and autonomy is highly context specific. It is not in fact likely to generalize research findings from one particular setting to the other settings very easily. A self-access environment can offer affordances (Gibson, 1979) which facilitate the concomitant and mutually supportive roles of sense of the self and imagination in the learning process, thereby enabling learners to relate the learning to their sense of self and gradually construct an L2 Self. In the EFL context of Iran, due to ever-dominance of the teacher and his/her subsequent scaffolding and mediating role, the goal types investigated in the present study can be conceptually and even concretely different from that of the other contexts. This can have a unique message for those who are going to conduct research in such contexts where the role relationships between teachers and learners are different from the learning-centered contexts.

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