

Emotional Intelligence and Learner Autonomy of Iranian TEFL Students: Is There a Relation?

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***Abstract:** This study mainly aimed to examine the relationship between Iranian MA TEFL learners' emotional intelligence (EI) and learners' autonomy. It also intended to investigate whether there was any difference between Iranian male and female students in terms of learners' autonomy. To fulfill the objectives of this study, 80 Iranian MA TEFL learners who studied English at Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht Branch were selected based on random sampling and given two types of questionnaire: A questionnaire of emotional intelligence by Bar-on (1997) as well as a questionnaire of learners' autonomy developed by Asadinik and Mirza Suzani (2015). Based on the results analysis, there found to be a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and learners' autonomy in TEFL learners. Besides, the t-test was computed to determine the significance of difference between male and female on learners' autonomy questionnaire, on the basis of which no significant difference between Iranian male and female TEFL learners in autonomy level was revealed.*

***Key Words:** emotional intelligence; learner autonomy; Iranian MA TEFL learners; relation*

1. Introduction

Nowadays rapid and extensive developments in sciences and technology and emergence of modern perspectives on social, political, economic and cultural issues have brought essential changes in educational system and pedagogy methods. In addition, with the decline of behaviorist psychology and the advent of cognitive psychology, especially constructivist approach in learning, learners are considered as creators of their own learning rather than merely recipients of it. That is, learners must process information while receiving them and links it to previous experiences, organize their learning and apply them in new situations.

Successful adaptation to information age and science and technology explosion requires one's ability and sufficient skills to pursuing information and analyzing it. Recent research shows that for this purpose, it's not only intelligence and cognitive capabilities, but also emotional characteristics, especially emotional intelligence and social skills which are of utmost importance (Sharifi, 2008)

Since the importance of learner autonomy in SLA has generally been attested (Dafei, 2007; Little, 1991; Benson & Voller, 1997; Chene, 1983; Tough, 1971), the interest of language

teachers, educators, and material developers toward the notion is steadily on the increase, and hence, there is a need to arrive at results upon which teachers and researchers can make a reasonable prediction and judgments. Therefore, there is a need for study to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and learner autonomy of effect of certain characteristics on SLA process.

In this study, the following research questions are addressed:

Q1: Is there any significant relationship between student's emotional intelligence and learner's autonomy?

Q2: Is there any difference between male and female student in learner autonomy?

Considering the research questions raised above, the following research hypotheses are formulated:

H01. There is no significant relationship between students' emotional intelligence and their learner's autonomy.

H02: There is no difference between male and female student's learner autonomy

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Considerations

2.1.1. Learner Autonomy

Raz (1986) asserts that in an autonomous life, an individual can select the goals and all that is needed for a healthy life (as cited in Benson 2008). So on the basis of Raz's view autonomy is "individual freedom and human rights for making individual choices"(p.5). So it can be concluded that learning autonomy is needed in all life not for special period or context.

Benson & Voller (1997) have considered five phases for autonomy: the first one is relates to the situations that learners study by themselves; the second one deals with a number of skills that can be learned and used in self-directed learning; the third refers to the potentials that is stopped by institutional education; the fourth phase is for responsibility practice that individuals need for their own learning; and the last one is the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

2.1.2. Learner's role and teacher's role

The learner's role in an autonomous environment is not that of a passive receiver of information. Learners are the makers of their own fortune and valued members of a learning community that is their class. Autonomous learners have the ability and willingness to learn on their own. Learners become successful if they take responsibility for their own learning. It is up to learners if they want to learn (Lowes & Target, 1999)!

In an autonomous classroom, teachers do not play the role of imparters of information or sources of facts. Their role is more that of a facilitator. The teacher's position is to manage the activities in the classroom and help learners plan their learning both for long and short term. The teacher has to be able to establish a close collaboration with the learners and make sure that all learners know what is expected of them at all times (Lowes & Target, 1999).

Teachers have the role of counselors. They need to inform learners and make them capable of choosing the best learning strategies. Learners have to be able to make informed choices. This means knowing the rationale behind the strategies and having time to experiment to find which suits best for each occasion. Teachers must, however, be careful not to guide the learners implicitly to the strategies they themselves prefer (Nunan, 2003).

2.1.3. Emotional intelligence

The notion of Emotional Intelligence (EI) has generated an expansive interest in both lay and scientific field.

Research shows that social and emotional skills are correlated to success in many areas of life, including effective teaching, student learning, quality relationships, and academic performance (Brackett & Salovey, 2004; Suttan & Weatley, 2003). Generally, most of the studies indicate that emotional intelligence has a significant effect on learning a second or foreign language (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000; Pishghadam, 2008).

Some researchers (Mayer et al., 2000; Ghosn, 2001) stated that emotional intelligence is a new concept, and therefore, little research has been carried out in relation to its effect on second / foreign language learning. Recently a few studies have been carried out (e.g., Pishghagam, 2008). He conducted a research to find out whether emotional intelligence, psychometric intelligence and verbal intelligence (VI) have any role in the academic achievement of university students majoring in ELT in Iran. He found out academic achievement is strongly associated with several dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., intrapersonal, stress management, and general mood competencies) (Pishghadam, 2008). Another study was conducted to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' emotional intelligence and their self-efficacy in Language Institutes. (Moafian & Ghanizadeh, 2009) The participants were asked to complete the "Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale" and the "Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire". It was revealed that there is a significant relationship between the teachers' emotional intelligence and their self-efficacy.

2.2. Empirical Background

Many researchers have been recently interested to the relationship among learner autonomy and language learning. Dafei (2007) has done a study to investigate the correlation between students' English proficiency and their level of autonomy and found a positive significant correlation between his students' English proficiency and their level of autonomy.

In another study, based on the comparison between the subjects in China and Europe, Zhang and Li (2004) concluded that learner autonomy was closely related with the language proficiency levels.

In Iran, Bayat (2008) in a study investigated the relationship between autonomy perception and classroom behaviors of students learning English as a foreign language. The data of the research was gathered with Autonomy Perception Scale and Classroom Behaviors Scale. Significant relationship was found between autonomy and classroom behaviors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

To fulfill the objectives of this study, 80 MA TEFL learners who studied English teaching at Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht Branch were selected voluntarily and were given two questionnaires. 9 male and 62 female students participated in this study. There was no limitation in age and gender because of restriction of students.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

To achieve the purpose of this study and address the questions posed, certain procedures were pursued. 80 TEFL students of M.A level at Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht Branch were selected based on random sampling. First, the researcher obtained permission from the professors to visit their classes and explained the purpose of the study to the students. Before administering the questionnaires, the participants were fully briefed on the process of completing the questionnaires; this briefing was given in Persian through explaining and exemplifying the process of choosing answers. Moreover, the researcher intentionally randomized the order of administered questionnaires to control for the impact of order upon the completion process and validity of the data.

The researcher randomly observed the process of filling out for some individuals to make sure they were capable to fully understand the questions and how to respond them. Because of some potential misunderstanding of vocabularies and concepts that was used in English version of Bar-on, the Persian version of Bar-on was used, and so the participants were asked to fill the Persian version of Bar-on. It should be added that the whole length of the class period (i.e., 90 minutes) devoted to administering these questionnaires. Subsequently, the administered questionnaires were scored to specify the participants' emotional intelligence score and the degree of learner' autonomy. This was followed by the statistical analyses which were elaborated in due course.

3.3. Instruments

In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, a questionnaire of autonomy as well as the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (Bar-On EQ-i) were utilized. Thus, the instruments used in this study were as follows:

3.3.1. *Questionnaire of autonomy*

To evaluate the participants' level of autonomy, a 22-item questionnaire of autonomy developed by Asadinik and Mirza Suzani (2015) was used and administered. The reliability of questionnaire was checked and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability index was reported as 0.75 that indicated the questionnaire items could fairly robustly measure the attribution of autonomy (Asadinik and Mirza Suzani, 2015).

3.3.2. *The Persian Version of Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (Bar-On EQ-i)*

The Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) is a pencil and paper self-report scale. The original version of EQ-I consists of 133 items containing five expansive areas of skills or competencies and 15 factorial components.

In this study, to avoid cross-cultural differences and to make sure Iranian students completely comprehend the content, the translated Persian version of this questionnaire was employed. This adjusted final form was decreased into 90 items and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability index was reported as .80 (Samouei, 2002). In another study, Dehshiri (2003) reported that the Persian version has generally good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity. As he states, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found to be .76 and the results of the factor analysis provided convincing support for the inventory hypothesized structure. This test and its subscales do have reliability and validity in Iranian culture (Dehshiri, 2003). The grade of emotional intelligence of all participants was calculated by online service of Mabna consultation center.

3.4. Design of the Study

Because the aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and learner's autonomy, so the research was a correlational research in which emotional intelligence was independent variable and learner autonomy was dependent variable. Also, this study was *ex-post-facto* design, since the researcher had no control over the manipulation of the independent variable.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

In the present study, the data analysis was provided in descriptive statistics and inferential statistics as well. Descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation, and standard error of the mean were obtained. For referential statistics, the collected data were scored and then the results were analyzed using Pearson moment correlation via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20).

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics of emotional intelligence

The emotional intelligence Questionnaire administered in the study in order to evaluate the participants' emotional intelligence. The descriptive statistics related to the obtained scores on the instrument appears below in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of emotional intelligence

<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>						
N	Range	Minimu m	Maximu m	Mean	Std. Deviation	

Emotional intelligence	71	166.000	242.000	408.000	333.54930	39.107832
Valid N (list wise)	71					

4.2. Descriptive Statistics of learner autonomy

The learner autonomy Questionnaire was administered in the study in order to evaluate the participants' level of autonomy. The descriptive statistics related to the obtained scores on the instrument appears below in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of learner autonomy

<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>						
	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learner autonomy	71	19.00	35.00	54.00	46.2254	4.48871
Valid N (list wise)	71					

4.3. Testing the hypothesis

4.3.1. Testing H01

H01. There is no significant relationship between students' emotional intelligence and their learner's autonomy.

In order to test the first hypothesis, the researcher carried out the Pearson Product Correlation between the participants' emotional intelligence and their level of autonomy. In Table 3 the value of correlation ($r = .603^{**}$) at significance level of 0.01 shows a statistically significant and positive relationship between emotional intelligence and learner autonomy of TEFL learners. In another words, increasing of each one corresponds to increasing of another.

Thus, H01 is rejected at 0.00 level of significance and it is concluded that a statistically significant relationship exists between TEFL emotional intelligence and their learner autonomy.

Table 3
Correlation between emotional intelligence and learner autonomy

<i>Correlations</i>			
		Emotional intelligence	Learner autonomy
Emotional intelligence	Pearson Correlation	1	.603 ^{**}
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000

	N	71	71
Learner autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.603**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	71	71
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).			

4.3.2. Testing H02

H02: There is no significant difference between male and female learners in learner autonomy.

The t-test was computed to determine the significance of difference between male and female on learner autonomy questionnaire, as shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4

Group Statistics					
	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Learner autonomy	Male	9	46.5556	5.02770	1.67590
	Female	62	46.1774	4.44833	.56494

Table 4 on means, standard deviations, standard error mean shows little differences in scores between Genders on learner autonomy questionnaire.

Table5
Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
						Lower	Upper		

Learner autonomy	Equal variances assumed	.114	.737	.235	69	.815	.37814	1.61207	2.83786	3.59413
	Equal variances not assumed			.214	9.905	.835	.37814	1.76856	3.56760	4.32388

Table. t-value showing differences in scores between Genders on learner autonomy questionnaire.

The mean and standard deviation of male scores are 46.5556 and 5.02770. The mean and standard deviation of female scores are 46.1774 and 4.44833.

The t-test was computed to determine the significance of difference between male and female on learner autonomy questionnaire.

On the basis of the above results, there is no significant difference between male and female learners in autonomy level.

5. Discussion

The current study attempted to investigate the possible relationships between TEFL emotional intelligence and their learner autonomy.

As displayed in Table 3, emotional intelligence has a strong, positive relationship with learner autonomy. This finding also confirms the idea that the results of most of the studies indicate that emotional intelligence has a significant effect on learning a second or foreign language (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000; Pishghadam, 2008).

This is also in support to another study, Motallebzadeh & Azizi (2012) who tried to elaborate the relationship between Iranian higher level EFL learners' emotional intelligence (EI) and their performance on TOEFL/PBT. Results indicated a significant and positive relationship between EQ and scores on TOEFL/PBT.

The findings of this study also confirm the ideas of a research claiming that academic achievement is strongly associated with several dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., intrapersonal, stress management, and general mood competencies) (Pishghadam, 2008).

Dickinson (1995) characterizes autonomous learners as “those who have the capacity for being active and independent in the learning process; they can identify goals, formulate their own goals, and can change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests; they are able to use learning strategies, and to monitor their own learning” (p.167, in Conttia, 2007). So it can be said that students with high level of EI can be more successful in decision making, self-study, examining themselves and other factors of autonomous learning.

In examining the second hypotheses, there is no significant difference between male and female learners in autonomy level and it confirms the study Varol & Yilmaz (2010) tried to find the differences and similarities between male and female in terms of autonomous language

learning activities. The analysis of the relevant data yielded somewhat similar results for both female and male learners.

By developing their emotional intelligence individuals (both male and female) can become more productive and successful at what they do, and help others become more productive and successful too. As a result it can be said that raising emotional intelligence especially in interpersonal and intrapersonal domain among students can be a valuable goal in second language acquisition.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study can provide an empirical evidence for the relationship between emotional intelligence and learner autonomy. The remarkable shift regarding EFL context can persuade majority of researchers to take the new studies in which find all the variables which may affect learners' learning. Also they can consider different factors which help learners to become independent and responsible in their learning.

Emotional intelligence seems to be one of these factors. Pishghadam (2009) explored the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in students' academic scores in reading, listening, writing and reading. His studies revealed that second language learning was strongly associated with several dimensions of emotional intelligence. Social skills, on the other hand, according to Goleman (1998), are "handling emotions in relationships well and accurately reading social situations and networks; interacting smoothly; using skills to persuade and lead, negotiate and settle disputes, for cooperation and teamwork" (p. 318).

Macaskill and Taylor (2010) argued that a small measure of autonomous learning will be beneficial to research in education. Besides, if the development of autonomous learners is one of the major aims of an education system then it is important that we develop tools to assist in its assessment (Chemers et al, 2001).

Independent language learning (ILL) reflects a move towards more learner-centered approaches viewing learners as individuals with needs and rights, who can develop and exercise responsibility for their learning (Hurd & Lewis, 2008). On the other hand, learners with highly developed social skills might not be as stressed over relationships, are better at managing conflict, and are better at elaborating with family and classmates as they strive toward academic goals (Drago, 2004).

From what was mentioned above, we can say that raising emotional intelligence among students can be a valuable goal and an ideal for every educational system as we all believe that education is a means to an end not an end in its own turn. So this study might have clarified some issues attributable to enhance autonomy in language learning.

Due to the fact that language learning is a multidimensional phenomenon, not only language teachers, but also language learners are required to play their role properly in order to facilitate and optimize this complicated process. Therefore, results of the current study have implications for language learners, encouraging them to become more conscious and autonomous about their best learning styles.

The truth is that some will be more naturally gifted emotional intelligence than others but the good news are that emotional intelligence skills can be learned. (This must be so because emotional intelligence is shown to increase with age.) However, for this to happen, people must be personally motivated, practice extensively what they learn, receive feedback, and reinforce their new skills.

By developing their emotional intelligence individuals can become more productive and successful at what they do and what they learn. They can make decision better and help others become more productive and successful too.

Regarding the results of the study, English (L2) teachers should give more attention to the development of sub factors of emotional intelligence in students, a person with independent character can be an independent learner .students with high self-esteem are more likely become independent learner (alpha omega academy, 2012) When teachers know more about students' emotional indigence, they can plan their instructions so as to enable their students to have more autonomy.

Also the results of current study may inform foreign language teachers and syllabus designers about the importance of psychological aspects in students and help them to raise this skill to become autonomous learners and to make the process of language learning easier.

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