

The Effect of Iranian EFL Learners' Attitude towards English Language Learning on Their Autonomy

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Abstract. In the process of English learning, each learner has his/her own attitude towards learning. In this path, s/he should feel free to be responsible for what s/he wants and seeks to learn which shows how autonomous the learner is. This study is based on the hypotheses that there is a relationship between what the learner feels towards English language learning and his/her level of autonomy. For this aim, forty Iranian EFL learners were involved in this study. They were all females and studied English as their foreign language at Iran Language Institute. Twenty of them were put into an experimental group and received a treatment. The treatment was used to improve their positive attitudes towards learning English. The second group, known as a control group also consisted of twenty learners but no treatment was applied to this group. Before the study has begun, the two groups received two sets of questionnaires on autonomy and attitude as a pretest to measure their attitude towards learning English. The posttest which was the same questionnaire was given to the experimental group after the application of the treatment, and to the control group which received no treatment. In order to see if there is a relationship between the learners' attitude and their level of autonomy or not, Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the significance of the relationship. T-tests were conducted between and within the groups. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between the learners' attitude

and their level of autonomy and the significance of this relationship was also clarified.

Keywords: learners' attitude, level of autonomy, Iranian EFL learners

1. Introduction

Each EFL learner has his/her own specific feeling about his/her own process of English learning. That is what we generally believe about the learners' attitude and it is believed to have a significant role in the process of learning and specifically learning a second language. Learners' autonomy on the other hand, has gained a lot of attention in language learning recently. Language learners are no longer conceptualized as those who come to the classroom just to receive pieces of information, restore them, and later display them, but rather, they are considered as those who come to the classroom to discover and to take responsibility for what they want to learn. As a result of having different attitudes toward learning, one can be positively or negatively affected, and the learners' amount of eagerness in taking responsibility for their process of learning is clarified.

Learners' success or failure in the process of learning is considerably in the hand of their attitude towards learning. Understanding their attitude and putting an effort to help the students to boost their positive attitude toward learning is an effective strategy for learning to take place, and to let the learners be autonomous.

The affective variables are so important in learning process. As Noels and Pelletier (2000) stated, "affective variables, such as attitude, orientation, anxiety, and motivation, have been shown to be at least as important as language aptitude for predicting L2 achievement" (p.35). Among these variables, attitude is studied in this research.

1.1. Definitions of attitude

Montano and Kasprzyk (2008) stated that attitude is specified by what they believe about the outcome of applying the behavior, and is weighted by evaluations of those outcomes. In this way, learners who highly believe that positively valued outcomes will result from the

appliance of the behavior, they will have positive attitude toward the behavior. For those who have strong beliefs on the negatively valued outcomes, this attitude is going to be negative.

Gardner (1980) defined attitudes as “the sum total of a man’s instincts and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic”(p.267). Gardner (1985) also considered attitudes as components of motivation. As he stated, “motivation refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p10).

Later on, Wenden (1991) recommended a broader definition of attitude. He categorized this concept into three categories; cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive component is constructed by the beliefs and ideas about the knowledge and in information the learners receive and also their belief about how s/he understand that information.

The affective or emotional component talks about the feelings and emotions that the person has towards the object (likes/dislikes, for/against). As Fang and Chen (2009) declared, “learning process is an emotional process. It is affected by different emotional factors. The teacher and his students engage in various emotional activities in it and varied fruits of emotions are yielded” (p.93-97).

The third one refers to the individual’s behavioral intentions toward the object of attitude (Zeinol Abedin, & Pour-Mohammad, 2012), and the way s/he reacts in a special situation. A member of a language community is recognized by their specific behaviors to their target language. Kara (2009) believed that:

Positive attitudes lead to exhibition of positive behaviors toward courses of study, with participants absorbing in courses and striving to learn more. Such students are also observed to be more eager to solve problems, to acquire the information and skills useful for daily life and engage themselves emotionally (p. 100-113).

Oscamp (1977) suggested that the three components named above, are so closely interrelated. As he said, “theorists who insist on distinguishing them should bear in the burden of providing that the distinction is

worthwhile” (p.10). He thought it is not important to measure all or just one of these components, because the interrelationship between them let the measurement to be sufficiently done as only one of the components is measured.

1.2. Learners’ autonomy

The idea of autonomy was entered into the field of language teaching from other disciplines like politics and philosophy. Learner autonomy is defined as “the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p.8). As Holec (1985) stated, learning to learn and making someone learn are completely different. His definition of autonomy “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p.3), is one of the most frequently cited definition of the concept. He elaborated on the definition as taking charge of one’s own learning is to understand, to have, and to handle the responsibility concerning all aspects of learning.

Little (1995) noted what autonomy is not. He stated that autonomy is a different notion than self-instruction; in other words, it is not only a matter of learning without a teacher, and at the same time, unlike a teaching methodology, it is not something that teachers do to learners. Although Holec’s (1985) definition of autonomy and the stages he referred implied that the learner has to cognitively engage in learning, it was Little (1991), who explicitly hinted that autonomy is not merely concerned with organization of learning. He declared that:

Essentially, autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he/she transfer what has been learned to wider contexts(p.4).

The idea of fostering of autonomy is clearly a desirable issue in language learning. As Benson (2001, p.244) mentioned, “autonomy takes variety of forms, there is no single best method of fostering it”. The development of learners’ autonomy is a process for which Scharle and Szabó (2000) proposed three stages “raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles” (p. 9).

In order to enable learner's autonomy to be flourished, teachers should be able to construct a good relationship with students, and as Nakamura (2000) suggested, they should quit the know it all role . According to Scharle and Szabó (2000), regarding teacher roles the students' attitudes changes overtime.

1.3. Learners' attitudes toward learning

It is asserted by Reid(2003) that “attitudes are important to us because they cannot be neatly separated from study” (p.33). As Ellis (1994) and Noels (2003) stated, the learners' attitude is shaped by the social factors which are based on level of education, income, and occupation. There exist both positive and negative attitudes toward learning. Positive attitude can enhance learning in the way that, as a result, learners, who are willing to communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning, can make it happen.

Negative attitudes, as Ellis (1994) stated, can become barriers to learning, since learners have these attitudes as they have difficulties in learning or they just feel that what is presented to them is boring. While negative attitude towards learning can result in poor performance of students, the positive attitude can result in an appropriate and good performance of learners.

In 1992, Baker emphasized how important research is in recognizing the effect of attitude in the process of language learning. Popham (2011) mentioned that affective domain is important by being an alternative factor in learners' future behavior. He stated that the reason behind our interest in promoting positive attitude of learners towards learning is that it makes the students more determined in the path of learning. The Students' attitudes can change overtime as they may have good or bad feeling at the beginning, but at the end, their attitude can be completely different.

1.4. Teacher-student relationship

Students' attitude towards learning a second language is very often influenced by the teacher-student relationship. Verbal (use of student's first names, use of humor) and non-verbal use of language(eye contact, positive gesture) are important in the way that they reduce the anxiety

in the classroom and prepare a pleasant environment for learning to take place.

1.5. Related studies

Many studies are done both internationally and locally in investigating the important role of attitude in EFL language learning context. In case of recent studies, Shams (2008) administered a research on the effect of attitude, motivation, and anxiety of the learners toward language learning. The findings revealed by his research showed that most of the participants had positive effect toward English language learning, which is drawn upon the fact that English learning efficiency is a valuable concept in daily life.

In 2009, Momani conducted a research on the secondary stage students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language and their achievement in reading comprehension. As the calculation of correlation showed, there was a high correlation between the two variables.

Another study done by Al-Tamimi and Shuil (2009), took Petroleum Engineering students as participants and it investigated their motivation and attitudes toward English language learning. The result explained the fact that they had positive attitudes towards using English in the social and educational context. Fakeye (2010) had a research regarding to the participants' gender as a variable under investigation and the result showed the significant relationship between the learners' attitude and achievement, and in this result, gender had no effect.

Having attitude as an important factor in the process of learning further research is needed to see if attitude has any effect on the learners' willingness to take hold of their learning process or in other word their level of autonomy as there is a gap here according to the point that few research is done specifically on this issue.

1.6. Strategies to improve learners' positive attitudes

The original model of different motivational strategies was first established by Dornyei (2001) as his model of motivational teaching practice. It consisted of 25 motivational strategies. The strategies which

are selected for this study with no specific orders are: elicitation, team competition, personalization, using referential questions, and social chat.

1.7. Objective of the study and research questions

This study is aimed at investigating the relationship between the EFL learners' attitudes and their motivation, the effect of their attitudes toward learning on their motivation, and how positively or negatively these different attitudes affect the students in being autonomous. For these aims to be accomplished, it is necessary to answer the following questions:

1. Does Iranian EFL learners' attitude have any effect on their autonomy?
2. How is autonomy fostered by positive changes in Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward English language learning?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of the learners of two English classes at Iran Language Institute who studied English as their foreign language. There were 30 students in each of the classes (all females). As a whole, this study was done for 60 EFL learners. All of them had the same level of proficiency based on a proficiency test which was applied by the institute, according to which they were selected to be in the same level.

2.2. Instruments

Two sets of questions were given to the participants through the application of two questionnaires. One of the questionnaires was to measure the students' attitude toward learning and the other one was used to measure their level of autonomy. The questionnaire of the learners' attitude which was used in this study was first employed by Boonrangsri et al. (2004). The learners' autonomy questionnaire which was developed by Zhang and Li (2004, p.23) was administered to investigate how ready the students were to take responsibility for their learning.

2.3. Data collection

This study was done on two groups and the design which was used for this study is true experimental. Random assignment was used to put the students into two groups in order to reduce the threats which might lead to decrease the internal validity. Randomizing was done by the researchers.

After the two groups were organized, one assigned to be the control group and the other was labeled as the experimental group. Both groups received two sets of questionnaires as a pretest to determine their level of autonomy and their attitude.

Then only the experimental group received a treatment through a strategy for improving their positive attitude toward learning. The strategies were proved to be effective through the previous research of the researcher which was referred to in the literature review section.

Finally, the two groups received the same questionnaires again to see how significantly the treatment affected their level of autonomy and to see if there is a significant change in their level of autonomy as a result of improvements in their attitudes.

2.4. Data analysis

According to the students' answers to each questionnaire, they were given scores, considering positivity and negativity of each part. According to each student's score, the total score of the groups was counted for the two questionnaires for each group.

The data was given to the computer and was calculated through SPSS software using Pearson correlation coefficient to see whether there is a significant relationship between the student's attitude and their level of autonomy or not. To clarify another objective of this study, which was how autonomy is fostered by different attitudes toward learning, the issue was mentioned based on the results obtained from the application of paired-sample and independent-sample *t*-tests.

3. Results and Discussion

In order to investigate the relationship between autonomy and attitude

of the learners, the first step was to run Pearson correlation coefficient. For the experimental group the correlation coefficient between the posttest of autonomy and the posttest of attitude was calculated and the results are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation coefficient between the pretest and posttest of autonomy for the experimental group

		Autonomy Experimental	Attitude Experimental
Autonomy Experimental	Pearson Correlation	1	.490*
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.028
	N	20	20
Attitude Experimental	Pearson Correlation	.490*	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.028	
	N	20	20

Note. *. Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As it is stated in Table 1, the level of significance is .02 which is smaller than .05 and .01. As a result, we found out that there was a relationship between autonomy and attitude and the direction of this relationship was positive which means as the attitude as one of the variables increases, the other variable which is autonomy also increases.

In order to be logical, there should be a correlation between the posttest of autonomy in the control group and the posttest of attitude in the same group too. To make sure that this logic exists, another correlation coefficient was run through SPSS software and the result which was gained is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation coefficient between the pretest and posttest of autonomy for the control group

		Autonomy Control G	Attitude Control G
Autonomy Control G	Pearson Correlation	1	.466*
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.038
	N	20	20
Attitude Control G	Pearson Correlation	.466*	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.038	
	N	20	20

Note. *. Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As the statistics and numbers show, there was also a correlation between attitude and autonomy of the learners in our control group. So the answer to the first research question is clearly achieved. We can definitely say that there is a relationship between the learners' autonomy and their attitude.

The second statistical procedure which was used in this study is *t*-test. This procedure is used to study the significant relationship within the groups and between the groups. This was fulfilled by using two kinds of *t*-test, i.e. paired-sample and independent-sample *t*-tests. To clarify the significant relationship for the experimental group before and after the application of treatment, the paired sample *t*-test was conducted between the pretest and the posttest of autonomy. The results are presented below in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired-sample *t*-test between the pretest and posttest of autonomy for the experimental group

			95% confident interval of the difference			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Pretest of autonomy for the experimental group	-7.84	25.75	-90.50	-66.39	19	.000
Posttest of autonomy for the experimental group						

According to the table, the level of significance is .000 which is smaller than .05 and .001. It is concluded that there was a statistically significant difference within the experimental group based on their autonomy. In order to observe if the changes and differences in the experimental group were due to the application of the treatment or not, another *t*-test was run for the control group. You can see the result in the table below.

Table 4. Paired-sample *t*-test between the pretest and posttest of autonomy for the control group

		95% confident interval of the difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest of autonomy for the control group	6.85	22.21	-3.54	17.24	19	.184
Posttest of autonomy for the control group						

By looking at Table 4, we came to the point that there was no statistically significant difference between the scores of pretest and the scores of posttest because the level of significance is .184, which is larger than .05. Therefore, it is concluded that our treatment was effectively done in our experimental group.

The same procedure was used for the scores of attitudes in both experimental and control group by the application of paired-sample *t*-test. For the experimental group, the numbers are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Paired-sample *t*-test between the pretest and posttest of attitude for the experimental group

		95% confident interval of the difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest of attitude for the experimental group	-1.34	12.38	-140.29	-128.7	19	.000
Posttest of attitude for the experimental group						

A close look at Table 5 shows that there was a statistically significant difference within the experimental group, as the level of significance is .000, which is smaller than .05. To see if this statistically significant change's cause was our treatment or not, we ran another paired-sample *t*-test just for the control group to compare and investigate the scores of pretest and posttest of the group. What we expect is that there should

be no statistically significant difference or change within the control group in order to make sure about the effectiveness of the treatment.

Table 6. Paired-sample t-test between the pretest and posttest of attitude for the control group

			95% confident interval of the difference			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest of attitude for the control group	6.60	30.75	-7.79	20.99	19	.349
Posttest of attitude for the control group						

By paying attention to Table 6, our expectations came to reality. As the level of significance is .349, a number which is larger than .05, there were no statistically significant differences or changes within the control group which had received no treatment. Again we can confidently say that the treatment applied to the experimental group was an effective one and that the changes and differences were because of the treatment.

Finally, we compared the scores of posttests of autonomy and attitude of the experimental group with the scores of posttests of autonomy and attitude of the control group. This time because we have two groups, independent-sample *t*-test was used. The results are presented in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7. Independent-sample t-test between the post tests of autonomy for the experimental and control group

				95% confidence of the interval of the differences		
	F	Sig.	df	Sig.(2tailed)	lower	upper
Autonomy scores	17.3	.000	38	.000	79.00	101.89
			22.73	.000	78.75	102.14

Table 8. Independent-sample t-test between the post tests of attitude for the experimental and control group

		F	Sig.	df	Sig.(2tailed)	95% confidence of the interval of the differences	
						lower	upper
	Equal variances assumed			38	.000	79.87	94.32
Attitude scores		.186	.000				
	Equal variances not assumed			22.83	.000	78.86	95.33

Comparing Tables 7 and 8, it can brightly be seen that there was a significant difference in the posttests of autonomy and the posttests of attitude after the application of treatment in the experimental group. According to the significance level, which is .000 in both cases, and it is smaller than .05, it is believed that there was a statistically significant change between the two groups in both categories.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the EFL learners' attitude towards English language learning and their level of autonomy and to see whether by improving their attitudes towards English language learning their level of autonomy also changes or not. The results gained from this study were in the same direction as what the researcher has expected and there were a significant relationship between the students' or the learners' attitudes and their level of autonomy. As the learners' attitudes towards English language learning were positively increased by the use of different motivational strategies as a treatment, the learners started to take more responsibility towards their process of English language learning. By comparing the results gained from the scores on pretests and posttest of both experimental and control groups, it was clearly proved that the group in which the researcher had applied the treatment and in which the learners' attitudes were positively boosted, learners were significantly more autonomous. There is a chance here for further researches to see

which motivational strategy is the most effective one specifically in the process of taking hold of English language learning.

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