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# The Relationship between Learners' Self-directed Learning Readiness and their English for Specific Purposes Course Accomplishment at Distance Education in Iran

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Abstract

The major role of self-directed learning, a sub-division of autonomy, in successful learning at distance education has been informed by various studies. Although learners pass General English courses before studying any ESP courses at distance education in Iran, they sometimes lack the preliminary skills for independent language learning. The current study aimed to explore ESP learners' self-directed learning readiness (SDLR) and the relationship between SDLR and ESP course accomplishment. Participants were 126 B.A students (33 male and 93 female) studying English for Students of Economy and Management (ESEM) at Tabriz Payam-e-Noor University which is based on distance learning. Data gathered by Guglielmino's (1978) self-directed learning readiness scale (SDLRS) and a test of ESEM. Data analysis revealed that half of the learners' SDLR is at an average or below average level, which is likely to be insufficient for conducting successful self-directed language learning (SDLL). Furthermore, the correlation coefficient demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between SDLR and ESP course accomplishment. Therefore, the need for appropriate training to improve learners' SDLR that directly contributes to a successful ESP learning at distance education in Iran becomes apparent.

*Keywords*: distance education, ESP, self-directed learning, self-directed language learning

In recent decades, as the research has grown in the area of self-directed learning (SDL), scholars have begun to explore it in the area of foreign or second language learning. It is claimed that a considerable amount of language learning occurs outside the classroom; consequently, students perform one of the major roles in organizing this aspect of learning (Horwitz, 1987). Therefore, the need for addressing other aspect of SDL called self-directed language learning (SDLL) becomes apparent.

Whereas SDLL is common among all language learners, it is a salient feature of ESP learners in distance learning. In such a setting, learners are obliged to apply SDL during their whole studies and cope with requirements of this university. It is claimed that SDL is the essential factor leading to success in distance learning courses (Gan, 2004; Gearhart, 2002). However, as learners in Iran are accustomed to learning in formal education with a teacher-centered style for many years, learning in a SDL method can be very demanding for them. As

a result, they may be confronted with problems in conducting SDL in their courses, especially language learning courses.

In order to estimate the depth of ESP learners' problems and the need for self-directed training in distance education in Iran, research was conducted by Araghi and Mohammadi (2012) on 275 ESP learners majoring in Theology and Islamic Science, and Economics and Social science, Management, Geology, and Chemistry at Tabriz Payam-e-Noor University. The fact that around 75% of the ESP learners were not aware of skills and strategies to promote SDLL and preferred to be taught directly by teachers implies that it is necessary to make learners aware of the benefits and steps associated with SDLL in order to facilitate ESP learning in the distance education system in Iran.

These findings, lack of research in the area of SDLL, and the critical condition of ESP learning in distance education in Iran makes conducting of this research vital. This study aims to demonstrate a clear state of ESP learners' self-directed learning readiness (SDLR) for distance education in Iran. Moreover, it aims to find the relationship between learners' SDLR and their ESP course achievements. The following research questions were developed based on the aims of this study:

1) What is the learners' current level of SDLR?

2) Is there any relationship between learners' SDLR and their ESEM grades?

3) Can SDLR be used as a good predictor of learners' final ESP grades?

## Literature Review

We usually expect learning to take place in educational institutions under the direction of a teacher based upon a textbook and a systematic course. However, this is a narrow view toward the learning process because learning does not cease outside the confines of the classroom (Gibbons, Bailey, Comeau, Schmuck, Seymour, & Wallace, 1980). Learners usually conduct much of the learning process outside the boundaries of a formal classroom.

SDL that leads to conducting independent studies is not totally a new concept in the field of learning (Grow, 1991). It is a concept widely used in the context of learner autonomy. It is defined by several scholars in different terms, some of them listed below:

- SDL refers to any self-teaching projects in which the learner establishes his specific goal, decides how to achieve it, finds relevant resources, plans his strategies, and maintains his motivation to learn independently (Tough, 1967).

- SDL is a process in which individual learners take the advantage to recognize their learning needs, establish learning goals, identify appropriate materials, implement relevant strategies in learning, and evaluate the learning progress, with or without the help of others (Knowles, 1975).

- SDL is any study in which individual learners take the responsibility to plan, implement and evaluate their own learning process (Hiemstra, 1994).

- SDL is a process of learning in which the learners control their own learning in terms of setting goals, finding resources, selecting appropriate methods to learn and evaluating the learning progress (Brookfield, 1995).

- SDL is a learned phenomenon that is based on affective traits, love of learning and basic skills, and cognitive exercises (Vann, 1996).

- SDL is any accumulation of knowledge, skill, or personal development that individuals accomplish by their own efforts using any method in any circumstances at any time (Gibbons, 2002).

- SDL is a state of learning in which making all the decisions related to learning are shouldered by the learner; however, main factors in implementing the decisions are necessarily given by authorities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

- SDL is an approach to learning that relies on flexibility in time and place of learning and entrusts responsibilities of learning to the learner (Smedley, 2007).

Considering all the definitions of SDL, it is worth mentioning that according to Caffarella (1993) 'self' in SDL does not necessarily mean solitary learning or learning in isolation. She further stressed the roles of human resources such as friends, colleagues, and experts in that area of knowledge and material resources like books, magazines, and journals in providing help for SDL.

The definitions depend on the kind of view that scholars had toward SDL. Some believed that SDL is an instructional process in which the learning is centered on all external factors of learners (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994; Hiemstra &

Sisco, 1990; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1967). Others emphasized personal characteristics internal to individual learners which enables them to pursue SDL successfully (Guglielmino, 1978). Some other scholars approach SDL from the viewpoint of social, experiential, and political aspects (Brookfield, 1993; Vann, 1996).

During recent decades, several research studies in the area of SDL have resulted in numerous publications, research reports, and instruments by other researches from around the world. Gibbons et al. (1980) explored the biographies of 450 self-directed learners to find patterns in order to propose principles for SDL. Long (1989) highlighted the major role of building theory and principles for SDL in terms of sociological, pedagogical, and psychological dimensions. Candy (1991) demonstrated the dichotomy of SDL as a process and as a goal. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) suggested Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model with the aim to highlight similarities and differences between SDL as an instruction method and as a set of personality characteristics. Hiemstra (1994) investigated SDL in terms of learning and learner's ability or willingness to take the responsibility of learning and accepting its relevant consequences. Hiemstra and Brockett (1994) explored how to overcome internal and external sources of resistance to SDL.

In the area of language learning, attributes and behaviors of third language learners were examined and compared to second language learners by Rivers (1996). This study revealed two main results: a) Third language learners succeeded in language learning faster than second language learners. b) The characteristics and behaviors of third language learners were similar to self-directed language learners (Rivers, 1996).

The importance of self-directed learning as a prerequisite for online courses in the context of distance learning is confirmed by Gearhart (2002) at Dakota State University. It was found that there is a positive relationship between the level of self-directedness, measured by a self-directed self-assessment test and the final course grades.

With accelerating interest in SDL, new roles are necessary for both teachers and learners. Gibbons et al. (1980) focus on the active role of learners in engaging with challenging activities as contrasted with passive and abstract-theoretical activities. Tough (1967) emphasizes the shift of responsibility from teacher to learner in conventional learning and SDL. He asserts that the range of responsibilities varies along a continuum in which at one pole the maximum responsibility is shouldered by the teacher whereas at the other pole the maximum responsibility is shouldered by the learner.

Despite the plethora of literature developed in the area of SDL across the world, it seems that we are far from understanding the role of readiness for SDLL at distance learning in Iran.

## Methodology

### *Participants of the study*

Participants of this study were 126 B.A students of Economics and Management including 33 male and 93 female learners. They were studying English for Economics and Management (ESEM) at Tabriz Payam-e-Noor University based on a distance education system. All the students passed the General English course that is a prerequisite course for selecting ESP courses.

### *Data gathering instruments*

In order to gather data, a questionnaire of self-directed learning readiness scale (SDLRS) developed by Guglielmino (1978) was applied to test students' degree of readiness for SDLL. SDLRS is a 58-item scale, a highly valid and reliable questionnaire, which has been used in more than 250 studies in self-directed learning. The main focus of items are on 8 factors: openness to learning opportunities, self-concept as an effective learner, initiative and independence in learning, informed acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning, a love of learning, creativity, future orientation, and the ability to use basic study skills and problem-solving skills. Each item has a 5-point Likert format scale including '1=almost never true of me', '2=usually not true of me', '3=sometimes true of me', '4=usually true of me', '5=almost always true of me'. Each point has a score equal to its number. For Example in positively stated items, selecting 'usually true of me', scores 4 points for that item. Some items of SDLRS are negatively stated; therefore, they are reverse scored. This means that if a participant selects 'almost always true of me', 1 point will be assigned to that item. The sum of these scores will show the SDLR of that participant. According to Guglielmino (1978) SDLR scores are classified into three levels. Scores between 58 and 201 are below the average level, 202-226 are at average level, and 227-290 are above the average level of SDLR.

In addition to SDLRS, an ESEM test was administered to the ESP learners by the university in order to check their learning of ESP course content. The ESP teacher scored the tests and reported the learners' scores to the researchers.

***Data gathering procedure***

Data was collected at Tabriz Payam-e-Noor University. The SDLRS questionnaire was distributed among learners near the end of the second semester. They were instructed to read the items and complete all of them. Although written instructions were supplied to learners, to make it more comprehensible the researcher explained orally that learners should read the items and select one of 1-5 points according to their first impression of statement about their learning experiences. Then, their SDLR was calculated by summing up the scores of items.

***Data analysis***

Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0 was used in order to calculate descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficient between scores of SDLRS and ESEM. Furthermore, linear regression was used to find out whether learners' current SDLR can predict their ESEM scores.

## Findings and Discussion

Data analysis displayed a SDLR mean score of 222.87 with a standard deviation of 26.29. By using SPSS, participants' SDLRS scores were recorded into three levels described by Guglielmino. The findings revealed that 50% of participants ranked at high level, 41% at average level, and 17.5% at below average level of SDLRS (Table 1). Students with high SDLRS scores can implement their own learning successfully while those with average scores are not fully competent in handling the entire process of learning at distance education (Guglielmino, 1978). This is even more problematic for those with below average scores since they are accustomed to traditional classrooms and lectures and lack the ability to conduct their own language learning. One of the apparent problems of learners in distance education in Iran is the lack of familiarity with the subject of SDL and relevant strategies and skills.

Table 1. Self-directed Learning Readiness Level

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | below average | 22 | 17.5 | 17.5 | 17.0 |
| | average | 41 | 32.5 | 32.5 | 50.0 |
| | above average | 63 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 126 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

In order to establish the relationship between learners' SDLR and their final course grades, a correlation coefficient was calculated. As can be seen in Table 2, a significant level of 0.002 that is less than 0.01 confirms that there is a significant relationship between SDLR and ESEM grades. Since the value of Pearson correlation is 0.276, it was concluded that there is a positive relationship between SDLR and ESEM. However, this relationship is weak.

Table 2. Correlations

| | | SDLRS | ESP |
|---|---|---|---|
| Self-directed learning readiness scale | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .276** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .002 |
| | N | 126 | 126 |
| English for Students of Economics and Management | Pearson Correlation | .276** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .002 | |
| | N | 126 | 126 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A linear regression model was employed to calculate the extent to which SDLRS predict ESEM scores (Table 3). The R Square equals 0.076, which reveals that learners SDLR can only predict a little more than 7% of their scores in the ESEM course.

Table 3. Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .276[a] | .076 | .069 | 3.51444 |

a. Predictors: (ESEM), SDLRS

The existence of a weak relationship between SDLR and ESEM might be influenced by several issues in the Iranian system of education. The most important one is adherence to teacher-directed methods during studying at elementary, junior, and high schools. On the other hand, lack of training regarding SDL imposes another limitation on learners.

These findings can shed light on the concept of language learning in distance learning in Iran. Most of the research in Iran focuses on open learning; therefore, it is necessary to consider the important factors such as SDL, SDLR, skills and strategies of SDL in language learning at distance educational system, too.

## Conclusion

Gibbons (2002) focused on the prominent state of SDL in today's life by stating that:

> Globalization is rapidly expanding the economic field of play. Change is dramatically shifting the nature of life and work. Knowledge is doubling every few years. Technology is transforming the way we live and the way we work. Work itself is transformed from the well-protected lifelong job to the precarious short-term performance contract. Individuals will not be looked after from the cradle to the grave; increasingly, they must look after themselves. Students must know how to learn every day, how to adapt to rapidly shifting circumstances, and how to take independent initiative when opportunity disappears. SDL prepares students for this new world in which the active learner survives best (p. 2)

There is no doubt that "the most important outcome of education is to help students become independent of formal education" (Gray, n.d.). Therefore, there should be a balance between learners' SDLR and the kind of education, they are undertaking.

Considering all the related literature, an analysis of the relationship between learners' SDLR and their ESEM scores were conducted at Tabriz Payam-e-Noor University. The findings revealed that half of the learners' level of readiness is at average or below average

level, which seems insufficient for conducting a successful SDLL in the distance education system of Payam-e-Noor University. This may have been affected by learners' tendencies for teacher-directed classes in the Iranian educational system.

Furthermore, the existence of a positive relationship between learners' SDLR and course accomplishment confirms that by increasing learners' SDLR it is highly likely that their course grades will improve.

In order to keep the trends of SDLL at this university, a helpful instruction of how to conduct SDL is required. Several researchers implemented learner-training courses as an intervention program in various fields of study. They found that it enhances learners' readiness for SDL and achievements of main courses (Gan, 2004; Gearhart, 2002; Huang, 2008; Saha, 2006).

Findings of this study can directly contribute to ESP teaching in distance education and in the preparation of guidelines to promote ESP learning in a self-directed way. Moreover, teachers and materials developers will be persuaded to smooth the way for learners of ESP courses in distance education in order to engage not only in updating of their knowledge in the related majors of study through medium of English language, but also in learning English for meeting their daily needs.

It is undeniable that there were some limitations in this study, which can suggest ideas for further research, such as:

- This study was conducted in one branch of Payam-e-Noor University in Iran. Therefore, it might not adequately represent the population of ESP learners in distance education in Iran.

- The participants were not selected randomly; moreover, in this study, the participants were selected from one group of majors i.e. Economics and Management.

- The focus was on ESP, but it is necessary to consider general English learning in distance education, too.

Therefore, the findings of this study need to be interpreted with due consideration of the limitations.

## Notes on the Contributors

Parinaz Mohammadi is an EFL instructor and supervisor at Language Teaching Centers. She has conducted several research projects related to autonomous language learning, teaching issues in distance education, and class management.

Seyed Mahdi Araghi is an assistant professor in TEFL at Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran. He has published several articles in applied linguistics including psycholinguistics, contrastive analysis, and teacher training programs.

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