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Autonomous Language Learning in a Work-cycle: Learners' Perceptions, Beliefs and Behaviors

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Abstract

The present study reports on an attempt to apply the principles of autonomous learning within the curriculum of an online course for teaching English to Iranian adult language learners. The contents of the course (i.e. general English) were delivered using work-cycles (Legenhausen, 2003) and were completed in the form of students' projects. Each work-cycle started by setting personal learning goals in the *planning and negotiation* phase*,* deciding on the project in the *decision-making* phase, completing the actual project in the *project* phase, followed by an evaluation of the outcomes in the *evaluation* phase. Different phases of the cycle fitted autonomous learning framework, enabling the implementation of the principles of learner autonomy. Finally, after the actual implementation of the principles of learner autonomy through work-cycles, learners' perceptions were assessed to estimate the efficiency of autonomous learning using work-cycles which revealed an overall positive pattern of beliefs. However, despite general success of work-cycles in implementing autonomous learning, a gap between learners' autonomous beliefs and behaviors was observed which necessitates further preparation in the form of awareness-raising.

Keywords: autonomy, online learning, CALL, work-cycles

Fostering autonomy among language learners has been one of the concerns of researchers and practitioners over the past few decades (Benson, 2001; Cotterall 1998; Little, 2000; Littlewood, 1996; Ter Haseborg, 2012). The sudden growth of interest in autonomy among language teaching and learning researchers is theoretically supported, as "enhancing students' autonomy and control over the language learning process is a central goal of modern approaches to language teaching" (Warschauer et al., p. 1). Autonomy is also considered important since autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners and their learning is efficient and effective (Little, 1997).

The rapid uptake of various technologies for educational purposes also adds to the importance of the issue, as many learners are learning languages through internet and online

environments, which has a long relationship with learner autonomy (Motteram, 1997). More specifically, the physical separation between teacher and learner in online classes (Harmon, 2012), and the vastness of the available learning material on the internet necessitates a degree of autonomy for learners. Furthermore, some amount of self-directed learning has been encouraged by the "growing role of technology in education" (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 6). However, according to White (1995), the use of self-instructional context does not automatically equate to learner autonomy, and autonomy may or may not arise or develop within these contexts as a result of instruction. Thus, for an effective autonomous language learning program in online medium, sound pedagogical practices need to follow technology.

The current study applied the principles of learner autonomy to the curriculum of an online language course which was delivered through work-cycles. As a solid framework for presenting the principles of learner autonomy, work-cycles integrated the operational and procedural principles along with the content of the course which was general English for the current study. Thus, the current study claims to fill a gap in the literature on language learner autonomy regarding the absence of a solid framework for practical application of learner autonomy in actual language teaching by addressing the following research questions:

a. How do learners perceive the effectiveness of autonomous online learning through work-cycles?
b. What are the discrepancies between autonomous beliefs and behaviors after autonomy training?

Literature Review

Language Learner Autonomy

In his seminal work, Littlewood (1996) presents a framework for fostering learner autonomy in language classes. He defines an autonomous person as "one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions" (p. 421). This capacity includes ability and willingness as its main components. Ability involves knowledge about language and necessary skills for carrying out learning, whereas willingness includes the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for learning. Moreover, Littlewood's framework illustrates different parts of a program to increase language learner autonomy which includes communication strategies, learning strategies, independent work,

creation of personal learning contexts, creation of personal meanings, and linguistic creativity. Littlewood (1996, 1997) recommends using the autonomous approach as a teaching methodology that links classroom teaching and learning to learning beyond the classroom. What is absent in Littlewood's framework is the concept of interdependence which is central to the definition of an autonomous learner. According to Kohonen (1992), cited in Benson (2001), "autonomy entails the notion of interdependence which means being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context" (p. 14). It entails being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context that is being able to cooperate with others to solve conflicts in constructive ways (Kohonen, 1992). In the same vein, Kessler and Bikowski (2010) add a new dimension to Littlewood's framework making it more appropriate framework for online learning. In their revised framework, there are interdependencies between the learner, teacher, peer, computer and material which lead towards learning objectives.

Cotterall (2000) draws upon Littlewood's principles and presents a course design for practical application of autonomy. Five principles emerged out of the course design process which are listed as (1) learner goals, (2) the language learning process, (3) tasks, (4) learner strategies, and (5) reflection on learning. According to Cotterall (2000), the course design principles aim at transferring the responsibility from teacher to learner in order to help them take charge of their learning. Cotterall (2000) believes that a course that fosters learner autonomy has the following features:

1) The course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies;
2) Course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process;
3) Course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks;
4) The course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance;
5) The course promotes reflection on learning.

In the same vein, Dam and Legenhausen (1997) introduce underlying, operational, and procedural principles as being the essential elements of autonomous classrooms. Based on their classification, underlying principles imply that language learning is a 'creative construction process' which is created upon authentic communicative interactions between learners and

between teacher and learner(s). Characterized by authenticity of the social interactions, operational principles are the second set of principles characterizing autonomous learning environment. According to Legenhausen (2003), "since classroom interactions are largely based on the learners' free choice, and since those activities that are intended to promote the learning process are more often than not carried out in pairs or small groups, the authenticity of the communicative exchanges is guaranteed" (p. 67). They also highlight awareness-raising on language and language learning process as the main responsibility of a teacher in an autonomous learning environment. Finally, the procedural principles aim at providing a structure to the procedures of language learning and supporting the learners' feeling of security and of control over the process. Based on these principles, Legenhausen (2003) presents work-cycles that are units of teaching which are not merely based on delivering content, but on incorporating learners in the process of learning by asking them to choose content in the first phase, and allowing them to set personal learning goals and complete their projects based and finally evaluate the outcome. The last phase namely, evaluation of the outcomes determines if learning was successful based on the goals set at the beginning of the cycle. As work-cycles are project works, they are usually done by groups of students in crowded classes and as a whole class activity in classes with few students. Figure 1 visualize the principles of autonomous learning environment in a work-cycle.

Figure 1

Work-cycles for Autonomous Learning (adapted from Legenhausen, 2003, p. 69)

Ideas and activity banks are a collection of ideas and activities chosen by both the teacher and students to give learners freedom to choose among a variety of topics and exercises for completing their projects. According to Legenhausen (2003), work cycles have the potential to guide autonomous classrooms toward higher achievements. However, generally, the effectiveness of work-cycles was only assessed in face-to-face learning situation (Legenhausen, 2003; Ter Haseborg, 2012) and the possible potentials of work-cycles in promoting learner autonomy in online language teaching/learning is the concern of the current study.

The Affordances of Technology for Learner Autonomy

It is a common belief that computer assisted language learning (CALL) has the potential to support learner-autonomy based pedagogies. Schwienhorst (2012) lists some features of CALL that can support autonomy programs:

- CALL environments allow for greater self-awareness and encourage learners to experiment with different roles through the use of virtual representations, thereby reducing the affective filter.
- CALL environments may go beyond face-to-face communication in the way they can enhance linguistic and cognitive awareness of the learning process, especially through the medium of writing.
- CALL environments support interaction by locating participants in a shared environment, thus allowing for a common linguistic reference point.
- CALL environments enhance conversation management and group work by allowing for collaboration in a variety of rapidly changing group work scenarios.
- CALL environments with their underlying spatial metaphors are a more natural way of organizing information resources than an interface that relies solely on the use of buttons and/or menu bars.
- CALL environments enable learners to collaborate on resources in real time.
- CALL environments encourage and enable learners to actively participate in the creation and organization of their learning environment.
- CALL environments provide an ideal support for the teacher as facilitator, counsellor, and resource; in addition, they provide the teacher with a large number of research tools.

The literature on language learner autonomy also suggests some ways by which technology can help learner autonomy. For instance, the writing skill has been shown to be supported by technology (e.g. tandem learning) in learner-autonomy-based classrooms (Aase et al., 2000; Little, 2001). By applying tandem learning, Schwienhorst (2012) shows how learner autonomy can create a dynamic exchange between expert native speakers and language learners from different cultural backgrounds. In tandem learning, learner autonomy is defined as creating a reciprocal responsibility for one's own and peer's (native speakers') learning. Learners must set their learning objectives and approaches to achieve their learning goals. Moreover, learners and the native speaker should keep the balance between the amount of communication in the target language and the amount of authentic data. For achieving this goal, Schwienhorst (2012) introduces three major rules of reciprocity, bilingualism (which entails the equal balance of L1 and L2 in communication) and learner autonomy.

In another study focusing on autonomy in online teaching and learning, Mutlu and Eroz-Tuga (2013) attempted to develop learner autonomy using a language environment equipped with technology and measuring autonomy through five indicators of motivation, responsibility, out of class study, and learning strategies. Their findings indicated that to enhance the effectiveness of autonomous learning through CALL, learners should be prepared for accepting the concept of autonomy. They suggested awareness-raising as an effective technique to reach this goal.

Usuki (2001) and Chan (2001) also believed that autonomy training through CALL is valuable as some students realize that they can take better advantage of resources by being more independent. In fact, if independent learning is the goal, we should give learners good reasons for moving in that direction which is possible by the flexibility and variety that characterizes learning through internet. In her study about autonomous learning, Fanany (2005) maintains that the ability of students to make use of technology without regular supervision offers great potential for the enhancement of autonomous learning and the encouragement of students' responsibility for independent learning.

Method

Design

The current study adheres to the mixed method paradigm of research including both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative part of research included a semi-structured, open ended interview and for the quantitative part, we administered the Autonomous Beliefs and Behaviors' Questionnaire designed by Chang (2007).

Participants

The participants of the current study were 35 Iranian adult language learners (both male and female) who were enrolled in an online General English language course at *E-Zaban* Virtual Language Institution. Based on the placement test administered by the institution, the participants were placed at the intermediate level of English language proficiency. The participants had a degree of familiarity with computer technology and virtual institution due to their prior experiences in learning English online for almost more than a year. The courses were conducted in a Moodle-based system that provided both synchronous and asynchronous communication opportunities through live audio, video, messaging, and recording facilities. From the registration to the placement test and participation in the classes, all steps were taken completely online.

Instrumentation

Training as the main part of the current study (i.e. the training) was done through a Moodle-based system by using synchronous video chat for conducting classes, teaching content, and whole-class discussions for solving students' possible problems. Also, a messaging platform was used as a help desk to offer students help. Moreover, some other online tools were adopted for certain purposes which are introduced below:

Wiki

Wikis are websites created by individuals and edited collaboratively by communities of users. As a collaborative environment, a wiki can be created for specific projects with a set group of allowable users (Godwin-Jones, 2003). The possibility to build the text collaboratively, track back the changes, comment on the revisions, and follow the history make the wiki an appropriate

educational tool for practicing writing. In the current study, a wiki was used for the purpose of practicing collaborative writing in a work-cycle. The wiki was built by the instructor at Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com) which is a free educational wiki service provider. The current study used the wiki as a platform for practicing writing, as many learners chose writing skill as their projects. The writing project was initiated, completed and edited by the learners and the teacher-researcher acted as a facilitator throughout the process.

WebQuest

WebQuest as an inquiry-oriented lesson format was used for gathering all the information that learners needed from the web and was applied as the idea and activity bank for the work-cycle. The WebQuests were hosted by Zunal (http://zunal.com/index.php), a free platform for creating educational WebQuests. Each WebQuest included six essential parts namely, a welcome page, introduction, task, process, evaluation and teacher's page. The WebQuest for the current study was created by the course instructor but was revised and evolved regularly based on the learners' needs for their projects (For more information about the use of WebQuest as idea and activity bank, see Sadaghian and Marandi, 2016b).

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a method of data collection for the first research question of the current study. The interviews were carried out at the end of the semester in the virtual institution. The language of the interview was English and the data collected from the interviews was manually transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The thematic analysis of interview data is presented in Table 1.

Autonomous Behaviors and Beliefs Questionnaire

Adopted from Chang (2007), the questionnaire investigated various aspects of learner autonomy affected by autonomous learning through work-cycles. As a multidimensional construct, autonomy can be studied and estimated from various perspectives. Thus, the reason for choosing Chang's (2007) questionnaire; from among a plethora of instruments used for gauging learner autonomy; was its focus on the construct of learner autonomy which was similar to the focus of work-cycles that were applied for fostering learner autonomy. Based on the

questionnaire, learners' autonomous beliefs were studied in relation to ten discriminating features including *identifying one's strength and weakness*; *setting up goals*; *deciding what to learn outside the classroom*; *evaluation*; *stimulating interest*; *learning from peers*; *self-direction*; *commenting on the learning material*; *discovering knowledge* and *choosing learning materials*. The questionnaire also estimated respondents' autonomous behaviors based on the same features. The reliability of the questionnaire piloted by 30 language learners prior to the training process was α=.79. Also, three experts in language learner autonomy judged the questionnaire as valid.

Procedure

The principles of learner autonomy were taught to the learners through work-cycles (Legenhausen, 2003). Learners were required to complete a project that they had chosen based on their determined needs and evaluate it by the help of peers. Work-cycles were introduced at the beginning of the course, however, some learners' frequent absences and relying on the records rather than attending synchronous teaching sessions prolonged the training process.

The focus of the first sessions of the course was on introducing the concept of work-cycles and informing learners of their roles as autonomous learners. Awareness-raising, however, was not only limited to talking about language learner autonomy, but also involved learners' thinking about their learning goals and how autonomous online learning can make their goals achievable. Learners then set their goals and chose their projects based on their perceived weaknesses or needs in a specific skill. Cooperatively with the course instructor, students designed a work-cycle with a project at the heart of it. For completing the project however, students were responsible to find necessary content from the internet which was pursued using the WebQuest. Students drew on the WebQuest to get ideas and activities to complete their projects.

Through the evaluation stage, learners evaluated not only their own projects, but also peers' projects by commenting on the project and discussing them in groups. Moreover, as the projects also affected learners' final grades, they were evaluated by the course instructor after self- and peer-evaluation. At the end of the training, learners took part in an online interview to express their perception regarding autonomous language learning with technology. Learners also filled in the learner autonomy questionnaires (Chang, 2007) which were then uploaded to the virtual institution.

Data analysis

The data from the interviews was transcribed manually and inductive thematic analysis was applied to the transcriptions. The first stage of data analysis involved a thorough listening to the interviews and providing a detailed transcription of the interview data. The interview data was then studied carefully by the researcher for a comprehensive understanding. During the next stage, the researcher started an inductive labeling process to find the opinions related to the learners' perceptions about autonomous online learning which were called 'codes'. The extracted codes were then transferred to a new word document and went through a secondary analysis. During this stage, the codes were studied carefully and were clustered under an umbrella term called 'themes'. Four themes emerged out of the codes, and there were a few codes that did not belong to any of the four themes and were thus, omitted from the list of codes. The created themes provided sufficient data to answer the first research question. As the codes were semantic and did not require coder's conceptual or theoretical framework for identifying implicit meanings, no need was felt for inter-coder agreement and the researcher conducted the final analysis of the themes to answer the research question.

For the second research question, the data collected from the questionnaires went through statistical analysis using Statistical Package for Social Science (version. 22) for Windows. The next section presents and discusses the results.

Results and Discussion

Four themes emerged from the analysis of learners' interview data which divided the learners' perceptions into positive perceptions of autonomy; negative perceptions of autonomy; positive perceptions of technology in autonomous learning environment; and negative perceptions of technology in autonomous learning environment. Table 1 illustrates the learners' perceptions along with an illustrative example for each interview taken from the transcriptions.

Table 1

Students' Perceptions of an Autonomous Learning Environment

Theme	Code	Example
Positive perceptions of autonomy	Out of class learning	I believe that I can continue my learning without classes because I know my needs.
	Setting personal goals	I know what do I want to learn and I can set my goal.
	Less reliance on the teacher	When I know my goal, I need teacher less than before.
	Self-evaluation	Planning helps me know if I was successful or not.
	Motivation	I love to continue learning English in this way.
Negative perceptions of autonomy	Confusion	So many responsibilities on the shoulders of the learner. It makes me confused.
	Need for a more organized syllabus	I wish I could know what I am going to do next.
	Abuse of freedom	I tended to choose easy projects for my work cycles.
Positive perceptions of technology in autonomous learning environment.	New sources for self-learning	Finding out so many new websites for self-learning is great.
	Learning to write for many readers	When I write in my weblog, I try to write as good as possible because other teachers may read my reflection too.
	Multiple ways to learn	I downloaded podcasts and listened to them even while I was driving.
	Extended learning chance	I always have English listening files with me and use them as I find time.
	Interesting materials	Some of the materials in the WebQuest were very interesting.
	Authentic materials	I could listen to TED talks and hear real American pronunciation.
Negative perceptions of technology in autonomous learning environment.	More receptive than productive	We didn't have enough chance to speak.
	Confusing	Shifting between different pages and websites was confusing, especially in the first sessions.

Based on the underlying principles of language learner autonomy (Legenhausen, 2003), authentic communicative interaction between learners and learners and teacher in language

learning settings is the driving force for a creative construction process. Moreover, free choice for the learners is stressed by the operational principles of language learner autonomy which sticks to the maxim of authenticity and implies that learners should be free to plan their learning, set their objectives, complete the project, and evaluate the final outcome in learning a language (Littlewood, 1996) which in the case of the current study, were pursued using work-cycles.

According to the results obtained from the interviews, work-cycles were found to be efficient in a successful implementation of the principles of learner autonomy as positive perceptions of autonomy and technology in autonomous learning environment outperformed the negative ones. During the planning and negotiation phase, the current study benefitted from a flexible syllabus and ideas and activities were chosen based on the learners' interest and needs. Also, it should be noted that a majority of people who choose to learn language in online institutions are usually adults who often have clear goals in mind before starting to learn a new language. Most of the participants in the current study also had clear goals which helped them accelerate the planning and negotiation phase. They had a general picture of their needs at the beginning of the study and set their goals upon those needs. The course instructor also helped them break their goals into smaller and achievable chunks in terms of skills and provided them with a set of activities, materials and ideas to use during a cycle. The availability of technology was an undeniable plus for organizing learning materials based on the learners' projects, as there was no limitation in choosing activities. Moreover, the small number of students in the online course made the planning and negotiation feasible as there was less heterogeneity in learners' goals and choices. Obviously, planning and negotiation would be more difficult in crowded face-to-face classes.

The ideas and activities were presented to the learners in the form of a WebQuest, which provoked learners' positive perceptions represented under the codes of *extended learning chance* and *interesting material*. By extended learning chance, learners meant having learning materials 24 hours a day. For instance, one learner reported on checking the WebQuest late at night for finding any updates or new materials. It is apparent that the new technology provoked learners' interests as it was their first experience of using the WebQuest. Moreover, learners found the WebQuest useful as it provided plenty of reliable authentic learning materials according to their style preference. However, there were a few students who found WebQuest confusing and preferred a more organized syllabus. Similar to a retrospective syllabus (Candlin, 1984) that

appeared at the end of the course, the final WebQuest for a cycle was sometimes updated at the end of a cycle when the projects were almost finished.

The second phase in the work-cycle known as decision making on the project, was found as a positive feature of autonomous language learning in students' interviews. Learners found cooperating in the decision-making process motivating and a good practice for increasing their independence in future learnings. Decision making and ownership of the goals are inseparable parts of autonomous learning. On the other hand, the possibility of choice and decision making of the learners manifested itself under the code of *abuse of freedom*, which was a negative perception of autonomy. By *abuse of freedom* learners meant choosing easy subjects for their projects that could be completed in a short time. Although a very small number of learners frankly reported on abusing freedom in autonomous learning, such findings highlighted the need for awareness-raising for responsibility and accountability in future programs.

During the actual project phase, there were three steps known researching, documenting, and publishing (Legenhausen, 2003) which revealed an overall positive perception under the theme of *positive perception of technology in autonomous learning*. Learners reported on *new sources for self-learning, learning to write for many readers*, and *multiple ways to learn* as the extra advantages of online autonomous learning. Generally, such advantages motivated learners, as learners were engaged with authentic material during the cycle, which, according to Oxford (2006) increases learners' motivation for taking part in classroom activities.

Finally, during the evaluation phase, learners had internal and external evaluation based on the goals set at the beginning of the work-cycle. The codes revealed a rather general negative perception toward self- and peer-evaluation among learners. One reason, could be the system of education that learners were in and got used to its principles. In the Iranian education system, evaluation is usually done in formal ways in the form of final exams, and self- or peer-evaluation is not an expected type of evaluation. Generally, there are some advantages and disadvantages associated with self- and peer-evaluation. Firstly, it encourages students' involvement and responsibility, secondly, it makes learners to reflect on their roles and it allows students to see and reflect on their peers, and finally it focuses on the development of students' judgment skills (Ashraf & Mahdinejhad, 2015). However, self-evaluation has a risk of being unreliable and requires equipping learners with the necessary skills to undertake the assessment. Learners in

autonomous class also practiced peer-evaluation which challenged learners' dependence on the teacher as the only source of feedback. According to Chan (2000):

> Peer evaluation constitutes an essential follow-up activity in the autonomous classroom, as learners can rely on peers because the teacher is no longer the sole judge. Another advantage of peer feedback is the personal dimension it adds to the whole assessment process and the help it provides for learners to develop expertise in reflection, self-assessment, and evaluation. (p. 80)

For the second research question of the current study which is "*What are the discrepancies between autonomous beliefs and behaviors after autonomy training?*" learners' autonomous behaviors and beliefs were collected by an autonomy questionnaire (Chang, 2007) and the results were organized as two separate tables for beliefs and behaviors. Table 2 present learners' autonomous beliefs which has the highest value of each item highlighted.

Table 2

Learners Beliefs towards Autonomous Learning

Item	No(%)	Little(%)	Some(%)	Mainly(%)
Identify my own strength and weaknesses	2.9	8.6	**54.3**	34.3
Set up my own learning goals	0	11.4	37.1	**51.4**
Decide what to learn outside the classroom	0	11.4	25.7	**62.9**
Evaluate my own learning and progress	11.4	28.6	**31.4**	28.6
Stimulate my own interest in learning English	0	14.3	**54.3**	31.4
Learn from my peers, not just from the teachers	0	25.7	**57.1**	17.1
Become more self-directed in my learning	5.7	22.9	**57.1**	14.3
Offer opinions on learning materials	8.6	34.3	**42.9**	14.3
Discover knowledge in English on my own rather than waiting for knowledge from the teacher	5.7	25.7	**63.9**	5.7
Offer opinions on what to learn in the classroom	5.7	17.1	60	17.1

A glance at the table reveals that learners' choices revolved around *some* and *mainly* options for all items of the questionnaire. Learners' responses to the first part of the questionnaire reveal that learners consider themselves autonomous based on the definition of autonomy by items in the questionnaire.

According to Chang (2007), adoption of some autonomous behaviors follows from individual's beliefs. Thus, to gauge autonomous behavior, the same learners were asked to fill out the second part of the self-report questionnaire focusing on their actual behaviors in completing the work-cycle. To make sure that learners had a clear vision about their autonomous behaviors however, they were asked to recall their actual behaviors in completing the projects in work-cycles and answer the items based on their experiences. Table 3 presents learners' actual autonomous behaviors with regard to the items in the questionnaire.

Table 3

Learners' Autonomous Behaviors

Item	Not at all (%)	Hardly (%)	Occasionally (%)	Very much (%)
Identify my own strength and weaknesses	2.9	2.9	45.7	**48.6**
Set up my own learning goals	2.9	11.4	28.6	**54.3**
Decide what to learn outside the classroom	5.7	17.1	**45.7**	31.4
Evaluate my own learning and progress	11.4	14.3	**42.9**	31.4
Stimulate my own interest in learning English	0	14.3	**45.7**	40
Learn from my peers, not just from the teachers	0	22.9	37.1	**40**
Become more self-directed in my learning	8.6	17.1	34.3	**37.1**
Offer opinions on learning materials	5.7	14.3	**48.6**	31.4
Discover knowledge in English on my own rather than waiting for knowledge from the teacher	11.4	25.7	**45.7**	14.3
Offer opinions on what to learn in the classroom	5.7	20	**40**	34

The comparison of the two tables reveals a slight discrepancy between learners' autonomous beliefs and behaviors for some items in the questionnaire. The first item entitled *identifying ones' own strengths and weaknesses* for instance, reveals that as a behavior, 48.6% of learners are very much engaged with identifying their own strength and weaknesses whereas, 54.3% considered themselves responsible to some extent at the reflection stage, implying that that learners actually practiced identifying their strength and weaknesses. As learners had set their own goals at the beginning of the instruction and were responsible for completing their projects based on the activities they chose, they had to identify their strength and weaknesses in order to choose the right activity. A heavier load of responsibility in autonomous classes results

in learners' engagement in some activities such as identifying their own strength and weaknesses even without prior preparation. For the third item in the questionnaire, in contrast to the first items, learners' beliefs outperformed their behavior. Whereas 62.9% of the respondents believed that they mainly decide what to learn outside the class, the actual behavior showed that 45.7% of the learners decide what to learn out of the class on occasions.

The internet is replete with variety of learning material that need to be chosen consciously. Not all the material available online are appropriate for learning objectives. In fact, material should be culturally appropriate, fit learners' proficiency levels, be cost effective and lead learners toward learning objectives. It is the course instructors' responsibility to help learners in choosing right material and informing them of the standards. Regarding the role of teacher as knowledge provider, a percentage of 57% of the learners believed that they learn very much from their peers besides their teacher, yet in the case of behaviors, 40% of the respondents actually performed learning from peers to some extent. Less contact between peers in online courses could partially justify such a discrepancy in learners' beliefs and behaviors. Although, a lot of effort has been put into making stronger connections between classmates in online course, the nature of virtual classroom, and learners frequent absences hindered our efforts. For becoming a more self-directed leaner, the two parts of the questionnaire revealed a slightly different pattern. Finally, a total of 51.7% of the participants believed in becoming self-directed to some extent, whereas, 34.3% became self-directed in their learning in some occasions and 37.1% also rated their learning behaviors totally self-directed (very much) which indicates that there is still a great need for training self-directed learners.

The discrepancy between learner's beliefs and behaviors should become the starting point for building autonomy in language classroom. According to Cotterall (1995), "all behaviors are governed by beliefs and experiences and autonomous language learning behavior may be supported by a particular set of beliefs" (p. 196). Thus, the step prior to the promotion of learner autonomy, is investigation of learners' beliefs based on which, one can establish particular behaviors. Moreover, it should be noted that people from different cultural backgrounds may represent different patterns of behavior, thus, it is necessary to study underpinning behaviors in each cultural context. In the same vein, Sadaghian and Marandi (2016a) studied patterns of autonomous behavior among Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and found

three underlying factors namely, approach to studying; learner confidence in study ability; and experience of language learning as the emerging factors.

Conclusion

The study of learners' perceptions and their behaviors and beliefs suggested the success of work-cycles in helping learners to learn language autonomously. Work-cycles helped learners through different phases of autonomous learning namely, goal setting, deciding on the project, completing the project, and evaluation. Work-cycles also fitted the nature of autonomous online courses in which a need for an organized framework was felt due to the absence of a predetermined syllabus. The implications of the current study could be used in designing language learning programs aimed at teaching content and fostering learner autonomy at the same time.

The current study aimed at filling the gap in the literature regarding the absence of actual practices for training autonomous language learners. As online language teaching and learning necessitates a degree of learner autonomy for a successful learning experience, the findings of the current study will be profitable for designing online courses. The integration of work-cycles into the curriculum of online English courses will strengthen the practice of online learning by being in line with online collaborative learning theory (OCL) and the principles of learner autonomy.

Limitations

Besides its important findings, the present study also had some limitations, the biggest of which was the number of participants. As online learning is not yet the common mode of learning in Iran, finding enough participants with similar proficiency levels was a burden for the current study. Also, learners in the current study were all adults who had a clear goal in mind which is a prerequisite for autonomous learning, Thus, the study may yield different results in younger age groups. Some limitations were also related to technology. As an instance, the recording feature of the virtual platform provided learners with the opportunity to have a record of sessions and neglect participating in synchronous sessions. It is highly recommended that future researchers take the issue of students' attendance and the learning of lurking participants into consideration.

Notes on the Contributors

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