

**MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDE  
AS PREDICTORS OF  
LEARNER AUTONOMY**

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## Full Length Research

# Motivation and Attitude as Predictors of Learner Autonomy

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The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between learner autonomy and attitude as well as the relationship between learner autonomy and motivation. To this end, 108 intermediate level Iranian EFL learners were selected. The participants responded to a language attitude questionnaire, a modified version of Gardner's Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), and a learner autonomy questionnaire. The obtained data were analyzed using two Pearson correlation procedures. Results showed a significant but low positive relationship between motivation and learner autonomy, but a statistically insignificant relationship between attitude and learner autonomy. The findings of this study can have implications for both teachers and curriculum developers.

**Key words:** Learner autonomy, attitude, motivation.

## INTRODUCTION

Learners are the main element of language teaching and learning. The history of autonomy and learner autonomy goes back to about thirty years ago; however, as Lamb and Reinders (2005) believe, interest in autonomy probably dates back as far as Aristotle. A learner is autonomous when he is responsible for his own learning. Recently, however, learner autonomy has attracted a surge of interest from researchers and language educators.

Moreover, promoting learner autonomy has become even more important. Dafei (2007) suggests that teachers should promote learner autonomy "by giving students more responsibility, teaching learning strategies, cultivating positive attitudes and guiding reflection"(p. 16).

At the same time, there is a wide variety of factors which affect learner autonomy. Among such factors age, prior knowledge, attitude, motivation, cooperative learning, aptitude, amount of exposure, and anxiety in second language learning have been shown to be strongly related to learner autonomy (Ames & Archer, 1988; Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008; Ortega, 2003; Towns,

1998; Vandergrift, 2005). The present study will focus on motivation and attitude. Naturally, language teachers use various ways to motivate their students because they clearly know that without motivation, no learning can occur. They also try to help their students attain positive attitudes toward learning a language. To do this, they need to be aware of students' needs, personalities and many other features. The present study aims to find answers to the following questions:

- 1). Is there any significant relationship between motivation and learner autonomy?
- 2). Is there any significant relationship between attitude and learner autonomy?

## Literature review

### **Learner autonomy**

The term autonomy has been variously defined. Dickinson (1995) maintains "autonomy can be seen as an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning"(p. 167). Bruce (1995) gives a similar definition. Cortes and Lujan

(2005) define autonomy as "moving away from conventional and restrictive contexts and moving towards self-direction and self-regulation"(p. 134).

Learner autonomy is different from autonomy and is believed to be a contentious concept. While Cotterall (2000) argues that learner autonomy must be the goal of all learning, Breeze (2002) believes that learner autonomy is an inquiry of attitudes and experience.

Learner autonomy is a shift from teacher-centered learning to learner-centered learning. Although, as Cotterall (2000) puts it, tenets to direct the design of courses are currently lacking, learner autonomy will be promoted by transferring responsibility from the teacher to the learner. This transfer may include setting goals, selecting strategies and evaluating progress. Obviously, awareness of these ways plays an important role in promoting learner autonomy, without which transfer cannot take place and learners become 'consumers' of language (Cotterall, 2000, p.111). Awareness cannot be easily raised; it needs a lot of practice. Thanasoulas (2000) believes that to promote learner autonomy, factors such as learners' motivation, needs, attitudes, language awareness, learning styles and strategies are important. Learning strategies play a crucial role in promoting learner autonomy.

Predicting differences in autonomy versus competence, Levesque, Zuehlke, Stanek and Ryan (2004) conducted a study in American and German settings to investigate students' autonomy as well as competence. Results indicated that although American students were less autonomous than German students, they were more competent. In addition, it was reported that positive informational feedback and perceived pressure were related to competence as well as autonomy.

In a study conducted by Dafei (2007) to investigate the relationship between learner autonomy and students' English proficiency; it was found that learner autonomy and English proficiency were considerably and positively correlated. Yahong (2009) explains how, as an English language teacher, she helped her students develop learner autonomy. She could not evaluate the level of learning of each student but three particular students were evaluated and it was reported that they had a lot of progress in setting their goals, making decisions, working hard according to their plans and even discovering new strategies.

### **Motivation**

One of the factors affecting learner autonomy is motivation. It is widely accepted that learners who are more motivated tend to use more learning strategies (Rivera-Mills & Plonsky, 2007). According to Dornyei (1994a), "the exact nature of the social and pragmatic dimensions of second language motivation is always dependent on who learns what languages where" (p. 275).

Ryan and Deci (2000) state that "Motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence and equifinality--all aspects of activation and intention" (p. 69). Similarly, Whiteley (2002) believes that motivation involves the encouragement of people and helps them act in a particular way. He holds that "Motivation is elusive: it exists in the unlikeliest places; it is absent in the most promising locations" (p. 6). In addition, he states that motivation can be neither assessed nor easily observed.

According to MacIntyre (2002), questions about motivation address three issues. The first issue is why behavior is directed toward a specific goal. The second one refers to the determination of intensity or effort investment in pursuing goals. The third issue addresses why different people in the same situation differ in the direction and strength of motivated behavior.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) as cited in Dornyei (1990) introduced instrumental and integrative motivation. Integrative motivation involves integrating oneself with target culture while instrumental motivation refers to learning a language for a specific purpose such as employment. According to McIntosh and Noels (2004), there are some orientations in self-determination. First and the most important one is intrinsic motivation, which involves performing activities because of experiencing positive affect existing in the activity. Second is integrated regulation referring to one's participation in an activity not because it motivates by experiential goals, but because it supports a valuable part of his/her identity and self-concept. The third orientation is identified regulation. It is also a highly self-determined form of motivation and includes tasks in which one participates because it helps him/her achieve an important personal goal. Fourth is introjected regulation including situations in which a person forces pressure on him/herself to do an activity. The fifth orientation is external regulation including total external control of the activity by anticipation of rewards or punishment. The last one is amotivation in which motivation is absent. In other words, there is no controlling means for the behavior that the individual can identify.

There are few studies which have paid attention to the direct relationship between motivation and learner autonomy. Noels (2001) conducted a study including 332 students learning Spanish to investigate their experienced autonomy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward learning English, integrative orientations as well as observations of teachers' communication style. Based on the results, the students experienced less autonomy as well as low levels of intrinsic motivation when the teacher managed the class. In addition, intrinsic motivation and integrative orientations were correlated. Also, integrative orientations affected students' perseverance and effort as well as other variables alone.

Additionally, Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002)

investigated students' readiness for learner autonomy in language learning. 508 participants were involved in their study. Although their study did not focus mainly on the relationship between autonomy and motivation and was based on self-report, the results showed that motivation comes first and leads to autonomy.

To investigate the effect of psychological needs including autonomy, relatedness and competence on motivation, Hiroaki and Tomohito (2007) conducted a study involving 78 participants. It turned out that autonomy and motivational development were highly correlated. In addition, it was found that autonomy, relatedness and competence varied in different students because of their motivational profiles. Students with medium motivation needed autonomy and competence for their motivational development whereas students with low motivation just needed competence. Therefore, Hiroaki and Tomohito (2007) suggested that teachers change their strategies for students with different motivational levels to promote their motivation.

In a similar study, Ootoshi and Heffernan (2011) conducted a study with 203 students of English and 82 students of Business to consider the effect of autonomy, competence and relatedness on their intrinsic motivation. Results indicated that competence affected intrinsic motivation of Business students, whereas relatedness and competence influenced intrinsic motivation of English students. In addition, autonomy influenced intrinsic motivation of neither English nor Business students.

### **Attitude**

The other factor affecting learner autonomy is attitude. Ajzen (2005) defines attitude as "a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event" (p. 3). He also believes that attitude is a construct which is not reachable to direct observation, so measurable responses are required. A study by Charney, Newman and Palmquist (1995) showed that students' attitude as well as belief affect their thought, what they do while reading and writing, and their success. Little attention has been paid to the relationship between attitude and learner autonomy. Here is a brief review of the few available studies in this regard.

Ames and Archer (1988) suggest that when mastery goals are salient and are adopted by students, classroom goal orientation may facilitate the maintenance of adaptive motivation patterns. They found that on the one hand, students who emphasized mastery goals in the classroom, used more effective strategies, had a more positive attitude toward the class, had a stronger belief that success follows from one's effort, and preferred challenging tasks. On the other hand, students who emphasized performance goals as salient focused on their ability, evaluated their ability negatively and attributed failure to lack of ability.

Hammann (2005) examined students' beliefs in relation to their self regulatory behaviours, writing, epistemology as well as their attitudes concerning writing and learning. Based on the results, a positive correlation was found between students' epistemology beliefs and writing attitudes. It was reported that differences between group means concerning both 'Fixed Ability' and 'Quick Learning' were significant, and students who highly believed in 'Fixed Ability' and 'Quick Learning' were low in 'Writing Learnability' (Hammann, 2005).

To conclude, as the above mentioned studies show, motivation, attitude and learner autonomy are all important factors in language learning and teaching. However, there are few studies which have paid attention to the direct relationships among them. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between motivation and attitude on the one hand and learner autonomy of EFL learners, on the other.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

In the present study, a sample of 158 Iranian EFL students studying Teaching English and English Translation (both males and females) at Qazvin and Takestan State and Islamic Azad Universities was selected. After the administration of The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency and taking the results into account, the number of participants was reduced to 108. The students' age ranged from 19 to 29.

### **Instruments**

To answer the research questions, the following instruments were made use of: First, to homogenize the participants, a general proficiency test (The Michigan English Language Proficiency Test) was administered at the outset of the study. Second, an autonomy questionnaire which was on a five-point scale and was coded as (A. Never, B. Rarely, C. Sometimes, D. Often, E. Always) with 21 items was given to the participants to obtain their beliefs about autonomy (Appendix A). Then, a modified version of Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' including 25 items was given to the participants (Appendix B). Finally, a language learning attitude questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' which were coded as (Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree= 2, Neutral= 3, Agree= 4, Strongly Agree= 5) and included 27 items was given to them. (Appendix C)

### **Procedures**

The following procedures were followed in order to achieve the purpose of the present study: First, to remove anxiety, all the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Also, to encourage them, it was

**Table 1:** Correlation between Learner Autonomy and Motivation

		Autonomy	Motivation
<b>Autonomy</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.281*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	108	108

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

**Table 2:** Correlation between Learner Autonomy and Attitude

		Autonomy	Attitude
<b>Autonomy</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.182
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.59
	N	108	108

explained that 1 point would be awarded to everyone who filled out the questionnaires truthfully. Then, a general proficiency test was administered to make sure that there were no significant differences among the participants in terms of their proficiency level. The participants had 45 minutes to complete the test. To homogenize the participants, their scores on the general proficiency test were summarized, and the mean and standard deviation were computed. The scores of those who had achieved more than one standard deviation away from (above or below) the mean were excluded from all subsequent analyses. In another session, the autonomy, motivation and attitude questionnaires were given to all participants. The participants had 50 minutes to complete these three questionnaires. To analyze the obtained data and to answer the research questions, two Pearson Correlation procedures were used.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Investigation of the first research question

The first research question sought to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' motivation and their learner autonomy. To answer this question, a correlation procedure was used. Table 1 shows the results of the correlation procedure for motivation and learner autonomy.

As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a significant but low positive relationship between motivation and learner autonomy of EFL learners ( $r = .281, p < .01$ ).

### Investigation of the second research question

The second research question sought to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' attitude and their learner autonomy. To answer the second research question, another correlation procedure was used. Table 2 illustrates the correlation procedure for attitude and their learner autonomy.

As Table 2 shows, the relationship between attitude and

learner autonomy of EFL learners is insignificant ( $r = .182, p > 0.05$ ); however, there is a trend toward a positive relationship.

## DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to investigate the relationship between motivation and attitude on the one hand and learner autonomy on the other. One of the findings of the present study was that there was a significant correlation between motivation and learner autonomy. This finding supports Hiraoki and Tomohito's (2007) finding which indicates that autonomy and motivation development are highly correlated. Although types of motivation were not considered in the present study, this study supports the findings of studies (Dafei, 2007; Noels, 2001; Otoshi & Heffernan, 2011) which considered them. The present study also corroborates those of Dafei (2007). On the other hand, the results of the present study are different from Noels (2001), who found less autonomy as well as low level of intrinsic motivation among students when the teacher managed the class. Also, the findings of the present study contradict those of Otoshi and Heffernan (2011), who found that autonomy did not affect intrinsic motivation of students.

A number of factors account for these findings. One of the reasons refers to the Iranian socio-cultural educational setting. Students are used to following the teachers' instructions and classes are predominantly teacher-centered. Thus, Iranian student tend to show lower levels of autonomy compared with their European counterparts.

The other possible reason could be the participants' level of proficiency. The participants of the present study were all at intermediate proficiency level. Therefore, their tendency toward being autonomous was moderate. It could be argued that lower levels of proficiency are usually marked with lower levels of autonomy because of

the inevitable dependence on the teacher as a source of knowledge. In other words, in lower levels, teachers' superior knowledge may give them superior power. In fact, there are studies such as Dafei (2007) which have found a significant correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study indicated a significant, though low, positive relationship between motivation and learner autonomy. In other words, the findings revealed that more motivated students are more autonomous. The results of the Pearson revealed a positive but not significant relationship between attitude and learner autonomy.

This study focused on four factors, motivation, attitude and learner autonomy which are three of the most important factors in language teaching and learning and the findings of the present study, may have some implications for teachers and learners. As the effect of motivation and attitude on language learning is undeniable, the present study can help teachers and learners to have a better understanding of motivation and attitude in an educational context. In addition, teachers can find new and better ways of teaching to increase students' motivation and attitude and create opportunities to foster autonomy and encourage students to be more autonomous.

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**Appendix A: Learner autonomy questionnaire**

Name: ----- Age: -----

Direction: Please circle the one closest answer to the following questions according to your true cases. Thank you very much for your help and patience.  
(A. Never B. Rarely C. Sometimes D. Often E. Always.)

**Part I**

1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.  
A B C D E
2. I make good use of my free time in English study.  
A B C D E
3. I preview before the class.  
A B C D E
4. I find I can finish my task in time.  
A B C D E
5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review etc.  
A B C D E
6. I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself.  
A B C D E
7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I make progress.  
A B C D E
8. I attend out-class activities to practice and learn the language.  
A B C D E
9. During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc.  
A B C D E
10. I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English study.  
A B C D E
11. I choose books, exercises which suit me, neither too difficult nor too easy.  
A B C D E

**Part II**

12. I study English here due to:  
A. my parents' demand  
B. curiosity  
C. getting a good job, help to my major  
D. interest of English culture, such as film, sports, music, etc.  
E. C and D
13. I think the learner-teacher relationship is that of:  
A. receiver and giver  
B. raw material and maker  
C. customer and shopkeeper  
D. partners  
E. explorer and director
14. I think my success or failure in English study is mainly due to:  
A. luck or fate  
B. English studying environment  
C. studying facilities (aids)

- D. teachers
- E. myself

15. Whether students should design the teaching plan together with teachers or not, my opinion is:

- A. strongly agree
- B. agree
- C. neutral
- D. oppose
- E. strongly oppose

16. When the teacher asks questions for us to answer, I would mostly like to:

- A. wait for others' answers
- B. think and ready to answer
- C. look up books, dictionaries
- D. clarify questions with teachers
- E. join a pair/group discussion

17. When I meet a word I don't know, I mainly:

- A. let it go
- B. ask others
- C. guess the meaning
- D. B and E
- E. look up the dictionary

18. When I make mistakes in study, I'd usually like the following ones to correct them:

- A. let them be
- B. teachers
- C. classmates
- D. others
- E. books or dictionaries

19. When I am asked to use technologies that I haven't used before(e. g. internet discussion),

- A. I usually try to learn new skills
- B. I learn them following others
- C. I feel worried, but anyway
- D. I put it off or try to avoid it
- E. I resist using them

20. I think the following way is most useful in my English study:

- A. taking notes
- B. mechanic memory
- C. doing exercises of grammar, translation, words etc.
- D. classifying or grouping or comparing
- E. group discussion

21. I usually use materials selected:

- A. only by teachers
- B. mostly by teachers
- C. by teachers and by myself
- D. mostly by myself
- E. only by myself

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#### Appendix B: Motivation Questionnaire

Below are a number of statements with which some people agree and others disagree. We would like you to indicate your opinion about each statement by circling the numbers below which best indicates the extent to which you disagree or agree with that statement.

SD= Strongly Disagree D= Disagree N= Neutral A= Agree SA= Strongly Agree

1. Studying English can be important to me because it will allow me to be more at ease with other people who speak English.

SD D N A SA

2. Studying English can be important for me because it will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people.

SD D N A SA

3. Studying English can be important for me because it will enable me to better understand and appreciate English art and literature.

SD D N A SA

4. Studying English can be important for me because I will be able to participate more freely in the activities of other cultural groups.

SD D N A SA

5. It is important for me to know English in order to know the life of the English-speaking nations.

SD D N A SA

6. Studying English is important to me so that I can understand English pop music.

SD D N A SA

7. The more I get to know native English speakers, the more I like them.

SD D N A SA

8- Studying English is important to me.

SD D N A SA

9. Studying English is important to me so that I can keep in touch with foreign friends and acquaintances.

SD D N A SA

10. I would like to know more about native English speakers.

SD D N A SA

11. The British are kind and friendly.

SD D N A SA

12. The Americans are kind and cheerful

SD D N A SA

13. Studying English can be important for me because I'll need it for my future career.

SD D N A SA

14. Studying English can be important for me because it will make me a more knowledgeable person.

SD D N A SA

15. Studying English can be important for me because it will someday be useful in getting a good job.

SD D N A SA

16. Studying English can be important for me because other people will respect me more if I know English.

SD D N A SA

17. Studying English can be important for me because I will be able to search for information and materials in English on the Internet.

SD D N A SA

18. Studying English can be important for me because I will learn more about what's happening in the world.

SD D N A SA

19. Studying English can be important for me because language learning often gives me a feeling of success.  
SD D N A SA

20. Studying English can be important for me because language learning often makes me happy.  
SD D N A SA

21. Studying English is important to me because an educated person is supposed to be able to speak English.  
SD D N A SA

22. Studying English is important to me so that I can understand English-speaking films, videos, TV or radio.  
SD D N A SA

23. Studying English is important to me so that I can read English books.  
SD D N A SA

24. Studying English is important to me because it will enable me to get to know new people from different parts of the world.  
SD D N A SA

25. Studying English is important to me because without it one cannot be successful in any field.  
SD D N A SA

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#### Appendix C: Attitude Questionnaire

Fill out the following questionnaire, circling the one which best describes whether you agree or disagree with each statement. This is for yourself not for anyone else, so answer as honestly as you can.

SD= Strongly Disagree D= Disagree N= Neither agree nor disagree A= Agree SA= Strongly Agree

1. I think I'm a pretty good language learner.

SD D N A SA

2. Learning a language may be important to my goals, but I don't expect it to be much fun.

SD D N A SA

3. My language learning aptitude is probably pretty high.

SD D N A SA

4. I don't have any idea about how to go about learning a language.

SD D N A SA

5. I think that I could learn pretty much any language I really put my mind to, given the right circumstances.

SD D N A SA

6. I worry a lot about making mistakes.

SD D N A SA

7. I'm afraid people will laugh at me if I don't say things right.

SD D N A SA

8. I end up trembling and practically in a cold sweat when I have to talk in front of people.

SD D N A SA

9. I find it hard to make conversation even with people who speak my own language.

SD D N A SA

10. I feel a resistance from within when I try to speak in a foreign language, even if I've practiced.

SD D N A SA

11. It is a mark of respect to people to learn their language if you're living in their country.

SD D N A SA

12. I like getting to know people from other countries, in general.

SD D N A SA

13. Speaking the language of the community where I'll be living will let me help people more than I could otherwise.

SD D N A SA

14. I don't like the idea of relying on speaking English (or my mother tongue) in another country.

SD D N A SA

15. I think the people of the country where I'll be living would like for me to learn their language.

SD D N A SA

16. I won't really be able to get to know people well if I don't speak their language.

SD D N A SA

17. There is a right and a wrong way to do almost everything, and I think it's my duty to figure out which is which and do it right.

SD D N A SA

18. It annoys me when people don't give me a clear-cut answer, but just beat around the bush.

SD D N A SA

19. You should say “yes” if you mean yes and “no” if you mean no. Not to do so is dishonest.

SD D N A SA

20. You have to understand people’s culture and value system before you can be sure whether some things are right or wrong.

SD D N A SA

21. I like to mimic other accents, and people say I do it well.

SD D N A SA

22. I can do impersonations of famous people.

SD D N A SA

23. I find it easy to “put myself in other people’s shoes” and imagine how they feel.

SD D N A SA

24. In school, if I didn’t know an answer for sure, I’d sometimes answer out loud in class anyway.

SD D N A SA

25. I often think out loud, trying out my ideas on other people.

SD D N A SA

26. I want to have everything worked out in my own head before I answer.

SD D N A SA

27. I’d call myself a risk-taker.

SD D N A SA