Exploring self-regulated learning and motivation: A case study of EFL undergraduate learners at a public university in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The concept of self-regulated learning (SRL) in the field of educational psychology has been developed to comprehend how students learn autonomously. Motivation is a pivotal factor in learners' academic outcomes and its connection with (SRL) is extensive. The purpose of this study was to further explore this phenomenon among EFL learners enrolled at Kandahar University. Quantitative research was carried out on a sample of 123 EFL learners. The data were collected through an online survey questionnaire and analysed using statistical packages. The results indicated that the majority of the learners were standing on the average level of SRL. The results also revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between motivation and SRL. Foreign language learning can be enhanced by designing environments in a way that fosters SRL skills. Further research could be conducted with a wider sample size from other public universities to generate a more fine-grained understanding.

Keywords: EFL, EFL learners, self-regulated learning, motivation

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Introduction

Training autonomous learners who self-regulate their learning is one of the most recent trends in the last two decades. The approach teacher-centre is currently substituted by learner-centre, so the role and responsibility of the individuals are more important and changed from passive to active (Banisaeid & Huang, 2015; Omarchevska et al., 2021). An emphasis on passive memorisation and the recitation of accurate information is no longer accepted within instructional contexts (DiFrancesca et al., 2016). Instead, the focus has shifted to equipping students to become self-regulated, lifelong learners. Learning is an activity that will be in progress throughout a lifetime independently of age and location (Aksan, 2009; Teng & Zhang, 2020). For the learners to be at the centre of this activity, mostly becomes dependent on bearing the liability of self-learning and have the competency to orient the learning process and implement decisions concerning this process.

The motivation for teaching learners 'how to learn' came from the work of Rubin and Stern in the mid-nineteenth century on the work of poor and good language learners (Banisaeid & Huang, 2015). Many scholars then tried to shape the classification of strategies and language learning strategies which were the focus of many studies during the last two decades. Learners were able to employ various types of strategies for regulating their learning with the appearance of language learning strategies leading to strategy instruction or strategy training. The fundamental goal of strategy instruction is to train self-regulated learners. The process of self-regulated learning (SRL) needs learners to monitor their learning strategies independently of the lecturer and peers and tailor them if required (Nejabati, 2015). These monitoring activities consist of checking the content of the study, judging learning difficulties, assessing progress, and predicting learning outcomes. Learners can create better learning habits, heighten their study techniques, monitor their progress, evaluate their performance, use strategies to boost the desired outcomes, and assess their academic progress and learning (Ilmi et al., 2022; Zumbrunn et al., 2011).

SRL presents an important perspective on learning in recent research on educational psychology (Aksan, 2009; Zhang et al., 2023). The concept of SRL in the field of educational psychology has been developed to comprehend how students learn autonomously. As a borrowed term from educational psychology, self-regulation has become a topic of investigation in foreign and second language teaching and learning research (Yüce, 2019). Becoming a self-regulated learner via planning learning processes is now considered an essential turning point in education because it ignores conventional teacher-based language classrooms.

SRL is the base upon which learners build their academic skills (Su et al., 2018; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). The meaning of SRL is to self-generate thoughts, feelings, and actions planned and regularly adapted to achieve personal goals (Habiba et al., 2020). SRL is referred to as a self-directive process and self-beliefs allowing learners to transform their mental abilities such as verbal aptitude into academic performance skills (Nagro & Monnin, 2022; Nejabati, 2015). One of the subjects that researchers dwell on is the SRL approach and the purpose of research carried out on this topic is to present the failure reasons of unsuccessful learners.

1.1. Conceptual background

Afghan students from different life backgrounds vary in their levels of knowledge and English proficiency. When these students enter university, especially becoming EFL learners, a number of them still lack the English language proficiency required to meet the demands of academic reading, writing, and oral communication and it is a common learning problem. Whereas, English language policy for the EFL curriculum mandates the use of the English language. In teaching and learning English in

Afghanistan, on the other hand, Grammar Translation and Audio-lingual Methods, and other traditional teaching methods with teacher-centeredness have been practiced for many years, which have made it difficult for Afghan EFL learners to have strong communication skills. EFL learners are observers and passive rather than creative and active participants in the process of language learning and teaching (Alamyar, 2017; Winke et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Lessons are taught more theoretically rather than practically. Lecturer's lecture and learners write down the lecture word by word to reproduce it in the examinations. EFL learners rarely have the chance to express their opinions or have pair or group discussions and most of the time they should rely on their lecturers' opinions.

To make the language learning experience as successful as possible, EFL lecturers have to look for concrete ways to assist their learners by empowering them to take responsibility and manage their learning. Also, EFL lecturers can develop ways to diminish learners' difficulties in learning that arise from their lack of awareness and control over learning. This may be especially beneficial for many Afghan EFL undergraduates who come directly from high school, where a 'spoon feeding' mentality is still very much ingrained in them. Generally, Afghan EFL learners confront problems in developing and acquiring practical skills. Lack of awareness of SRL strategies of Afghan EFL learners could be one of the reasons. With this in mind, it is evidenced by Virtanen and Nevgi (2010) and Virtanen et al. (2015) who claimed that several learners in higher education lack (SRL) skills with no realistic conceptions of their use of learning strategies. This difficulty can lead to reciprocal relationships between repeated academic failures, a poor self-image, low motivation, limited task engagement and persistence, devaluation of learning, and low productivity.

1.2. Purpose of study

Many empirical researches have been carried out to investigate SRL in Western countries. The present study can be regarded as an important one in terms of its scope and context. Because little is known about how Afghan EFL learners at the tertiary level self-regulate their language learning. SRL qualifies as an important research area for researchers in Afghanistan and believing there is a need, the current study seeks to contribute to self-regulation research by investigating the SRL of EFL learners in the area of higher education. In this respect, the study seeks to address the following four research questions:

1. What is the level of SRL skills of Afghan EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant difference in SRL among freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors?
3. Is there any significant relationship among the five components that measure SRL and motivation?
4. Is there any significant impact of SRL on motivation?

1.3. Literature review

To be a successful learner, we know it is necessary to apply a range of strategies tailored to the contextually relevant requirements. These strategies can be framed into what has been called SRL. The concept of self-regulation is an important element in teaching. Particularly, in the last decade, a large number of studies have been done on the links between learning, motivation, and self-regulation in language learning (Gilbert, 2010; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Pintrich & Garcia, 2012; Zahidi & Binti, 2012; Zimmerman, 2013; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). In this regard, several recent research studies in the literature are discussed within the scope of this study.

With the shift from behaviourism to cognitivism, educational psychology has located cumulative responsibility on learners for their learning, and SRL has become a frequent area of educational research

(Mahmoodi et al., 2014). In the field of educational psychology, the notion of SRL has been established to understand how learners learn voluntarily (Fukuda, 2018).

The need for regulating one's learning has emerged due to the value placed on education and it has underlined SRL. Attaining a high level of foreign language proficiency depends on the self-regulatory skills of a learner (Mahmoodi et al., 2014). Recent studies, according to the authors, suggest the applicability of SRL strategies to the field of language education even though this concept originated from educational psychology. Self-regulation of cognition and behaviour is a significant aspect of student learning and academic performance in the classroom context (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). The noticeable characteristics of self-regulated learners, according to Yüce (2019), are self-awareness, competency, and determination.

Self-regulated learners do not only monitor themselves in accomplishing tasks, but they also try to find useful information by acting consciously. In general, it is necessary to see how lecturers characterise self-regulated learners and SRL. Mezei (2008) elaborated on these concepts as learning is student-initiated, and the learners persistently carry out the task, learners are independent and use effective learning strategies and learners can reflect on their work. Also, self-regulated learners are typically interested in learning, able to set intrinsic and personal goals, realistic about their knowledge, and love learning. In addition to that, learners are self-confident, diligent, and persistent.

Moreover, learners are intended to become more fluent, independent, goal-oriented, and reflective when an SRL strategy is applied (Erickson et al., 2017). To be more precise, lecturers have a significant role in applying SRL to assist learners to become self-regulated (Abadikhah et al., 2018). To this end, lecturers should ensure which SRL strategy requires to be focused more comprehensively to adapt the instruction to meet the learners' needs. Also, lecturers should be accustomed to the features that impact a learner's ability to self-regulate and the approaches they can use to identify and promote SRL in their classrooms (Wang et al., 2012; Zumbrunn et al., 2011).

SRL, according to Abadikhah et al. (2018), endeavours to explain how learners can be successful in an academic context apart from the benefits or drawbacks they might have in their mental ability, social and environmental background and the quality of schooling. Self-regulating learning augments learners' language learning performance. To illustrate this, Gilbert (2010) admitted that self-regulation has generally been used to help weak learners and learners with disabilities develop skills for improving their learning performance and language acquisition.

Another area of interest as a pivotal factor in learners' academic outcomes is motivation which came to the fore as research interests and connections with SRL were extensively investigated through several studies. For example, Mahmoodi et al. (2014), Banisaeid and Huang (2015), and Fukuda (2018) investigated EFL context and found a correlation between motivation and SRL and SRL is known (Zumbrunn et al., 2011) as a key predictor of student academic motivation and achievement. The main factor in SRL is motivation so that the learners can maintain a cycle of self-regulation.

 Similarly, Wolters and Pintrich (1998) revealed that SRL has emphasised the importance of motivational factors in classroom learning. As an illustration, Habiba et al. (2020) argued that SRL strategies such as guiding instruction and scaffolding boost learners' motivational beliefs. Moreover, the authors added that learners' motivation for learning was also enriched in a learning environment with (Zumbrunn et al., 2011) enlarged SRL opportunities.

Since motivation is considered to be a key aspect in ensuring academic success, therefore, educators should make every endeavour to comfort learners to improve these strategies (Fukuda, 2018). Meanwhile, EFL learners must also reserve the taught knowledge and skills to help them become skilful

long-lasting learners (Nejabati, 2015). Weak self-regulation, according to Aksan (2009), is due to a lack of motivation. Aksan further explored that SRL and motivational beliefs predicted learners' achievements. Generally, self-regulation and motivation work hand in hand to explain student learning and success in the classroom (Zumbrunn et al., 2011). Zimmerman and Schunk (2001) argued that successful learners retain motivation and intrinsic interest as they control their choosing and planning of academic tasks.

1.4. Theoretical framework

The absence of learners' willingness in research to assume personal responsibility for their academic learning and performance, (Zimmerman, 2013) in this regard discovered the work of Albert Bandura. The current study is situated as a social-cognitive theory. This theory serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The principles of social cognitive theory have been applied widely to self-regulation.

A key assumption of social cognitive theory is that people desire 'to control events that affect their lives' (Bandura, 1991). Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1986) has a high impact on SRL and its principles have been applied to the learning of self-regulation skills (Zimmerman, 2013). Most human behaviour, being purposive, in social cognitive theory is comprehensively motivated and regulated by forethought and the ongoing exercise of self-influence (Bandura, 1991). During the past two decades, a large body of literature in educational psychology has discussed several theories of SRL (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman, 2013; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001).

Social cognitive researchers have self-regulation as an achievement of socialisation processes. Self-regulation operates through a set of psychological sub-functions that must be developed and mobilised for self-directed change. Self-regulation, according to Bandura's social cognitive theory, is a key process that affects students' learning and achievement. SRL for Badura is intended to 'expand freedom of action and enable people to serve as casual contributors to their life course by selecting, influencing and constructing their circumstances' (Zimmerman, 1990).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

A descriptive survey research method was used to address the research questions. The current study was quantitative in design to best answer the research questions being posed. Quantitative research, according to Creswell (1999) is a type of research that is explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods. Furthermore, a questionnaire is often used as a survey method. The present study was a case study that employed a descriptive approach to explore learners' perceptions concerning SRL. The case study enables the researcher to achieve great insight into a case where the focus is on a specific context (Yin, 2013).

2.2. Participants and sampling

The participants of this case study were all EFL learners from Kandahar University where their perspectives were discovered. A random sample of 123 EFL learners (89 male & 34 female) participated in this study from the total population of 143. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), for a population of 220 subjects, a sample size of 140 subjects is required to represent the whole population. Therefore, an appropriate sampling technique should be purposeful and it should be based on the assumption that a researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight (Etikan et al., 2016).

2.3. Data collection instrument

The data was collected from the participants via a questionnaire adopted from (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990) that was developed consisting of the concepts related to the topic under investigation. The first part of the questionnaire was about demographic information of the participants such as gender, age, year, shift, and faculty. The second part was to measure SRL levels. The third part of the questionnaire having an overall 42 items was intended to measure different aspects: Self-efficacy (9 items), intrinsic value (9 items), test anxiety (4 items), cognitive strategy use (13 items), and self-regulation (9 items). All aspects had a seven-point Likert-type scale for response i.e., 1 = very untrue of me, 2 = untrue of me, 3 = somewhat untrue of me, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat true of me, 6 = true of me, and 7 = very true of me.

2.4. Validity of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was presented to experts in the field of education for constructive feedback to establish the validity of the instrument and it was properly improved in light of the suggestions of the experts. The expert was consulted regarding the context, content, structure, and to ensure that the questions included in the questionnaire covered all features of the research and its research questions. It was also done to ensure that correct wording was used, and that grammatical errors that can influence the result of the study were addressed.

2.5. Ethical issues

Before the data was collected from the participants through a questionnaire, it was a requirement to seek approval. Therefore, the researcher approached the administration of Kandahar University and sought permission for data collection through a request letter because important ethical issues are involved in any social research including that into education, which deals with the beliefs, values, and lives of people (Kirk, 2007). The cooperation of departmental heads and lecturers made it possible to get 123 out of 150 questionnaires filled. In a review of the filled data, 11 questionnaires were rejected due to missing entries like year, faculty, and shift. While six cases appeared as outliers during the process of screening. As a result, data from 123 participants were usable for the research purpose.

2.6. Data analysis

In terms of data analysis, quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, ANOVA, multiple correlation, and simple regression were calculated in general to discover the correlations between the subject variables of age, gender, faculty, and grade.

3. Results

3.1. Questionnaire reliability

To examine the internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated which indicates that five of the categories reported above 0.70 alpha levels. Overall, the questionnaire was reliable for the research purpose. Questionnaire category alpha levels are as follows (Table 1):

Table 1
Reliability of the Questionnaire

Categories	Number of items	Items deleted	Alpha
Self-efficacy	9	-	0.91
Intrinsic value	9	-	0.90

Test anxiety	4	-	0.80
Cognitive strategy use	13	-	0.90
Self-regulation	9	-	0.78

3.2. Characteristics of the participants

Table 2 indicates the demographic information of the participants in categories of gender, age, level of education, shift, and faculty.

Table 2
Demographic Information of the Participants

	Characteristics	No. of participants	%
Gender	Male	89	72.4
	Female	34	27.6
Age	18–21	42	34.1
	22–26	67	54.5
	27–30	9	7.3
	Above	5	4.1
Level of education	Freshman	22	17.9
	Sophomore	19	15.4
	Junior	35	28.5
	Senior	47	38.2
Shift	Day	97	78.9
	Night	26	21.1
Faculty	Education	55	44.7
	Language and Literature	68	55.3
	Total	123	100.0

3.3. RQ 1: What is the level of SRL skills of male and female EFL learners?

Table 3
Level of SRL and Gender

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Low		6	0	6
		100.0	0.0	100.0
Average		62	25	87
		71.3	28.7	100.0

	High	21	9	30
		70.0	30.0	100.0
Total		89	34	123
		72.4	27.6	100.0

Table 3 indicates EFL learners' standings on low, average, and high levels of SRL. The majority of the boys (62) and girls (25) stood at an average level of SRL, while only 21 boys and 9 girls had a high level. However, only 6 male participants had a low level of SRL. Overall, participants were at an average level of SRL.

3.4. RQ 2: Is there any significant difference in SRL among the years?

Table 4
One-Way ANOVA: SRL Among Level of Education

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
	Between groups	6.084	3	2.028	1.472	0.226
Self-efficacy	Within groups	163.985	119	1.378		
	Total	170.069	122			
	Between groups	6.117	3	2.039	1.588	0.196
Intrinsic value	Within groups	152.795	119	1.284		
	Total	158.913	122			
	Between groups	15.463	3	5.154	2.638	0.053
Test anxiety	Within groups	232.532	119	1.954		
	Total	247.995	122			
	Between groups	2.621	3	0.874	0.827	0.482
Cognitive strategy use	Within groups	125.809	119	1.057		
	Total	128.430	122			
	Between groups	2.143	3	0.714	0.676	0.569
Self-regulation	Within groups	125.837	119	1.057		
	Total	127.980	122			

Table 4 shows One-Way ANOVA results of SRL among EFL learners' level of education to determine if there is any significant difference. The One-Way ANOVA analysis indicates that there is no significant difference among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior EFL learners and SRL in terms of the five components: self-efficacy (f (3, 119) = 1.472 and p = 0.226, intrinsic value (f (3, 119) = 1.588 and p = 0.196, test anxiety (f (3, 119) = 2.638 and p = 0.053, cognitive strategy use (f (3, 119) = 0.827 and p = 0.482 and SRL (f (3, 119) = 0.676 and p = 0.569. As a result, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Similarly, the Post-Hoc LSD multiple comparison analysis also indicates that there is no significant difference between the level of education and SRL.

3.5. RQ 3: Is there any significant relationship among the five components that measure SRL and motivation?

Table 5
Multiple Correlations: Relationship Among the Five Components

		Self-efficacy	Intrinsic value	Test anxiety	Cognitive strategy use	Self-regulation
Self-efficacy	Pearson correlation	1	0.850**	0.163	0.743**	0.495**

	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.072	0.000	0.000
	N	123	123	123	123	123
Intrinsic value	Pearson correlation	0.850**	1	0.258**	0.789**	0.481**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.004	0.000	0.000
	N	123	123	123	123	123
Test anxiety	Pearson correlation	0.163	0.258**	1	0.436**	0.442**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.072	0.004		0.000	0.000
	N	123	123	123	123	123
Cognitive strategy use	Pearson correlation	0.743**	0.789**	0.436**	1	0.690**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	123	123	123	123	123
Self-regulation	Pearson correlation	0.495**	0.481**	0.442**	0.690**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	123	123	123	123	123

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

To answer this question, Pearson Correlations were launched (Table 5). The results of multiple correlations suggest that 8 out of 10 correlations were statistically significant and were greater or equal to (r > = + 0.35, p < 0.25). The results of multiple correlations also indicate that there are significant relationships among the five components. In general, the results signify that if Afghan EFL learners feel self-regulated and motivated in one component, they tend to feel self-regulated and motivated in other components as well.

3.6. RQ 4: Is there any significant impact of SRL on motivation?

Table 6
Regression of SRL on Motivation

Variable	B	Beta	SE	*p*-value
Constant	1.000	0.781	0.300	0.000
SRL				
	0.801		0.058	
R^2	0.610			

N = 123.

Table 6 indicates the impact of SRL on motivation. The dependent variable was regressed on predicting variable to test the hypothesis. SRL predicted motivation, F (1, 121) = 189.46, p < 0.001. This indicates that SRL can play a significant positive role in shaping motivation (ß = 0.781, p < 0.001). Moreover, R^2 = 0.610 depicts that the variable explained 61% of the variance in motivation. We, therefore, shall reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis.

4. Discussion

Concerning demographic variables, the analysis of this study found that the majority of the male and female EFL learners were categorised as having an average level of SRL, while very few learners rated themselves as having a low level of SRL. This result is justified by the fact that learners from both genders at Kandahar University are not professionally trained and developed to become self-regulated learners at a high level. According to this, it may be said that individuals with high levels of self-regulation and motivation also have a high level of success. This finding is consistent with that of Khan et al. (2020) who revealed that university students possess SRL at an average level.

Next, the results of this study identified that there is no difference in terms of SRL and motivation among different levels of EFL learners at Kandahar University. However, literature screening revealed studies on variables influencing the SRL and motivation of the students. For example, Alotumi (2021) found that the majority of the junior and senior students reported themselves as medium regulation of their learning and they seek other ways to boost their learning.

Moreover, this study found that all of these dimensions are related to each other. It means that if EFL learners at Kandahar University feel motivated and self-regulated in one dimension, they are more likely to be motivated and self-regulated in other dimensions. To be more specific, if learners are motivated in their learning, they are tended to be more self-regulated learners. This finding aligns strongly with Zumbrunn et al. (2011) who found that when learners are motivated to learn, they are more likely to apply suitable SRL skills. This means that motivation plays important role in SRL to ensure academic success. According to Aksan (2009), a lack of motivation causes weak self-regulation. This is further supported by Pintrich (2000) who believed that motivation plays the role of a catalyst for learners to retain SRL. Therefore, self-regulation and motivation should work hand in hand to become a successful learner in the classroom.

4.1. Pedagogical implications

Foreign language learning can be enhanced by designing environments in a way that fosters SRL skills. Teaching techniques that help language learners to overcome their language learning stress and getting them into the habit of studying regularly may be beneficial for language education contexts. Furthermore, portfolio studies can help language learners record their learning processes which in turn enhances learner autonomy. Lastly, seminars on effective time management in foreign language learning can be organised for language learners.

4.2. Limitations and recommendations

The study aimed to provide an understanding of the extent of SRL and motivation among EFL learners at Kandahar University. Several limitations need to be considered. First, this research was not designed to be generalised among undergraduate students at other public universities in Afghanistan because the sample size of this study was only limited to 123. Second, the researcher did not include the perceptions of EFL lecturers concerning SRL. Third, the data collection procedure was problematic and the sample size was very small. As a result, there might have been dishonest and rushed responses which may affect the findings.

Based on the limitations of this study, recommendations for future studies on the same topic are listed below.

1. Further research could be conducted with a wider sample size from other public universities to generate a more fine-grained understanding.
2. Further study should be carried out right from EFL lecturers' perspectives on SRL and motivation.
3. To increase the honesty of participants' responses, the questionnaire should be short.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to explore SRL and motivation at one of the public universities in Afghanistan and this study presented a contextualised view of SRL skills. SRL in learning a foreign language is not only considered an individual capability but is also viewed as the process of personal and environmental events. The data collection method in this study was quantitative and the researcher collected the data through a questionnaire.

The results of this study revealed that there were no differences in terms of the demographics such as male and female, levels, and shifts. However, EFL learners in Education Faculty seemed to be self-regulated learners. Learners' motivation facilitates or hinders learners' self-regulation. It was also found that learners with a high degree of motivation can experience psychological freedom of SRL skills. Therefore, motivation based on interest has been associated with better SRL abilities.

Acknowledgments

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