

An investigation into the impact of reflective teaching on EFL learners' autonomy and intrinsic motivation

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Abstract

This study has sought to explore the effect of reflective teaching on learner autonomy and the intrinsic motivation of Iranian upper-intermediate female learners. The subjects included 60 adult upper-intermediate EFL learners chosen out of ninety, based on the scores obtained through administration of the TOEFL exam. They were randomly assigned to two groups: a) the experimental group - taught by a reflective teacher - and b) the control group instructed by an unreflective teacher. The motivation questionnaire and the autonomy questionnaire were administered to both groups to make sure that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of the level of motivation and autonomy. The experimental group was then taught by the reflective teacher and the control group was taught by the unreflective teacher who adopted no tangible reflective actions. Finally, both groups sat for motivation and autonomy questionnaires. The results indicate that reflective teaching leads to the enhancement of both learners' autonomy and the intrinsic motivation level.

Keywords: reflective teaching, intrinsic motivation, learner autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Teachers in general, and L2 teachers in particular, do their best to make use of the results of recently conducted research for the purpose of keeping abreast with the latest developments in their relevant field. Reflection in teaching is a topic in teachers' and teacher education literature, which has gained importance since the pioneering work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987). Since then, studies have pointed to the efficiency of taking a flexible approach to teaching and its bearing on teaching outcomes (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Farrell, 2004; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). This flexibility requires the teacher to reflect on his/her own teaching and make the relevant changes accordingly.

Taking a reflective teaching approach requires "paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively" (Bolton, 2010). Put another way, it means a process whereby the teacher evaluates and observes himself/herself as he/she is involved in teaching. Dewey (1933) believed that reflective practice is a goal-oriented effort to contemplate teaching and educational experiences. It thus results in increased learning on part of the learners as well as to a refined teaching approach on part of the teacher.

Meanwhile, one influential factor in the language teaching enterprise is ensuring the existence of motivation on the part of learners; here, most language teachers believe that motivation is a key factor for success in language learning (e.g. Alrabai, 2014; Moskovsky, Alrabai, Paolini & Ratcheva, 2013; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). As Ellis (1994) believes, motivation is a potent force in language acquisition. In addition, many studies on learner autonomy have set as their aim the degree of autonomy and responsibility that learners enjoy (e.g. Little, 2009). In addition, some studies have investigated the relationship between learners' autonomy and language skills (Ablard & Lipschultz, 1998; Dafei, 2007).

In the same vein, Wallace (1996) argues that "it is normal for teachers, from time to time, to informally evaluate various aspects of their professional expertise" (p. 292). Wallace (1998) names this type of thinking about one's teaching as "informal reflection" (p. 13). When teachers teach reflectively this reflection might contribute to positive changes on the part of learners. One of the aspects which might receive this sort of reflection on the part of the teachers is learners' autonomy and their motivation.

Given the scarcity of the studies conducted on the effect of reflective teaching on learners' autonomy and motivation, this study aims to examine the effect of the reflective teaching on autonomy and intrinsic motivation of Iranian language learners. Taking into accounts the previous contributions, the following research questions are addressed:

1. Does Reflective Teaching lead to the enhancement of Iranian female upper-intermediate EFL Learners' Autonomy?
2. Does Reflective Teaching lead to the enhancement of Iranian female upper-intermediate EFL learners' Intrinsic Motivation?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reflective Teaching

Reflective teaching was first raised by Dewey (1933) who believed that "teachers are not just passive curriculum implementers, but they can also play an active role in curriculum design and educational reform" (p. 49). He suggested that teaching needs to be a process comprising the following components: hypothesising, investigation, reasoning, testing and evaluation. These components will lead to adaptations and modification, if needed, leading to a teaching method which will take account of the class dynamics. This is what today has come to be named "reflective teaching".

The reflective teaching process requires the active participation on the part of the teacher so as to take informed decisions and be responsive to various instructional practices. The challenge

is to be able to demonstrate in action what is taught in the classroom. The afore-mentioned remarks imply that teachers need to take actions when facing problems in the classroom. This requires them to be equipped with skills such as spotting the problem, analysing and fixing it on the spot. Reflective teachers review their teaching and students' learning, how useful their teaching decisions are, their approaches to teaching, improving practice and cognitive awareness of their reflective processes.

Reflective teaching has caught the increasing attention of educators and teachers as it enhances the efficacy of teaching (Beauchamp, 2015; Etscheidt, Curran & Sawyer, 2012; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010; Minott, 2015). Minott (2015) has investigated the usefulness of a modified version of the reflective approach to teaching practice debriefing (RATPD) strategy in encouraging secondary music students' deep reflection-on-learning and has found that "it encouraged students to reveal cognitive, musical and attitudinal skills developed, think affectively by targeting their emotional state and to internalize the unit of lessons by identifying and taking ownership of positive attitudes and behaviors as part of their nature" (p.487).

Ramsey (2010), in an investigative attempt on pre-service teachers' reflections, has found that more student control over reflections is beneficial in that if students are permitted to make decisions about the focus of reflection and the process of reflection, then more meaningful reflective activity takes place. The results are in line with Callens and Elen (2011) insofar as they claim that allowing student teachers to decide on the competencies upon which they will reflect and the format of their reflections is a promising approach. Such control on the part of learners' requires more autonomy on their part; thus it calls for further research on the issue of learner autonomy that constitutes the second variable in this attempt.

2.2. Learner's Autonomy

Autonomy is deep-rooted concept within the context of English language teaching and learning (Benson, 2007; Murphy, 2008; Little, 2009). This concept focuses on learner reflection and the attempt to take responsibility for one's own learning processes. Intuitively, one may think that autonomy equals self-reliance. However, the definition of learner's autonomy defies an exact and consensual definition.

To increase the learner's autonomy, there is a need to encourage students "to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired" (Holec, 1981), which ultimately leads to a personal plan for learning by setting up directions in planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process. Illes (2012) argues that there should be a shift in attention from "the current training-oriented view of learner autonomy in ELT, with its focus on learning processes" towards language use "where autonomy is developed through tasks and activities that engage learners on their own terms and allow them to effectively exploit their linguistic resources in online negotiation of meaning" (p.505).

The results obtained from student teachers in Balçıkanlı's (2010) study have pointed that "students should be involved in the decision making process concerning the objectives of the course, classroom management, homework tasks, and the selection of materials" (p.98), which were in line with Ramsey (2010) and Callens and Elen (2011).

Considering the importance of learner autonomy as an educational phenomenon, various researchers have sought to create solutions for fostering learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Little, 2009; Tassinari, 2012). Tassinari (2012) describe a model to help learners and advisors assess and evaluate learners' competences for autonomy. Dang and Robertson (2010) have found a strong impact of computer technology on learner autonomy while, in another study, Ankan and Bakla (2011) point to the use of blogs as a way to foster learner autonomy.

According to Yu (2006), three integrated factors, including motivation, learners' meta-cognitive knowledge and the learning environment, influence learner autonomy in an Asian-Chinese EFL context. She further points out that learner autonomy depends on teacher

autonomy which demands that the teachers be aware of three factors: motivation, meta-cognition and learning environment in helping students develop learner autonomy. As mentioned above, learner autonomy and reflective practice are highly interdependent and motivation is a key variable in learner autonomy. The third variable under investigation in this attempt is motivation which is discussed in the following section.

2.3. Motivation

Learning another language seems to be a multi-dimensional ability, which goes beyond the linguistic and cognitive capacity of the learner. As Kramsch (2001) argues, learning another language is not like learning maths or other subjects. It is likely to involve not only the linguistic and cognitive capacities of the learner, but the social, historical, emotional, motivational, cultural and moral sense of self as a subject. As far as one's motivation is concerned, many factors have been found to have the potential to change the motivational level of the learners. According to Dörnyei (2001), both external and internal factors with which learners are confronted during the process of language learning could be a source in labeling the motivation as an evolving construct.

Numerous studies have proved the changeability of motivation (Alrababi, 2014; Moskovsky et al., 2013; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012; Xu & Gao, 2014). The study conducted by Papi and Abdollahzadeh (2012) on the relationship between teachers' use of motivational strategies and students' motivated behavior in the EFL context of Iran points out that the teachers' motivational practice is significantly related to the students' motivated behaviour. Their results were further confirmed by Moskovsky et al. (2013) and Alrababi (2014), who have investigated the effects of teachers' motivational strategies on Saudi EFL learners' learning motivation. The results of the afore-mentioned studies provide evidence that teachers' motivational behaviour causes enhanced motivation in second language learners.

Given the link between motivation and learner autonomy and also the link between learner autonomy and reflective practice, it is reasonable to hypothesise that reflective teaching would positively affect learner's motivation and autonomy. This study aims to examine this issue.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Four classes comprising a total number of 90 upper-intermediate female English students at Mehr Language Institute were selected randomly from among 10 such classes at this institute. To make sure of the homogeneity of the students in terms of the level of proficiency prior to the experiment, they were required to take a TOEFL exam which was used to select 60 students whose scores fell between +1 and -1 SD for this study. The age of these students ranged from 15 to 22 years and their first language was Persian. The textbooks used in this institute are the Interchange Series and short story books tailored to the level of the learners.

3.2. Instrumentation

For the purpose of the present study, a number of instruments were used; these will be described in this section.

3.2.1. Reflective Teaching Questionnaire

The instrument used for measuring reflective teaching in this study is the one devised by Behzadpour (2007), including 42 items on a five-point Likert scale, consisting of five options of 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often' and 'always', which has been devised based on six factors: Cognitive, Metacognitive, Affective, Practical, Critical, and Moral. Behzadpour's questionnaire

was chosen for the purpose of this study because it was devised for measuring teachers' reflection in the context of Iran. Then, checking its reliability by Chronbach Alpha, it was found that it enjoys a high reliability of 0.90 as a measuring instrument for teacher reflectivity (Behzadpour, 2007).

3.2.2. Intrinsic Motivation Questionnaire

The questionnaire used for the purposes of the study was adapted from Schmidt and Watanabe (2001). It consists of thirty items with a distinct emphasis on intrinsic motivation and its possible sources, although questions targeting other types of motivation (integrative, instrumental and extrinsic) were also included. Students were asked to show their agreement or disagreement with the items of the questionnaire in a five-point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). To establish the internal consistency of the questionnaire for this study, the questionnaire was piloted on 30 students with similar characteristics to the participants of this study. The results gained were then analysed using Chronbach Alpha, which was found to be 0.727.

3.2.3. Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

The Participants' autonomy was measured with a 21-item questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004). It involved two parts. The first 11 items form the first part, which are coded as (A. never B. rarely C. sometimes D. often E. always) and the remaining 10 items from the second part. All of the items in part 2 should be answered by choosing one of the five choices following each item. To establish the internal consistency of the learner autonomy questionnaire, it was piloted on 30 students with similar characteristics as the participants of this study. The results gained were then analysed using Chronbach Alpha, which was 0.741.

3.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Initially, two teachers – a reflective teacher and an unreflective teacher - were selected based on the results of reflective teaching questionnaire. The participants of this study were divided into two classes: one taken as the experimental group and the other class as control group. They were then given the motivation questionnaire and the results obtained from two groups were compared so as to make sure that the two classes were homogenous for the level of motivation. Consequently, the autonomy questionnaire was administered to make sure that two groups were not significantly different in terms of the level of autonomy.

The next stage was as follows: the experimental group was taught by the reflective teacher. During this class, the teacher drew on the principles of reflective teaching offered by Kumaravadivelu (2006). She analysed the possible problems on the spot and fixed the issue accordingly. This required her to explain beforehand the new approach to teaching so as to make them ready for it. The teacher drew on both reflection in teaching and reflection on teaching. However, the control group was taught by the unreflective teacher. Finally, both groups sat for motivation and autonomy questionnaires and, to explore our research questions, an independent T-test was employed.

4. Results

In order to probe the research questions formulated, it was first deemed necessary to homogenise the participants in terms of overall language proficiency and learner autonomy, as well as intrinsic motivation prior to the administration of the treatment.

4.1. Homogenising Participants in Terms of Overall Language Proficiency

Initially, based on the normal curve of TOEFL scores, 60 subjects out of the 90 whose scores fell within the range of 52-72 were selected. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the TOEFL scores of the participants.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants' TOEFL scores

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
TOEFL	90	42.00	40.00	82.00	5598.9	62.21	.93093
Valid N (list wise)	90						9.694

These sixty subjects were assigned to two 30-member groups. In regard to descriptive statistics, the scores mean of the participants who took part in TOEFL proficiency test turned out to be 62.21. The standard deviation of the participants' scores was 9.694. So, according to the information gained from the participants, 60 of them were chosen, the ones whose scores fell between one standard deviation below and above the mean.

4.2. Homogenising Participants in Terms of Learner Autonomy

To compare the pre-treatment scores of two groups in regard to learner autonomy for the purpose of assuring homogeneity, an independent samples T-Test was run. Table 2 gives the results of inferential statistics showing that ($P=0.171$) is higher than the confidence level of 0.05. Thus, it can be concluded that the two groups are not significantly different in terms of learner autonomy prior to the treatment.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples T-test Results for comparing Pre-treatment Scores regarding Learner Autonomy

	Group	Mean	S. D.	T	Sig.
Learner Autonomy (pre-test)	Experimental	28.16	1.83	1.386	0.171
	Control	27.53	1.69		

After assuring the homogeneity of the participants regarding learner autonomy, we also checked the homogeneity of the learners in terms of intrinsic motivation

4.3. Homogenising Participants in Terms of Intrinsic Motivation

To compare the pre-treatment scores of the two groups regarding intrinsic motivation for the purpose of assuring homogeneity, an independent samples T-Test was run. Table 3 indicates the results of inferential statistics indicating that ($P=0.381$) is higher than the confidence level of 0.05. Thus, the two groups weren't significantly different in terms of intrinsic motivation prior to the treatment.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples T-test Results for comparing Pre-treatment Scores regarding Intrinsic Motivation

	Group	Mean	S. D.	T	Sig.
Intrinsic-Motivation (pre-test)	Experimental	34.10	6.03	0.275	0.381
	Control	33.70	5.20		

After assuring participants' homogeneity in terms of overall language proficiency, learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation in the treatment of the study, reflective teaching was administered. At the end of the treatment, the questionnaires regarding learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation were filled out again by the participants, the results of which were used to explore the research questions.

4.4. Investigating The First Research Question

To explore the first research question of the study, as to whether reflective teaching affects learner autonomy, the following null hypothesis was formed: Reflective teaching does not affect the learner autonomy of Iranian upper-intermediate learners.

In order to probe this null hypothesis, the post-treatment scores of the learner autonomy questionnaire were compared running an independent samples t-test. Table 4 indicates the descriptive statistics of the two groups with respect to learner autonomy scores after the administration of treatment.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and Independent Samples T-test Results of post-treatment scores of the two groups concerning Learner Autonomy

	Group	Mean	S. D.	T	Sig.
Learner Autonomy (post-test)	Experimental	32.66	1.88	9.603	0.002
	Control	27.80	2.04		

Table 4 shows that p-value equals 0.002 which is lower than the confidence level of 0.05. As a result, it can be concluded that the post-treatment means of two groups in terms of Learner Autonomy are significantly different. Thus, the experimental group is seen to outperform the control group and the first null hypothesis of the study is rejected. Reflective teaching therefore has a significant effect on learner autonomy.

4.5. Investigating the Second Research Question

To examine the second research question of the study as to whether reflective teaching affects intrinsic motivation, the following null hypothesis was formed: Reflective teaching does not affect the intrinsic motivation of Iranian upper-intermediate learners.

In order to probe this null hypothesis, the post-treatment scores of the intrinsic motivation questionnaire were compared running an independent Samples t-test. Table 5 indicates the descriptive and inferential statistics of the two groups with respect to intrinsic motivation scores after the administration of treatment.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples T-test Results for comparing Post-treatment Scores regarding Intrinsic Motivation

	Group	Mean	S. D.	T	Sig.
Intrinsic- motivation (post-test)	Experimental	39.53	5.76	3.898	0.04
	Control	33.93	5.35		

Based on table 5, the significance level is 0.04 which is lower than the confidence level of 0.05 indicating that the difference between the two groups is statistically significant and therefore the second null hypothesis of the study is also rejected. Thus, it can be concluded that reflective teaching has also had a significant effect on the intrinsic motivation of the learners. The following figure illustrates the mean scores of the two groups concerning intrinsic motivation after treatment.

5. Discussion

The current study aimed at investigating the impact of reflective teaching on learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation of Iranian female upper-intermediate EFL learners. The results of Parametric Independent Samples t-test illustrate that reflective teaching is effective on both learners' autonomy and intrinsic motivation level.

This study was in line with many studies exploring the effect of different factors on learner autonomy (e.g., Dafei, 2007; Holec, 1981; Little, 2009; Inozu, 2011; Lai, Yeung & Hu, 2015; Xu, 2015; Xu & Gao, 2014) and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992; Kramersch, 2001) in the ELT context.

Fostering learners' autonomy in EFL teaching involves many individual factors such as personality, motivation, learning strategies, anxiety and self-efficiency. As motivation is one of the most important concepts in psychology and language education and it is commonly used to explain learners' success and failure in learning (Dörnyei, 2009), it cannot be neglected as an important element related to learner autonomy.

The current study and its findings are in line with Littlejohn (1997) who contends that the role of the curriculum and classroom practice in promoting learner autonomy and motivation should be taken more seriously. In the current study, we have revealed that reflective teaching is effective in enhancing the level of learner autonomy. One of the possible explanations for this result could be the fact that when teachers are involved in reflective practice they pay more attention to the process of their teaching. As a result, they can help students learn more independently. Put another way, when a teacher is thinking about her own practice in the classroom and considers reflection as an important aspect of her job, she will inevitably transfer this way of thinking and doing things to the learners.

These findings also give support to the arguments of Benson (2007), Dickinson (1995) and Littlewoods (1999), who have stated that intrinsic motivation will be fostered if we give the second language learners a certain amount of freedom to the extent that they feel responsible for their own course of learning.

Another possible explanation for the improvement of intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning in this study can be found in what Dörnyei (2001) identifies: "the best motivational intervention is simply to improve the quality of our teaching" (p. 26). Reflective teaching practice can therefore be seen as a factor which has increased the quality of teaching and subsequently the intrinsic motivational level of the learners. This finding lends further support to the usefulness and applicability of reflective teaching practice (Beauchamp, 2015; Etscheidt, Curran & Sawyer, 2012; Minott, 2015).

A number of studies have documented empirical evidence in support of the positive relationships between autonomy and second language (Benson, 2013; Little, 2009; Tassinari, 2012). In addition, there is some evidence indicating that motivation and second language performance are positively related (Arababi, 2014; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012; Thompson & Erdil-Moody, 2014; Xu & Gao, 2014). Moreover, Matsumoto, Hiromori & Nakayama (2013) and Kormos and Csizer (2014) have found a strong correlation between learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In this regard then, this study complements and contributes to the existing body of evidence by proving the possibility of enhancing these two factors through reflective teaching practice.

Turning to the limitations of the current attempt, a number of points need to be raised in order to warrant attention for future research studies. In this study, students' autonomy may have been influenced by some other factors rather than reflective teaching. The intimacy between the teacher and some students may also have interfered with the final results as this closeness will favour the students' desires to participate in the study.

6. Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the effect of reflective teaching on learner autonomy and the intrinsic motivation of Iranian upper-intermediate female learners. Initially, two teachers – a reflective teacher and an unreflective teacher - were selected based on the results of reflective teaching questionnaire. To this end, two selected female teachers were briefed on what the purpose of the study was and the researcher maintained constant contact with them throughout the study. The participants of the study included sixty learners who were randomly divided into two groups of thirty. One of the classes was randomly assigned as the experimental group, taught by the reflective teacher and the other class as control group, whose instructor adopted no tangible reflective actions.

The results indicated that reflective teaching leads to the enhancement of both learners' autonomy and intrinsic motivational level. Given the findings of the present study, we are further reminded of the fact that the practice of teaching can influence the ways learners approach and view the learning process. As teachers, we need to reflect upon our practice in order to promote more effective learning on the part of ourselves and the learners. One way to do so is to adopt a reflective approach towards our teaching practice.

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