

## **The Role of Self-Directed Learning in Developing Speaking of Iranian EFL Learners at Different Proficiency Levels**

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### **Abstract**

This study was designed to investigate the role of self-directed learning among Iranian EFL learners. The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-directed learning and their speaking ability. It also attempted to identify the differences that may occur by gender variable in using self-directed learning. The sample was selected from among Iranian EFL learners studying at Islamic Azad University, Abadan Branch. Data were collected through semi-structured interview as the pre-test, it was conducted at the beginning of the semester and the participants were assigned to three proficiency groups in terms of their ability to speak screened by a proficiency test. Then, Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) was administered to these three groups of students. At the end of the semester, a parallel post-test was administered to the groups. This research took a whole academic semester. A one-way ANOVA was employed to determine the test-takers' performances on the SDLRS in terms of their speaking proficiency levels. Statistically significant differences emerged demonstrating the differences between the students' performances on the SDLRS in the upper-intermediate and the elementary levels, but these differences were not statistically significant among the upper-intermediate and the intermediate levels. It was concluded that the upper-intermediate learners are more self-directed, in simple words, data showed a direct relationship between self-directedness and the speaking skill at the upper-intermediate level. In order to see the extent to which the gender variable can account for a significant difference in the test-takers' performances, an independent *t*-test was also conducted. The analysis of the data also indicated that there were not significant differences between two genders.

**Keywords:** Self-directed learning, Language proficiency, Adult learning.

## Introduction

"For most people, the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication" (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p.103). Like every country that needs to be engaged with international transactions, learning English as a foreign language is one of the most important requirements in our country. Being familiar with English is required for getting new jobs, and academic degrees. Iranian students begin to learn English in guidance schools, while most of the students study English at private English language institutes even earlier. Despite all these attempts, they still face many problems in expressing themselves even at advanced levels when it comes to real situation of speaking. Accordingly, teachers and students should equip themselves to use the most effective methods and techniques of teaching and learning language, respectively. Having the knowledge of grammar, using different activities and drills are not enough for some participants to achieve the goal of leaning language; therefore, using strategies may throw light on learning, one of these strategies is to promote self-directed learning among English foreign language learners. As Knowles (1975) stated, "the ability of self-directed learning is the basic ability that exists in all human beings". Guglielmino (2008) believed that there are two reasons to promote, support, and foster self-directed learning. The first basic reason is that self-directed learning is our most natural way to learn. The second reason lies in the fact that "the complexity and rapid-changing society affects all aspects of our lives, hence self-directed learning is our most basic natural response to newness, problems, or challenges in our environment" (p.2). Self-directed learning is considered as one of the most common techniques in which adults pursue learning and thus being a self-directed learner is instrumental to being a life-long learner (Oddi, 1987). According to Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), "lifelong learning refers to learning that takes place across the entire life span" (p.20). Life-long learning enables learners to get information and knowledge outside formal learning context. Self-directed learning takes place throughout one's life when individual decides to learn more about some specific topics. Most of the researchers in the domain of self-directed learning believed that self-directed learning is defined in terms of the amount of responsibility and control a learner accepts for his/ her learning, the degree of the control a self-directed learner takes depends on his/ her attitude, ability and personality characteristic, so there is a need to assess college students to see if they possess the skills and attitudes and abilities for self-directed learning. Thus, the present study proposes three null hypotheses:

**H0<sub>1</sub>.** There is not a significant relationship between students' self-directed learning ability and their speaking ability.

**H0<sub>2</sub>.** Self-directed learning ability is not different in developing speaking ability among Iranian EFL learners' at different proficiency levels.

**H0<sub>3</sub>.** Self-directed learning ability is not different in developing speaking ability among male and female EFL learners.

Theoretically, this research is important because it adds to the body of literature on self-directed learning in adults learning and it sheds lights on how self-directed learning can meet the variety of needs of learners. In addition it provides fruitful evidences on the nature of self-directed learning in developing the skills and abilities. It also may be of great help to those who deal with language teaching, material developing, syllabus designing and the like.

## Review of Literature

Self-directed learning is a term mostly used in adult learning context. Merriam (2001) believed andragogy and self-directed learning are the pillars of adult learning theory. Self-directed learning has been defined differently by different scholars even more than one definition is presented by one scholar. Knowles (1975) defined self-directed learning as a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, identifying humans and materials resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (P.18). Most of the researchers in the field of adult education believed that this definition is the basic one among others definitions. There are different ideas about self-directed learning this is why this term has been defined in many different ways: as a process, a characteristic, and a combination of these two. Some scholars such as Tough (1979), Oddi (1987), Harisson (1978), and Knowles (1975) believed that SDL can be viewed as a process of organizing the instructions. These researchers centered on the learners' level of autonomy. While some others researchers have assumed SDL as a personal attribute for example: Kasworm (1988) and Guglielmino (1977). They have tried to describe individuals who can assume responsibility in the process of learning. But according to Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), SDL is considered as both, the instructional processes and personality characteristics. In the present study, the chosen definition is consistent with those researchers who have described SDL as an individual characteristic and the extent to which the learners possess personal attributes of self-directed learning is represented by their self-directed learning readiness. Although the bulk of literature on self-directed learning suggests that self-directed learning contributes to better understanding of learners in different fields of study, but interrelationships among self-directed learning and language four skills (speaking, listening, writing, reading) have not been explored. Hence, this exploratory study investigates the possible effects of self-directed learning on learners' speaking ability to fill this information gap. But inconsistent results have been presented concerning the relationship of self-directed learning with gender.

Reio (2004) conducted a study in which he examined whether prior knowledge, self-directed learning readiness, and curiosity impact classroom performance in a college classroom. The analysis of data indicated that females demonstrated lower level of self-directedness and it affected their classroom performances negatively.

Reio and Davis (2005) investigated age and gender differences in self-directed learning readiness on a sample of 530 participants. They found that age had statistically significant relationship with self-directed learning readiness and ethnicity. Based on the result obtained a significant age x gender interaction demonstrated that in comparison with the younger males, the younger females indicated higher levels of self-directed learning readiness. The finding also suggested that the age 14-20 year-old females had significantly higher self-directed learning readiness scores compared to males.

## Methods

The sample studied in this investigation consisted of 50 students at Abadan Azad University majoring in English Language Teaching. A total of 50 students, who were selected based on non-random judgment sampling participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 23 to 45. The mean and SD of their ages were 27.00 and 5.25, respectively. To decide on homogeneity of the sample, a pre-test for speaking proficiency based on IELTS test of speaking (Ramezane, 2004) was conducted. The selected subjects were both males and females including 13 males and 37 females.

The data were then collected by means of two oral interviews which were based on the speaking test of IELTS (Ramezane, 2004) and Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale

(Guglielmino, 1977). The pre-test was conducted. It is a face to face conversation lasted 10 to 20 minutes based on the ability of speaking skill in each person. The participants were required to answer some general questions about their personal life, for example, to introduce themselves and talk about their jobs, family members, hobbies, and so on, as a warm-up task. Then interview continued by giving them a topic as task two and then they were required to talk about an argument, as task three. At the end of interview, they were asked some questions about the given topic. Then they were scored by two scorers according to the scale developed by Hughes (2003) for the sake of inter-rater reliability. The recordings were evaluated through inter-rater correlation to arrive at the reliability value met as (0.84) in the pre-test and (0.88) in the post-test. In order to divide the students into three groups, the mean and the SD of the students' performances in the pre-test were calculated. Then, the students with the scores higher than one SD above the mean were considered as upper-intermediate, the students with the scores lower than one SD below the mean were considered as elementary, and the students with the scores between one standard below through one standard above the mean were considered as intermediate. The pre-test was conducted in the first week of the semester. Then, in the middle of the semester, the participants were provided with a set of questionnaire, Self Directed Learning Readiness Survey (SDLRS) Guglielmino (1977) which is a self-report questionnaire with a 58 item five-point Likert scale. Upon completion of the questionnaire, the scores were listed by name and in the order in which the individuals took the test. The scores on Guglielmino' SDLRS (1977) scale range from a minimum of 58 to a maximum of 290 based on 58 items totally. To interpret the scores on this questionnaire in terms of students' self-directed readiness, the scores falling between, 58-190 were regarded as below average, the scores falling between, 190-208 were regarded as average, and the scores falling between, 208-240 were regarded as above average. So three categories of self-directed learners were chosen as "high self-directed learners" or above average, "mid-self-directed learners" or average ones, and "low self-directed learners" or below average. The reliability of the test was computed through Cronbach's Alpha method ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) and the mean as well as the SD were estimated to be 200.36 and 20.82, respectively. Finally, at the end of the term, three groups were given an IELTS post-test of speaking (Ramezane, 2004) with the same mentioned method as the pre-test. Statistical analysis aimed at discovering students' progress regarding speaking skill experienced by them. It should be noted that the oral performance tests focused on the proficiency levels of the students. The obtained scores by these three groups in the post-test were compared with the pre-test scores to find which group had more progress in speaking. Then One-way ANOVA test was conducted in order to find out whether the differences between the three groups were statistically significant.

## Data Analysis

The students were categorized into three groups according to their scores on the SDLRS and then the mean and the SD of students in the pre and post-tests were compared to see whether the students have progressed as the SDLRS increases. The mean and the SD of the data in the SDLRS were 200.36 and 20.82, respectively. Then the correlations between these three sets of scores were calculated to see if there is a correlation between them or not. The result showed that  $r=0.36$  in the pre-test and  $r=0.39$  in the post-test. The results indicated that all three groups had progresses but the speaking skill of the high self-directed learners had improved more than the low self-directed learners, but there was not statistically significant difference between mid-self-directed learners and high self-directed learners. This gives a hint to conclude that as the SDLRS increases, the students' ability to speak also increases.

Regarding the second hypothesis, in order to see if self-directed learning ability is different in developing speaking ability among Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels, the students were divided into three groups in terms of their performances on the pre-test. The mean and the SD of the students' performances in the pre-test were calculated.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of the SDLRS at Different Proficiency Levels

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Upper-inter	11	211.81	20.42	6.15	198.09	225.54	183	240
Intermediate	30	200.20	19.76	3.60	192.75	207.51	163	240
Elementary	9	187.11	18.45	6.15	172.92	201.29	158	211
Total	50	200.36	20.82	2.94	194.44	206.27	158	240

Table 1 indicates that the students were divided into three groups; then, the means and the SD of these groups were compared. According to the results, the mean (211.81) and the SD (20.42) of the upper-intermediate level were greater than the mean (200.20) and the SD (19.76) in the intermediate level. In turn, the mean (200.20) and the SD (19.76) in the intermediate level were greater than the mean (187.11) and the SD (18.45) in the elementary level. Then, One-way ANOVA test was needed to determine if the differences between the means were significant. Based on One-way ANOVA test in Table 2,  $F(2, 47) = 3.90$ ,  $P = 0.02$ . It can be concluded that there were statistically significant differences between three sets of means.

**Table 2:** One-way ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3025.52	2	1512.76	3.90	0.02
Within Groups	18225.99	47	387.78		
Total	21251.52	49			

To evaluate the exact differences between the levels of the SDLRS among the groups, a Post Hoc Scheffe test was conducted. Table 2 shows the results of comparison performance means on the students' speaking tests scores in terms of the SDLRS questionnaire.

**Table 3:** Post Hoc Scheffe Tests

SDLRS and pre-test	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
intermediate	11.68	6.94	0.09	-2.27	25.64
Upper-inter	24.70	8.85	0.00	6.90	42.51
Elementary					

Upper-inter- Intermediate	-11.68	6.94	0.09	-25.64	2.27
Elementary	13.02	7.48	0.08	-2.03	28.07
Upper-inter Elementary	-24.70	8.85	0.00	-42.51	-6.90
intermediate	-13.02	7.48	0.08	-28.07	2.03

As it is obvious from Table 3, the students were divided into three groups according to their scores in the pre-test, then the mean and the SEM of the students' SDLRS scores at these three levels were compared and it was shown that the mean difference between the upper-intermediate and the intermediate students was (11.68) and the mean difference between the upper-intermediate and the elementary students was (24.70) and also the mean difference between the intermediate and the elementary level was (13.02). As Table 3 shows, there were statistically significant differences between the students' performances on the SDLRS in the upper-intermediate and the elementary levels, but these differences were not significant among the upper-intermediate and the intermediate levels. Hence, it can be concluded that the upper-intermediate students were found to be more self-directed and as their scores in the SDLRS increases, their speaking ability also increases. It can be said that their preference to learn more also increases.

Finally, in order to see the extent to which gender variable can account for a significant difference in the test-takers' performances, an independent *t*-test was conducted. It was run on the mean scores of the SDLRS among two groups (female and male groups).

**Table 4:** Independent Samples T-Test

t-test for Equality of Means								
Groups		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
SDLRS	Equal variances assumed	-1.86	48	0.06	-12.23	6.55	-25.40	0.93
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.83	20.40	0.08	-12.23	6.66	-26.12	1.65

According to Table 4, the result of the *t*-test between gender-based means showed that no significant difference between the males and females means ( $t = -1.86$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Consequently, this strategy had an effect on both female and male performances in speaking skill. The results of the independent *t*-test showed there was no significant difference between male and female groups concerning their strategy use. Finally, the above-mentioned strategy

had an effect across performances of both gender groups' in speaking, but there was not much difference between the performance of males and females.

## Results and Discussion

The data collected and analyzed in this study showed, in general, the speaking ability of all groups under study improved. They also indicated that self-directed learning is differently effective in improving EFL learners' speaking ability at different proficiency levels. This result can be more approved by the evidence that the data analysis showed a significant difference between the means of the pre-test and post-test. Indeed, the mean of the post-test was greater than the pre-test which implies their outperformance in the post-test compared to the pre-test. The reason for better performances of the students might be due to the fact that, according to Garrison (1997), self-directed learners are more active, curious, motivated, interested to try new things and get involved in learning. In self-directed learning process, learning is not for learners who passively wait to be taught, it is for those learners who are active to participate in learning activities and construct knowledge. When learners actively get involved in learning, they have more or less degrees of self-directed learning for selecting learning approaches, using resources and evaluating learning. In fact, the results of this study are consistent with the results obtained from the research conducted by Chou (2000), his study was done among the engineering students' self-directed learning ability and their learning performances. The conclusion he drew was that a positive relationship exists between engineering students' self-directed learning abilities and their learning performances. Positive and correct uses of such strategies help students to enhance their learning and speaking. Rubin (1975) also has noted that our knowledge of what successful learners do, strategies they employ, all can help us teach those techniques to students and consequently enhance their learning. Therefore, self-directed learning can be used as an effective strategy which helps learners to promote their skills more.

The results of the present study revealed that though all groups had progresses in developing speaking ability, the students in the upper-intermediate level yielded a better performance. The results are in line with the study that McCauley and McClelland (2004) did, their work was designed to examine the role of self-directed learning in physics. They launched two studies among undergraduate physics students and postgraduate science students. The result came to indicate that the majority of undergraduate physics students scored average and below in readiness of self-directed learning and it was found that the majority of postgraduate students were above average or high in their SDL readiness. They suggested that SDL readiness among postgraduate sample was significantly higher than the undergraduate sample. And also Nokdee (2007) conducted a study to investigate self-directed learning among nurses, the findings of the study showed that those nurses who were self-directed learners learned more about patients and nursing communication. They had the ability to choose their own methods of learning and the resources of their learning. Nurses who showed higher self-direction were able to use their skills and experiences much better than low self-directed learners. It can be concluded that as the self-directed learning ability increases the ability and desire to learn more also increases.

To observe the mean differences between male and female students, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted. The result of the *t*-test between gender-based means showed that there was no significant difference between the male and female performances. It can also be implied from the results of this study that there is no significant difference between males and females' self-directed learning. The result is in the line with McCauley and McClelland (2004) that found no correlation between gender, age, course type, and SDL readiness scale. Also it is compatible with Reio and Davis (2005) that found no significant evidence to support sex differences in male and female learners, but a significant age x gender interaction indicated that the age 14-20-year-old females had significantly higher self-directed learning

readiness scores than the males. And also Hoban & Sersland (2000) reported no significant difference between males and females self-directed learning. But the results are not consistent with the findings of Reio (2004) who found individual differences in self-directed learning readiness; being older and male predicted higher self-directed learning readiness and classroom learning performances.

Based on the findings of this study, the following implications are recommended. Teachers need to know that students' participation is of paramount importance in classes. Thus, a good teacher should provide students with an opportunity to make them active in learning process. As it was shown in this study, those who are more self-directed are more successful in their speaking skill compared to those who are endowed with low level of self-directedness. Self-directed learning in this study was used as an influential strategy among EFL learners. There are a lot of strategies which are fruitful in helping learners to become "good language learners". Therefore, it is one part of teachers' duty to introduce different strategies and also their uses to their students. Motivating students to use different strategies is fruitful for both students and teachers. In effect, it will help both groups to be successful in their jobs.

This study presents implications and recommendations for foreign language teachers regarding teaching speaking skill. It also suggests areas that need further researches, since the study was narrowed to particular learners. Therefore, the following suggestions can be considered as the sources of further and supplementary studies.

Different factors can influence learners' level of self-directed learning readiness, among which only gender and the students' proficiency level were investigated in the present research. There are other important variables such as learning environment, personality traits, demography, age, and social context and so on not yet investigated among Iranian EFL learners which can serve as interesting areas for future researches.

This study was conducted among EFL learners at Abadan Azad University. Therefore, the present study can be replicated in other geographical areas. Further researches can be done to examine the performance of the same study among high school students or guidance school or older adult learners.

This experiment was performed with EFL students' at different proficiency levels on oral performance. The same study can be reiterated among different fields of study, for example the role of self-directed learning on students, teachers, nurses, farmers, as it was pointed out in the literature review. This study investigated the role of self-directed learning among males and females speaking skill and does not consider other language skills (reading, writing, and listening). There can be lots of studies in which researchers investigate the above mentioned items in the future researches.

As with any study, this inquiry has research limitations. First, this study was conducted at Islamic Azad University, Abadan Branch. Second, the sample was narrowed down to merely one university students. Thus, more researches are needed in similar situations to support the findings and to find more about self-directed learning impacts on the students' performances. Third, to examine the effect of self-directed learning with regard to time, maybe more time is needed while it took only a semester to run the research. Forth, this sample was just limited to 50 English Foreign Language Learners, and it should be investigated on more students. Fifth, self-directed learning can be applied to different fields of study, whereas it was limited to EFL learners in this study.



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