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GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER: FROM AUTONOMY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:
This paper investigated on the dual characteristics of good language learner in a foreign language (FL): autonomy, group cohesiveness and group norm. Data were collected by adopting methods of selecting good learners based on the achievement test and class participation, activity, and questionnaires. Fifty six learners took part in this study with more or less the same proficiency level. The results of the study showed that good language learners were more observant of the class norms rather than group cohesiveness. In addition, all of the good language learners were autonomous. The study had some certain implications regarding pedagogy in that teachers should assist poor language learners to increase their autonomy so that they may get closer to the ideal of being a good language learner.
Key Words: Autonomy, group cohesiveness, good language learners.

1. Introduction

Study in Good Language Learners (GLL) has faced a great shift from apsychological perspective to a more cognitive and later to a sociocultural perspective [20]. This has changed from the focus on idiosyncratic cognitive affective factors ([1], [12], [14]) to sociolinguistic features ([17], [18], [19], [23]) and later to more sociocultural, sociohistorical, and situated context-bound features of learners ([6], [20]).

Hsiao and Oxford (2002) mentioned that much research done on GLLs characteristics have more focused on the relationship between learners' use of strategy and levels of language proficiency. For example, Rubin [21] started to do research for identifying techniques and approaches employed by successful language learners. Stren (1975, cited in Grefell & Macaro, [13]) listed the top ten strategies of good language learners. Naiman, (1978 cited in [13]), listed 5 major strategies of good language learner as follow:

a. GLLs were active in their response to learning situations; they intensified efforts where necessary; they practiced regularly; they identified problems; they turned everyday experiences into learning opportunities.(active task approach)
b. GLLs referred to their own native language judiciously and made comparisons; made guesses and inferences about language; responded to clues; systematized language. (realization of language as system)
c. GLLs often concentrated on fluency rather than accuracy (especially in the early stages of learning); looked for communicative opportunities; looked for socio-cultural meanings.(realization of language as means of communication)
d. GLLs realized that learning a language involves emotional responses which they must take on board as part of their learning.(management of affective demands)
e. GLLs reviewed their L2 and made adjustment. (monitoring of L2 performance) (p. 12).

At the end of this extreme is a sociocultural perspective which assigns the learners' differences to more context-bound factors like group cohesiveness, group norming, and learners' group-bound belief. This latter view asserts that GLL is more determined by a specific task within specific second language acquisition (SLA) context. Cohen [8] mentioned that more effective learners intentionally and systematically selected and combined strategies relevant to the language task. This requires a shift in view from an interest in the quantity of strategy use to an interest in the quality of strategy use. Both of these views brought with them an increasing interest in metacognition as an orchestrating mechanism of effectively and context bound use of strategy.

2. Research in GLL

Diverse research has been done to identify different characteristics of GLLs. Stevick [25], in a research, studied seven successful language learners who were different markedly from others in what they preferred to do. He nevertheless thought that identifying overall pattern of GLLs would be possible. There are, perhaps, five major aspects of successful language learning as evidenced by the various studies: (1) a concern for language form, (2) a concern for communication (functional practice), (3) an active task approach, (4) an awareness of the learning process, and (5) a capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with task requirements.

Elsewhere, Ellis [11] mentioned that most GLL studies have focused on the types and number of strategies learners used and followed. He believed that GLLs are flexible in being attentive to form and meaning.

Social contexts can affect language learning success [17] through mediating factors of power, identity, culture, belief, and investment and the way these are interacted with each other. Autonomous learners are more responsible for their own learning. According to Scharle and Szabo [23], autonomous learners believed that their effort would be the most determining factor in their future success and would be willingly cooperate with others in a group to achieve their aim. To Wenden [27], autonomy meant to work cooperatively and flexibly within group and context. This way, autonomy is highly context dependent.

With whatever perspective they take to approach GLL studies, it is commonplace that researchers attribute learners' success and failures to certain factors. In the sociocultural paradigm, such factors are more context- and group- bound. A recent approach to SLA claims the importance of learners' involvement in group activity at the expense of static view as an explanation of who GLLs are [21], [6], [9], [16].

3. Group cohesiveness and group norms

Dornyei and Malderez [10] believed that group cohesiveness would contribute to learners' second language motivation. By group cohesiveness they meant the strength of the relationship among members of a group with each other and with the group itself. Such a relationship would lead individuals to identify themselves with their group. To Change (2007), learners in a classroom are not individuals but a "collection of individuals" (p. 40). This leads to the emergent of collective identity or to Bakhtin's intersubjectivity. Chang (2007) defined "group" as the whole class and "group members" as classmates. Closeness of group members is group cohesiveness which is highly constructive in the way communication might be initiated or ended and continued. Group cohesiveness leads members of a group to share their ideas, experience, and materials with each other.

4. What is autonomy?

Autonomy has been conceptualized differently by different scholars. Holec (1981, as cited in Benson [3]) defined autonomy as (1) the ability to take one's own responsibility of learning; (2) the potential capacity to be developed; and (3) technical aspects of learning. To Little (1991), autonomy is a capacity for critical reflection and decision making. To Benson (2001), autonomous learner is able to freely determine the context of learning. Elsewhere, Oxford (2003, cited in Benson, [4]) added two socio-cultural facets to Benson's model: (1) socio-cultural 1 which refers to approaches based on Vygotskyan learning theory (all learning is situated in a particular social and cultural setting) and (2) socio-cultural 2 which refers to work

based on theories of communities of practice (the context of autonomy is more important than idiosyncratic exercise).

5. The purpose of the study

As already mentioned, autonomy is not a practice of learning in isolation; autonomous learners work cooperatively with their teacher and other classmates. In sociocultural theory, autonomy is mostly discussed in relation with the ability to work in group and meet group norms. The present study attempts to investigate whether GLLs are also autonomous learners in the sense they are able to work cooperatively or not. To this end, the study goes through the following questions:

a. Is there any correlational difference between subcategories of autonomy across good and poor language learners?
b. Which of the components of autonomy (individualistic or group based) can predict learners achievement?

6. Method

To approach the questions raised above, we change the learners' final score into standardized scores (Z) so that we can divide the sample into two distinct groups of low and high achievers. Based on the obtained result, we label those learners with Z score lower than zero as low achievers and those with Z score higher than zero as high achievers. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of each group.

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness (Std Error)	Kurtosis (Std. Error)
High	Score	31	80.50	97.25	86.89	4.49	0.55 (0.4)	-0.417 (0.82)
	ZS	31	0.03	1.92	0.74	0.50	0.55 (0.4)	- 0.417 (0.82)
Low	Score	24	65	80	71.69	4.70	0.085 (0.47)	-1.175 (0.91)
	ZS	24	-1.72	-0.03	-0.96	0.53	0.085 (0.47)	-1.175 (0.91)

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by High and Low Achievers
Note: ZS = Standard Score; SD = Standard Deviation; N = number of participant per group.

7. Participants

The participants in this study were the 55 female learners forming five different classes (10 to 12 students in each class) and they enrolled in a

private English class in Iran. They were an intact group and were taught by the same teacher (the second author). Their age ranged from 20 to 40 and their general language proficiency was conventionally determined by the institute as an intermediate level. *Interchange* (third edition) was the book they studied.

8. Procedure

Data were collected over a period of two months. The questionnaires were given to the learners at the end of the semester so that they had enough time to know each other. The questionnaires were translated into Persian to ensure learners' full understanding of all questions. The students were given 20 minutes to fill out the questionnaires. SPSS version 18 was used to analyze the data.

9. Instrument

Three instruments were used in this study. Three questionnaires [25] were used to estimate learners' different levels of autonomy. The first questionnaire was used to obtain learners' belief and actual representation of their belief. It contained two parts of belief (N = 10) and learners' actual representation of belief (N = 10). Part A consisted of 10 questions measuring learners' opinion on how much they feel that they are responsible to do certain activities (question 1 to 10) on 4 options on the Likert scale with 1 indicating as *No*, 2 as a *little*, 3 as *some*, and 4 as *mainly*. The second part of this questionnaire required learners to determine to what extent they actually did the activities in part A.

The second questionnaire measured learners' amount of group cohesiveness. It was measured on four options Likert scale with 1 indicating as *not true*, 2 as *somewhat true*, 3 as *true*, and 4 as *very true*. Two questions of this questionnaire (item 14 and 18) were reverse input due to negative concept it refers.

The third question measured learners' amount of inclination to group norms. It consisted of 9 questions and was measured on four options Likert scale with 1 indicating as *not important*, 2 *somewhat important*, 3 *important*, and 4 extremely *important*. The second and third questionnaires were taken and adopted from Clement et al. (1994) and Chang (2007) respectively. Mean and standard deviation of each item is given in Appendix A.

10. Analysis

To answer the questions raised in this study, different statistical analyses were run. First, two correlational analyses were run to answer the first question of this study, "Is there any correlational difference between

subcategories of autonomy across good and poor language learners?" The results are shown in tables 2 and 3.

As shown in Table 2, in the high achievers group, Autonomous Belief (AutoB) is highly correlated with Autonomous Actual Practice (AutoAC) (Rho = 0.72, $p < 0.01$). This means that high achievers practice what they actually believe. Moreover, Group Norms and Autonomous Actual Practice are highly and significantly correlated (Rho = 0.45, $P < 0.01$). This means that they act in accordance with classroom norms. However, learners' scores are not correlated with any of the autonomy variables.

Variables	Scores (Sig)	AutoB (Sig)	AutoAC (Sig)	GrCoh (Sig)	GrNorm (Sig)
Score	1				
AutoB	0.26 (0.15)	1			
AutoAC	0.13 (0.45)	0.72**(0.00)	1		
GrCoh	- 0.033 (0.86)	0.169 (0.362)	0.198 (0.286)	1	
GrNorm	0.065 (0.72)	0.174 (0.348)	0.459** (0.00)	0.187 (0.313)	1

Table 2. Correlational Analysis for High Achievers

Table 3, also, demonstrates correlational relationship among the variables of this study for low achievers. In this group, there is a significant correlation between Autonomous Actual Practice and Group Norms (Rho = 0.48, $P < 0.01$). However, there is no significant correlational relationship among other variables, nor is there any significant correlation between score and other autonomous variables in this group.

Variables	Scores (Sig)	AutoB (Sig)	AutoAC (Sig)	GrCoh (Sig)	GrNorm (Sig)
Score	1				
AutoB	-0.30 (0.15)	1			
AutoAC	-0.03 (0.86)	0.19 (0.37)	1		
GrCoh	-0.07 (0.74)	-0.14 (0.5)	- 0.16 (0.44)	1	
GrNorm	-0.028 (0.89)	0.18 (0.39)	0.48* (0.016)	0.099 (0.64)	1

Table 3. Correlational Analysis for Low Achievers

To answer the second question, "Which of the components of autonomy (individualistic or group based) can predict learners achievement?" regression analysis through the stepwise method was used to probe which one of the components of autonomy might predict Iranian students' achievement. The results are shown in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7.

One of the essential assumptions that should be met in regression analysis is the linearity of the data which is tested through ANOVA. The result shows that the F (1, 53) = 5.180, P <0.05 for regression model is significant. This significant F-value indicates that the regression model is linear. This indicates that two assumptions of linearity and homogeneity of variance have been met.

As is shown in Table 4, the regression model extracted Autonomous Actual Practice (AutoAC) as the predictor of learners' language achievement. The total R reported is 0.298. Its square is .089, i.e. AutoAC can predict 8.9 percent of learners' achievement attended in this study. R squared ranges from 0 to 1 with smaller valued indicating that the model does not fit the data well. Therefore, although AutoAC turns out to be the predictive independent factor for learners' achievement, the small value of R square weakens the assumption.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.298(a)	0.089	0.072	8.534

a Predictors: (Constant), autoActual
c Dependent Variable: score

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Language Achievement by Learners' Autonomy

Table 5 displays the regression coefficients and the constants. The regression coefficient of autoactual is 0.67. Its Beta value is 0.298. This means that autoactual changes by 1 unit, the students' language achievement would change by 0.29 units. Other variables like Learners' Belief on Autonomy, Group Cohesiveness, and Group Norms are excluded from the analysis.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	61.94	8.129		7.62	.000
	AutoActual	0.678	0.298	0.298	2.276	.027

Table 5. Regression Coefficients by Learners' Score

11. Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the relationship of different variables attributed to learners' autonomy on learners' language achievement as well as GLLs versus PLL. The findings of the study indicated that GLLs (or high achievers), in this study, tended to meet the norms of the class rather

than considering the group cohesiveness. In other words, GLLs showed to be considerate of the standards, rules and generally norms of the class. For example, GLLs come to the class on time, hand in their assignments on time, help their peers, and get prepared before the class. This is while they have no heed of group cohesiveness that is they don't feel dependent to particular group of learners. They are autonomous and rely on their own capabilities.

For example, good language learners set their own goals, find their own strengths and weaknesses in learning, they evaluate their learning process, etc. The result of this study proved that GLLs were autonomous. Thus, teachers must try to promote and enhance the autonomy-oriented techniques for poor language learners to rely more on themselves and develop their language abilities. In addition, autonomous learners had a good deal of observance regarding group norms and standard. For GLLs, however, being in specific group and working only with their friends is not an indicative variable of their success in language achievement.

However, this study had many limitations. First, the number of the participants in the sample is not sufficient for obtaining a reliable result in regression. Second, learners' level was assumed to be conventionally homogeneous based on the Institution's decision; no proficiency tests were given to the learners.

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Appendix A.

Learners' achievement was not obtained through a single instrument. It had four sources with different weighting scale: speaking and class participation with a weighted score of 40, midterm exam with a weighted score of 10, final exam with a weighted scoring of 40, and story exam with a weighted score of 10.

The instruments used in this study enjoyed an acceptable reliability; alpha for Autonomous Belief, Autonomous Actual Practice, Group Cohesiveness, and Group Norms are 0.54, 0.63, 0.82, and 0.74 respectively. The reliability of total questionnaire is also 0.80 which is highly acceptable.

Appendix B. Means and Standard Deviation of Items

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learners' Belief on What They Do		
Identify my own strengths and weaknesses	3.3	0.57
Set up my own learning goals	3.1	0.82
Decide what to learn outside the classroom	2.8	0.83
Evaluate my learning and progress	3.0	0.74
Stimulate my own interest in learning English	3.4	0.74
Learn from my peers, not just from the teachers	3.4	0.70
Become more self-directed in my learning	2.9	0.89
Offer opinions on learning materials	2	0.83
Discover knowledge in English on my own rather than waiting for knowledge from the teacher	2.6	0.67
Offer opinions on what to learn in the classroom	1.9	0.82
What Learners Actually Do		
Identify my own strengths and weaknesses	3.0	0.74
Set up my own learning goals	2.9	0.91
Decide what to learn outside the classroom	2.6	0.91

Evaluate my learning and progress	2.9	0.79
Stimulate my own interest in learning English	3.2	0.80
Learn from my peers, not just from the teachers	3.3	0.72
Become more self-directed in my learning	2.9	0.87
Offer opinions on learning materials	1.7	0.72
Discover knowledge in English on my own rather than waiting for knowledge from the teacher	2.3	0.80
Offer opinions on what to learn in the classroom	1.7	0.76
Group Cohesiveness		
Compared to other classes I feel my class is better than most	2.6	0.84
If I were in another class, I would want that class to have students very similar to the classmates I have now	2.5	0.85
This class is composed of people who fit together	2.2	0.75
There are some people in this class who do not like each other	3.4	0.93
I am satisfied with my class	3	0.79
I feel very comfortable working with this class	2.9	0.76
If a had a choice, I would want to learn English in the same class again	2.8	0.93
My classmates don't seem to care about each other very much	3.5	0.85
I know most of my classmates and we all get along very well	2.4	0.93
Come to the class on-time	3.3	0.79
Help my classmates with their schoolwork	2.5	0.71
Hand in assignment on-time	3.2	0.92
Be well prepared (for example, preview the lesson) before the class	2.8	0.90
Fully participate during the class , for example answer teacher's questions voluntarily	3.2	0.70
Speak only English all the time	3.3	0.84
Spend as much time as I (we) can on assignments in order to do a good job	3.1	0.81
Absolutely not chatting with classmates when the teacher is lecturing	3	0.86
Ask teacher questions whenever we have questions or problems	3.3	0.73
Assist the teacher with setting up the equipments for the class	2.2	0.91