On the effect of Language Proficiency on Learners' Autonomy and Motivation

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Abstract- *The present study aimed at investigating the effect of Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level on their motivation and autonomy. To this end, 141 English major participants, both male and female, at Imam Khomeini International University and Kar non-profit university in Qazvin, Iran were asked to fill in two questionnaires on motivation and learner autonomy. Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and an autonomy questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004)[45] were used to assess these variables. Also, the participants' proficiency level was checked using their scores on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP). The collected data were analyzed using the Kruskal-Wallis procedure, and the findings revealed that the students' language proficiency did not influence their motivation and autonomy. In other words, language proficiency was not an influential factor in students' motivation and autonomy. The results of the present study may be helpful for teachers, learners and syllabus designers. A clear understanding of the nature of the relationship between language proficiency and traits like motivation and autonomy can help those involved in language teaching and learning to make more informed decisions about the steps to take to improve the above-mentioned traits.*

Keywords- *Motivation; Learner Autonomy; Language Proficiency*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, learning English as a foreign (EFL) or second language (ESL) is turning to a vital and inevitable issue all around the world. This has led numerous students to enroll in these courses. Getting more information about different factors that result in successful second or foreign language learning is a goal that anyone within the field is interested in. From among these factors, motivation and learner autonomy play a remarkable role in language learning. Benson (2001) [4], Brown (2007) [5], Dickenson (1995) [12], Lamb and Reinders (2005) [21] and, Little (2007) [24] are among the hundreds of people who have worked in this area. Motivation, as the name speaks, is a stimulating power in human beings to do an activity. As a whole, it is the desire to do something. Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) [13] believe that without motivation even the most capable individuals will not be able to meet the desired goals. Wang (2009) [40] recognized motivation as a key factor in language learning and found a direct relationship between motivation and learners' success and failure. Many researchers have studied motivation and autonomy in language learning. Among others, Dickinson (1995) [12] compares the role of autonomy and motivation in language learning and concludes:

> *...there is substantial evidence from cognitive motivational studies that learning success and enhanced motivation are conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning successes or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control. Each of these conditions is a characteristic of learner autonomy as it is described in applied linguistics (p. 147).*

In addition, Dafei (2007) [11] investigated the relationship between autonomy and language learning and reported that learner autonomy affects students' language proficiency. All these studies and their outcomes will be valid just under the poise and stability umbrella of these variables. If it is confirmed that these attributes are changeable and different factors may influence them, there will be no use in any of those studies, whether named here or not. Proficiency may be one of the factors that can affect learners' motivation and autonomy.

Many studies have been carried out to investigate various aspects of motivation and autonomy, as well as the factors that may influence them. However, there seems to be a paucity of research on how language proficiency may influence EFL learners' motivation and autonomy. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the stability (or instability, thereof) of L2 learners' motivation and autonomy across different levels of proficiency. It aims at answering the following questions:

1. Are there any significant differences in EFL learners' motivation across proficiency levels?
2. Are there any significant differences in EFL learners' autonomy across proficiency levels?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how motivation and anxiety might be influenced by language proficiency, one may need to develop a clear understanding of each of these traits first. This section, therefore, introduces these traits and then offers a short review of the studies carried out on each variable as well as those investigating the relationships among the factors that are the concern of this study.

2.1. Motivation

Learning a language other than one's mother tongue needs a strong motivation, without which learning may change into an overbearing and cumbersome process. A large body of research has been carried out to investigate this role in second language learning. According to Cook (2000) [9], motivation, age and personality are the principal factors affecting second language acquisition. Cook claims that, among the above factors, motivation has the most effective role. Moreover, the role of teachers should be considered in making learners motivated (Gömleksiz, 2001) [16]. In an EFL context, where access to native speakers is rather limited, interaction between the teacher and learners gains in importance. In Gömleksiz's opinion, teachers' success affects learners' success directly. Teaching strategies also have a considerable effect on motivation. Reece and Walker (1997) [31] state that teachers' approach to teaching will influence learners' motivation.

Motivation was introduced to the field of language learning by Gardner and Lambert in 1959 (Igoudin, 2008) [17]. Since motivation is a complicated and broad concept, it is a bit difficult to define. However, Igoudin (2008, p. 5) [17] quotes Keller (1983) defining motivation as "the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect". Gardner and Lalonde (1985) also define it as the desire to learn language, and the affective reactions toward it (Sung & Tsai, 2014) [37].

Lightbrown and Spada (2006) [23] confirm the above-mentioned complexity of motivation and, in their definition, add an attitudinal perspective to it. According to them, motivation is a complex concept which can create a balance between learners' needs and their views about the people who speak that language. There are other definitions of motivation, as well. Most of these definitions seem to have areas of overlap and are often simply paraphrases of the same idea. Among others, Oxford and Shearin (1994) [28], Ryan and Deci (2000) [33], as well as Cheng and Doryie (2007) [8] define motivation generally as an impetus and power behind one's action which pushes them to do it.

Motivational psychologists have conducted a large number of studies to understand what prompts people to do what they do. In Eccles and Wigfield's (2002) [15] words, people's beliefs, values and goals are the main sources of motivation. According to Pintrich and Schunk (2002), in the past, some other items were mentioned as the sources, for example needs and reinforcements (Öztürk, 2002) [29]. These discrepancies in past and present beliefs have resulted in a number of current theories. In his study, Öztürk presents these theories comprehensively. He classifies them into two groups: contemporary motivation theories in psychology, and motivational theories in second language learning. Due to space limitations, only their names come here. Expectancy- Value Theory, Achievement Motivation Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, Attribution Theory, Self-Worth Theory, Goal Setting Theory, Goal orientation Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Theory of Planned Behavior belong to the first category, and Gardner's Motivation Theory, Dörnyei's Motivational Framework of L2 Motivation, Williams and Burden's Framework of L2 Motivation, Dörnyei and Otto's Process Model of L2 Motivation, and Dörnyei's Framework of L2 Self-System belong to the second category.

Instrumental and integrative motivation are two main types of motivation which are distinguished by Gardner and Lambert (Zarei & Elekaie, 2012) [44]. While integrative motivation is defined as "wishing to integrate into the target culture", instrumental motivation is defined as "desiring academic or work-related achievements" (Zhang, Su & Liu, 2013, p. 59) [45]. Zarei and Elekaei (2012) [44] classify motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic. They define intrinsic motivation as an internal desire to engage in an activity because the activity itself is interesting and satisfying, and extrinsic motivation as the external desire to engage in an activity such as earning reward or avoiding punishment (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001). In Harmer's (1983) classification, intrinsic motivation has two sub-parts involving task motivation and situational motivation (Wang, 2009) [40]. Besides these major and more common types of motivation, there are two other types which are comparatively less common: travel and xenophile motivation (Perez-Barriga, 2013) [35]. Travel motivation talks about learners' desire to learn a language for traveling to places where that language is spoken and xenophile is "when students are keen on learning another language to be able to communicate with overseas people" (Perez-Barriga, 2013, p. 916).

A number of studies have investigated the relationship between motivation and various aspects of language learning. In their study on the relationship between student achievement and attitude, motivation, and learning styles, Shih and Gamon (2001) [35] worked on 99 students taking two web-based courses. To check the students' learning style, they used an on-line version of Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT), and to assess their motivation and attitude, an on-line questionnaire consisting of two scales (motivation and attitude) was used. They concluded that there were no significant differences in the achievement of field-dependent and field-independent students. Equal

performance was reported for students with different styles and attitudes. Their findings are interesting in that they found motivation as the only effective factor on students' achievement.

Zubairi and Sarudin (2009) [46] compared the students of two Malaysian universities based on their motivation in learning a foreign language. 500 students participated in the study. For data collection, they used survey questionnaire, document analysis and focus group discussion. Results showed that both groups of students were extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to learn a foreign language. Another finding from the t-test was that a significant difference existed in terms of motivation of students from the two universities.

Another investigation by Xu (2011) [42] regarding the relationship between language learning motivation and the choice of language learning strategies among Chinese graduates of non-English majors showed that extrinsic motivation seemed to be the dominant type in Chinese graduates, and that their motivation had a positive correlation with their strategy use. That is, more motivated learners used strategies more frequently.

Similarly, Nikoopour, Salimian, Salimian and Amini (2012) investigated the relationship between intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and language learning strategy use of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, questionnaires of motivation and learning strategies were given to 72 participants to be filled in. Results showed that intrinsic motivation was the prevailing type of motivation and metacognitive strategies were the more frequent ones among Iranian learners of English. In addition, intrinsic motivation was significantly related to cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

In a study by Thanh and Huan (2012) [39], the role of task-based learning in motivating non-English major Vietnamese students to enhance their vocabulary learning was investigated. Results were indicative of the influential role of text-based tasks in students' motivation, and showed an improvement in their vocabulary learning.

Additionally, Akram and Ghani (2013) [2] investigated gender differences regarding attitudes and motivation towards learning English. 240 male and half female learners participated in the study. Gardner's (1985) AMTB questionnaire was used to check the participants' attitude and motivation towards English language learning, and an achievement test was used to assess the students' proficiency. An independent samples t-test and MANOVA were employed in this study. Analyzing MANOVA results showed no statistically significant differences between motivation of male and female students, while there were significant differences in their integrativeness; their desire to and their attitude towards learning English language and English people. On the other hand, analysis of the t-test indicated no significant difference between language proficiency of the two gender groups.

A study conducted by Khodadady and Khajavy (2013) [19] aimed at investigating the relationship between language anxiety and motivation among Iranian EFL learners. The results indicated a positive relationship between less self-determined types of external motivation and language anxiety. Also, a negative relationship was found between intrinsic motivation, identified regulation and language anxiety.

In most of the studies investigating the importance of motivation in language learning, the relationship between motivation and autonomy has also been taken into consideration (Dickenson, 1995 [12]; Jones, 2007 [18]; Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002 [36]; Thanasoulas, 2000 [38]; Yu, 2006 [43]). Zarei and Elekaie (2012) [44] studied this relationship and found a significant but low positive relationship between these two variables. In addition, Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) [36] conducted a study to find out which one– autonomy or motivation – comes first. To achieve this objective, they used 508 participants of Hong Kong tertiary students, and a questionnaire consisting of 5 sections to collect the required data. Besides answering other questions posed by researchers, findings also showed that to learn autonomously, motivation played a considerable role in learners and took priority over autonomy. This suggests that teachers had better try to make students motivated before training them to be autonomous.

2.2 Autonomy

At the beginning, 'learner autonomy' seemed to be "a matter of learners doing things on their own" (Little, 2007, p. 14) [24]. Later on, by developing learner-centered theories and curricula considering learner autonomy as a key goal in education, it seemed to be "a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves" (p. 14).

It was Holec's (1981) study which introduced the concept of autonomy to foreign language learning domain. Holec defines it as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning where 'to take charge of one's learning is to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning' (Dafei, 2007) [11]. In spite of this obvious statement, there is some confusion over the definition of autonomy in the literature (Thanasoulas, 2000) [38]. Bruce (1995) [6] defines autonomy based on its etymology. She holds that it is driven from the Greek self-law or rule. Literally, it means right of self government, and personal freedom.

Based on an overall review of related research, Dikinson (1995) [12] discusses autonomy in relation to education in general and applied linguistic in particular. Generally, he identifies an autonomous learner as one who is active and independent in the learning process; one who knows his needs and interests and can match his goals with them. He sees autonomy as an attitude as well as a capacity; an attitude towards learning in which the learner is responsible for his own learning, and a capacity for activity and independence. In order to define autonomy as comprehensively as possible, Littlewood (1996) [25] considers three different domains of autonomy: its components, aspects and levels. He identifies *ability* and

willingness as two main components of this capacity. Thus, an individual may be able to make independent choices but have no willingness to do so. In contrast, another one may be willing to do a chosen option but have no ability to exercise it. He distinguishes *general* and *task-specific* as two main aspects of autonomy; and finally, he puts its levels (the level of behavior at which a person makes independent choices) within a hierarchy: low level and high level choices lie at the bottom and top of the hierarchy, respectively, and in between any number of levels can be distinguished.

In her paper, Cotterall (1995) [10] defines autonomy as "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning" (p. 195). She then prescribes the tactics and places them in a group that includes them for 'setting goals', 'choosing materials and tasks' and 'planning monitoring and evaluation progresses'. In Scharle and Szabo's (2000) [34] words, autonomy has been defined as "the freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well" (p. 4). They make a distinction between autonomous and responsible learners and assert that to promote learner autonomy, it is necessary to make learners responsible and encourage them to have an active role in decision making.

By taking a glance at the literature of the recent twenty years, one can easily notice the increasing importance of autonomy (either learners' or teachers') in education and specifically in second/ foreign language learning. A number of studies have been conducted to discover the degree of its importance in language learning. Some of the more important ones are discussed below.

The relationship between autonomy and strategy use has attracted more attention than other issues. White (1995) is one of those who have investigated this relationship. She conducted a comparative study regarding strategies which learners use in two quite different contexts: classroom and distance foreign language learning. The participants were from four nationalities: French, German, Japanese and Chinese who had enrolled in a dual-mode institution. A strategy use questionnaire and a kind of verbal report were used for the purpose of collecting data. Results showed that 'mode of study' was the most effective factor regarding metacognitive strategy use. Verbal reports results also indicated that distance learners used metacognitive strategies, especially self-management strategies, more distinctly.

In another study, Rivers (2001) [32] collected qualitative data based on which she could analyze self-directed language learning behaviors of adult third-language learners. 11 Georgian and Kazakh homogenized learners were chosen for this purpose. Data were analysed using Grounded Method. At the end of the project, all learners were required to "assess their progress, learning style, strategy preferences and conflicts with teaching styles and with the behavior of other learners regularly" (p. 279). Based on these assessments, they tried to choose the appropriate materials and learning tasks and strategies.

Levesque, Zuehlke, Stanek and Ryan (2004) [22] investigated the role of autonomy in 4 different university settings; two American and two German universities. They had predicted a significant difference between these universities in terms of their relative emphasis on competence versus autonomy. Their prediction came true and the findings showed that compared with German students, American students were less autonomous and more competent.

Moreover, Luna and Sánchez (2005) [26] sought to find out the characteristics of autonomous learners and identify the most common profiles observed in them. For this purpose, four students (one female and three males) who were university students and in their fifth semester of English were selected. Structured observations, questionnaires and interviews were the means of data collection over a nine-week period. By analyzing the gathered data, the authors identified four profiles which contained the main features of each of them. The Searcher, The Motivated but Unreliable, The Wind up Doll and The Brain were the identified profiles, each of which were described by the authors. At the end, they analyzed the autonomy of the whole class and found that the majority of students fell into 'The wind up doll' group, who followed the established rules, preferred group activities, but suffered from lack of flexibility.

As another instance, Dafei (2007) [11] investigated the relationship between autonomy and English language proficiency of learners. 129 non-English major students participated in his study. The data were collected through a questionnaire and an interview. The result showed a significant and positive relationship between the two variables. It means that when learners did not differ in terms of their English proficiency, their autonomy was also the same, and when they lay in different levels of proficiency, their autonomy differed significantly.

Additionally, Chang (2007) [7] studied the effects of group processes (group cohesiveness and group norms) on EFL learners' autonomy. She studied 152 Taiwanese university students, and used related questionnaires for this purpose. After responding to the questionnaires, some of the students were interviewed as well. Based on the questionnaire results, Chang found no correlation between group processes and students' autonomous beliefs, but a correlation between group factors and their autonomous behaviors was found. During the interviews, several students mentioned that their classmates had a noticeable role in their learning and that motivated classmates affected their own autonomy in a positive way.

Nowadays, fostering and promoting learner autonomy has turned into a key goal in educational systems all around the world. In this regard, Balçikanli (2008) [3] conducted a research study for which he chose two university classes randomly as control and experimental groups. At the beginning, he administered Learner Autonomy Questionnaire to both classes, and then instructed the experimental group in the autonomy implementation for twelve weeks. By the 12th week, he again gave both groups

the same questionnaire to be filled in. The results indicated higher scores as well as more tendency towards being autonomous in the experimental group.

In his study, Thanasoulas (2000) [38] had an epistemological approach to autonomy and argued that autonomy is not a ready-made product and, in order to achieve it, some conditions are needed. He referred to self-esteem as one of those conditions. In his opinion, self-esteem is directly related to the relationship of learners with themselves. If this is a good and strong relationship, he/she would have positive attitudes towards their abilities as a learner and strong tendency towards autonomous learning. So, self-esteem has a key role in establishing autonomous learning.

As the above short review may suggest, there have been many studies investigating the various aspects of motivation and autonomy. However, there appears to be a paucity of research as to whether the above factors are fixed attributes or whether they can change as a function of language proficiency. This study is aimed to partially address this gap.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

This study was carried out at Imam Khomeini International University and Kar non-profit university in Qazvin, Iran. A total of 184 students participated in the study, 24 of whom were excluded from data analysis due to careless coding, and 19 of whom did not answer all the questionnaires administered for data collection, bringing the final number of students to 141. Both females (60.3%) and males (39.7%) participated in the study. They were majoring in English Teaching and Translation and their age ranged from 19 to 29.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments utilized in this study included the following:

Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP): MTELP was used to determine the participants' level of proficiency. It contains 100 questions in three sections: grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Each of the first two parts (grammar and vocabulary) contain 40 items, and the last part (reading) consists of 4 short passages each followed by 5 items. MTELP is a multiple choice test which should be responded to in 60 minutes.

Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMBT): The participants' motivation was measured with a modified version of AMBT which was developed by Gardner (1985). The questionnaire contains 25 statements regarding participants' motivation and is scored on a five-point Likert type scale with five choices from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

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 formed the first part, which was coded as (A. never B. rarely C. sometimes D. often E. always) and the remaining 10 items formed the second part. The second part of the questionnaire was in multiple-choice format. The participant responded to each item by choosing one of the five choices following each item.

3.3 Procedure

Initially, the participants were given the proficiency test. Based on the results, they were divided into three different proficiency levels: high, mid and low. Each group contained one third of the total number of the participants. Then, the participants were asked to fill out the required questionnaires. After summarizing and processing, the obtained data were submitted to statistical analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

The obtained data were analyzed using the Kruscal-Wallis procedure. There was one Kruscal-Wallis procedure for each research question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Investigation of the first research question

The first research question attempted to see whether there is any significant difference in the motivation of learners at different proficiency levels. To do so, the Kruskal Wallis procedure was used. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for Kruskal Wallis on motivation

	Proficiency	N	Mean Rank
Motivation	High	47	78.43
	Mid	47	69.24
	Low	47	65.33
	Total	141	

Based on this table, the high group has the highest mean rank (mean rank = 78.43), followed by the medium group (mean rank = 69.24), and the low group (mean rank = 65.33). To see whether or not the differences among the mean ranks are statistically significant, the Kruskal Wallis procedure was run. The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of Kruskal Wallis on motivation

	Motivation
Chi-Square	2.549
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.280

Based on Table 2, the Chi-square value and the significance level ($\chi^2 = 2.549$, p > .05) are indicative of no significant differences among the three groups. In other words, the participants' motivation is not affected by their proficiency level.

4.2. Investigation of the second research question

The second research question investigated the differences among EFL learners' autonomy at different proficiency levels. To answer this question, another Kruskal Wallis was used. A summary of the descriptive statistics is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for Kruskal Wallis on autonomy

	Proficiency	N	Mean Rank
Autonomy	High	47	80.65
	Mid	47	64.46
	Low	47	67.89
	Total	141	

As Table 3 shows, the highest mean rank belongs to the high group, and the lowest belongs to the medium group. To see whether or not the observed differences among the groups are statistically significant, the Kruskal Wallis procedure was run, the results of which showed no statistically significant differences between the three proficiency levels ($\chi^2 = 4.108$, $p > .05$). Table 4 summarizes the results.

Table 4: Results of Kruskal Wallis on autonomy

	Autonomy
Chi-Square	4.108
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.128

5. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the effects of proficiency level on EFL learners' motivation and autonomy. One of the findings of this study was that there were no significant differences in motivation among students at different proficiency levels. Although types of motivation were not considered in the present study, this finding contradicts the results of Zhang, Su and Liu's (2013) [45], who found that among the four predictors of students' attainment in English (language requirement, intrinsic motivation, psychoticism and lie) motivation was the only positive predictor. Moreover, the results of the present study are different from those of Shih and Gamon (2001) [35], who found motivation as the only significant factor for student achievement in web-based learning. Furthermore, the findings contradict a number of previous studies (Wang, 2009 [40]; Cook, 2000 [9]) which emphasized the role of motivation in second language achievement. The findings of the present study are also in contrast with those of Gömleksiz (2001) [16], who reported that motivated learners are more successful in second language acquisition. At the same time, this finding differs from Khodadady and Khajavy's (2013) [19]

findings. They reported that less anxious students are more successful language learners. Since they found a negative correlation between learners' anxiety and their motivation, it was concluded that the more motivated the students are, the less anxiety they feel, and so, the more successful language learners they are. All the above studies showed a significant and positive relationship between students' motivation and their language learning achievement. According to the above sources, highly motivated learners should be more proficient in language learning and vice versa, but the present study does not seem to support these claims.

Another finding of this study was that there were no significant differences in the autonomy of EFL learners at different proficiency levels. In contrast with this finding, Dafei (2007) [11] found the students' English proficiency significantly and positively related to their autonomy. He reported significant differences in students' level of autonomy when their English proficiency was different. Besides, Ajideh (2009) [1] found autonomous learning as one of the basic essentials for teaching and learning ESP. Since ESP is known as a branch of language learning, it can be concluded that learner autonomy is essential for language learning, a claim which is not supported by the present study. Moreover, this finding is different from that of Thanasoulas (2000) [38], who found learner autonomy as a main factor for optimal learning. Naturally optimal learning leads to high proficiency level. So, Thanasoulas believes that more autonomous learners are more proficient, but this is not corroborated by the present study. Also, the findings of this study contradict those of Duan (2005) [14], who found it necessary and crucial to help students develop the abilities to learn autonomously, because it prepares them for the learning skills that are necessary to succeed in English learning. Therefore, in Duan's view, learner autonomy is directly related to successful language learning. This is not a safe assumption, considering the results of the present study.

A number of factors might have contributed to the results obtained in this study. One of the reasons may be the number of participants. A relatively small sample of participants took part in this study (N=141) compared with some previous studies including Zubairi and Sarudin (2009) [46], and Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) [36], which were conducted with much bigger samples of participants.

Another possible reason for the discrepancies between the findings of the present study and those of the above-mentioned studies could be partially related to gender differences. In this study, gender differences were not taken into account; however, Akram and Ghani (2013) [2] accentuated the role of gender in their findings.

The age of the participants could be another possible reason for such discrepancies. Most of the previous studies used students of elementary schools as their participants, whereas the age range of the participants of this study was 19 to 29.

Moreover, social and cultural differences in the educational setting can be another possible factor which may have brought about such findings. Levesque, Zuehlke, Stanek and Ryan (2004) [22] found these differences as influential factors in learners' traits. In Iran, the educational system seems to be more teacher-centered, and students may not play a significant role in the classroom. Therefore, their tendency toward being autonomous seems to be weak.

Students' motivation to communicate with foreign language speakers is another issue related to this factor. Iranian students have little (if any) opportunity to speak with native English speakers. This fact has a considerable role in making them not motivated about speaking and using English.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to answer the question of whether there are significant differences in motivation and Learner autonomy of Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels. Based on the findings of the present study, students' proficiency had no significant effect on the students' motivation and autonomy. From the findings of the present study, it may be concluded that learners and teachers need to take care to not to leave the development of traits like autonomy and motivation to happen as a byproduct of proficiency development. In other words, if language teachers want to have more motivated and autonomous students, they cannot achieve this goal by focusing on improving the students' proficiency alone. Doing so would be leaving too much to chance. Therefore, they should embark on using techniques which aim at developing those variables directly, and cannot rely on proficiency improvement techniques.

Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that this study was conducted with a relatively small sample of participants who were more or less homogeneous in terms of many characteristics such as native language, culture, educational background, context of learning and so on. At the same time, for manageability reasons, variables like age, gender, etc. were not considered. Further research may be needed before one can safely generalize the findings of this study.

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