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An Inquiry on the Relationship between Self-regulated Learning, Vocabulary Learning and Retention among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract: The belief is that learner-related variables, especially self-regulation strategies, have the potential to improve students' performance and can lead to language learning achievement. This study aimed at investigating the relationship between self-regulated learning, vocabulary learning and attitude toward English language learning among EFL learners. To this aim, it benefited from a descriptive correlational design within a descriptive method. The sample of this study consisted of 100 Iranian male intermediate EFL learners chosen from among 168 learners studying English at a private language institute in Kerman, Iran based on their PET scores. The original sample was selected through convenience sampling. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 30. The instruments used included two researcher-made vocabulary tests and the Persian version of Self-regulated Learning Strategies Questionnaire (MSLQ). Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis. Results showed a positive significant relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning among EFL learners. Besides, it was shown that there is a positive significant correlation between self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention among EFL learners.

Keywords: Self-regulation, Self-regulated learning, Self-regulation Strategies, Attitude toward English Language Learning, Vocabulary Learning

Introduction

The process of language learning is like a kaleidoscope in which different factors are at play. One of these factors is learner-related factors including learning styles, learning strategies, personality traits, etc. As put by Amirian, Mallahi and Zaghi (2015), the belief is that learner-related variables, especially self-regulation strategies, have the potential to improve students' performance and can lead to language learning achievement. Thus, among the positive factors in the process of language learning, self-regulation has been considered by the scholars in different fields including English Language Teaching (ELT). Self-regulation refers to learners' ideas and actions, which are self-generated and systematically directed towards educational goals and require learners' active participation in the learning process (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Pintrich's (2000, as cited in Zahidi, 2012, p. 16) has defined self-regulation as a process which is active and constructive and through which learners set their learning goals and then try to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior. Self-regulation strategies have been defined as "self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (Zahidi, 2012, p. 15). Accordingly, self-regulated learning for second language learners refers

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to the process during which L2 learners proactively use strategies to improve a specific English language skill by managing their language learning activities in order to achieve language learning goals. For example, second language learners apply cognitive strategies (methods for utilizing mental resources) to acquire vocabulary and metacognitive strategies (knowledge which allows learners to control their cognition) to manage their learning environment (Zahidi, 2012). The process of the development of SRL has been observed and examined in children's behaviors. Children typically learn about which behaviors are punished and rewarded in the environment through action and observing and, subsequently, evaluating the effects of these actions (Bronson, 2000). Such evaluations lead to the development of expectations for the outcomes of future behaviors and the establishment of internal criteria for judging the adequacy of the behaviors. Children then employ these criteria to evaluate and regulate their own behavior and evaluate their effectiveness. In contrast with a Vygotskian model where this shift in regulation occurs as a result of learning, Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) integrated this model into a socialization framework whereupon regulation shifts from social to self-sources as a result of the students' learning and motivation. First, these researchers asserted in their study that learners must discriminate a skill from a proficient model's performance over multiple observations (observational level). At this stage, learners are often motivated by positive vicarious consequences to the model. Then, learners must duplicate the model's response on a corresponding task with social assistance (emulation level). Learners improve more when guidance, feedback, and reinforcement are provided. Next, learners practice the skill in structured settings without models (self-control level), using a mental recollection of the model. Learners' self-reinforcement is contingent upon their success in matching a standard during practice, which is highly motivating. Finally, learners practice the skill in unstructured settings involving varied contexts and dynamic interpersonal interactions (self-regulated level). In Zarei and Hatami's (2012, p, 1) words, "in the past two decades, self-regulation has been the center of heated debate in educational psychology" (p. 1). According to Rahimi Laraki (2021), self-regulated learning is of the potential to impact different aspects of English learning.

Moreover, one of the inseparable parts of language learning and language use is vocabulary learning and retention. As defined by Nation (2001), "vocabulary learning means being able to recognize word items ('item knowledge') and being able to understand the various features of word items ('system knowledge')" (p. 23). Vocabulary retention is the ability to keep the meaning of a new word in memory and use it after a given period (Preston, 2007). In fact, there is consensus among the scholars upon the necessity of enhancing vocabulary knowledge for learners. According to Zinhong (2000), to learn new vocabularies, students are to discover new ways to develop their lexicon and vocabulary knowledge so that they become interested and motivated in learning a foreign language. In this regard, some scholars have considered different ways to help learners learn new vocabularies more effectively and easily. Among different ways, the use of self-regulation strategies has taken the attention of researchers recently.

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Statement of the Problem: In spite of the fact that various studies have shown that EFL learners who benefit from self- regulation strategies outperform those who do not use such strategies, still teacher-centeredness and teacher-centered classes are common in Iranian educational system. In other words, in such a system, learner-centeredness and what are brought by learners to the learning process are not taken into account as they deserve. This is while recently, the emphasis has been put on the learners and their potentials as the main players of language learning game.

Furthermore, vocabulary short-term and long-term retention has been acknowledged as an inseparable and inevitable part of language learning that is very difficult for many language learners, at least in EFL contexts (Laufer, 1998). In the same vein, Holden (2001) enumerated the retention and retrieval of new words as one of the difficult aspects in learning foreign language. According to Cameron (2001), despite its important role in language learning, vocabulary learning and retention is still challenging for EFL learners. More particularly, Iranian EFL learners repeatedly complain about their problems and challenges with the short-term and long-term vocabulary learning. This is while vocabulary learning is among inseparable and important parts of EFL learning in different levels and context and for different purposes.

Self-regulation strategies have been suggested as a solution to make EFL learning easier for learners. Accordingly, these strategies have been explored from different angles. Ozer and Akçayoğlu (2021) sought to explore the relationship between self-regulation and academic achievement among EFL learners. The participants of this study were 344 EFL learners at the university level in Turkey, who were selected through criterion sampling. The results showed a significantly positive correlation between self-regulation and academic achievement. Rahimi Laraki (2021) explored the relationship between self-regulated learning and speaking ability of EFL learners in the context of Iran. To do so, Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) and Metacognitive Awareness Inventory (MAI) were utilized as the tools of data collection. The results of this correlational study revealed that there was a strong positive correlation between self-regulation and speaking ability. Amirian, Mallahi and Zaghi (2015) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL students' self-regulation capacity for vocabulary learning and their vocabulary size. To collect the data, two instruments namely, the self-regulation capacity in vocabulary learning scale (by Tseng et al., 2006) which contained five subscales of commitment, metacognitive, emotion, satiation and environment control, and a bilingual vocabulary size test (by Karami, 2012) were used. The results of this study showed that there is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL students' self-regulation capacity for vocabulary learning and their vocabulary size. Also, the results revealed that the metacognitive control provided a better prediction of learners' vocabulary size. Banisaeid and Huang (2015) investigated the role of motivation in self-regulation and language learning strategy. To this aim, they administered Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (by Oxford, 1990), Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), MSLQ (by Pintrich et al., 1991) and Language Learning Orientation Scale (LLOS_ IEA) (by Noels et al., 2000) among 49 Chinese EFL learners. The results of their study showed a significant relationship between motivation, self-regulation and language learning strategies. It was also shown

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that memory, social and affective strategies were used by Chinese EFL learners more than the other strategy types. Besides, motivational orientation and effort regulation were identified as the commonest regulation and self-regulation strategies, respectively. Yigzaw and Fentie (2013) sought to determine the predictive power of motivational beliefs and self-regulated learning strategies in predicting high school students' reading performance. the motivation scale consisted of intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, task value, and self-efficacy for learning and performance subscales; and the cognitive learning strategies contained cognitive strategies (rehearsal, elaboration, organization, critical thinking) and metacognitive self-regulation (planning, monitoring, and evaluating) subscales. The study employed a mixed method, using questionnaire, interview and tests. Data analysis confirmed that just cognitive strategies served as significant predictors of the participants' reading performance. In a mixed methods study, the effect of self-regulated learning strategy on students' self-regulated learning and academic success was examined by Quince (2013). Self-regulated strategies of the study included goal setting, actions, monitoring, and evaluation of self-regulated learning processes. The source of required data was structured-diary responses according to which implementation of self-regulated learning process was evaluated. Results confirmed a significant impact for self-regulated learning strategy use. According to the participants' perceptions, self-regulated learning strategy intervention helped them increase the metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning skill levels. And this led to their increased efficacy for academic success. Zahidi (2012) conducted a qualitative study within multiple case studies method to investigate the way six English Language learners use self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies aimed at completing language learning tasks and ESL use. Also, the personal and contextual factors serving as facilitators and constraints of the participants' self-regulation were examined. Data collection instruments were multiple interviews with the learners, course documents and assignments, students' reflective diaries, and notes on observations. Data analysis revealed SRL strategies use by the participants in their own ways, and a significant effect for personal and environmental factors on the self-regulated learning strategies use. Lavasani and Hejazi (2011) examined the effects of self-regulation learning strategies on EFL learners' academic motivation and self-efficacy. To this aim, a quasi-experimental design was used. The instruments of the study included motivated strategies for learning questionnaire (MSLQ), academic motivation scale and self-efficacy scale. The results of the study suggested a significant effect for self-regulation learning strategies on the learners' academic motivation and self-efficacy. Dehghani (2010) examined the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' goal-oriented and self-regulated learning and their reading comprehension. The results showed that there was a positive relationship among goal orientation, self-regulated learning, and reading comprehension. Andrade and Bunker (2009) proposed a new model for distance self-regulated language learning based on a critical review and synthesis of the literature on autonomy and self-regulation. The model serves as a guide for curriculum designers, as a framework for examining elements of autonomy and self-regulated learning, and as a guide for curriculum designers. Building blocks of the model are six dimensions of self-regulated learning, namely motive, method, time, physical environment, social environment, and

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performance, which were proposed based on the four key psychological components of self-regulated learning: cognition, metacognition, motivation, and behavior. By using the model, instructors and designers can explain the main characteristics that will improve success in distance language learning. Bird (2009) explored the way teachers use particular self-regulating learning strategies in primary classrooms with the aim of improving the students' self-regulation skills. To do so, action research method was used. Results of the study indicated that most of the teachers believed that students should understand the use, application, and advantages of the self-regulated learning strategies before using them, so that they will be encouraged to use the strategies effectively. Moreover, it can be utilized as a framework for testing self-regulated learning in future research. In another study, Dehghan, Mirhassani, and Akbari (2006) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' goal-oriented and self-regulated learning and their language proficiency. The findings revealed a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and language proficiency. Also, all four subscales of self-regulated learning (planning, self-checking, effort, and self-efficacy) were positively related to language proficiency. Therefore, according to achievement goal research, students influence their own learning by adopting achievement goals that optimize self-regulatory processes (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Zarei and Hatami (2012) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-regulated learning components and vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. To achieve the objective of the study, they employed a 60-item vocabulary and reading comprehension TOEFL test, and the Persian version of Self- regulation Trait Questionnaire. The results of Pearson product moment correlation revealed a significant relationship between self-regulated learning components. Besides, it was shown that self-regulated learning components and vocabulary knowledge are significantly correlated. Besides, a significant relationship was found between self-regulated learning components and reading comprehension. Mizumoto (2013) investigated the effects of the self-regulated vocabulary learning on EFL learners' self-efficacy. To achieve this aim, a quasi-experimental research method was used. Instruments used in the study included self-regulated learning and a vocabulary test. Correlation analysis was utilized to evaluate the relationships between the study variables. The results showed a statistically significant relationship between self-regulated learning process and learners' self-efficacy. Also, it was revealed that self-regulated learning and vocabulary knowledge are significantly correlated. Liu, Lan and Ho (2014) used Google Docs as a Web-based tool to investigate the impact of Web-based self-regulation in EFL learners' vocabulary learning. To do so, a survey method was used. The findings of the study indicated a significant effect for Web-based self-regulation on vocabulary knowledge development. This effect was partially attributed to learners' awareness of how language system works their increased autonomy, independence and motivation. Amirian, Mallahi and Zaghi (2015) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL students' self-regulation capacity for vocabulary learning and their vocabulary size. To collect the data, two instruments namely, the self-regulation capacity in vocabulary learning scale (by Tseng et al., 2006) which contained five subscales of commitment, metacognitive, emotion, satiation and environment control, and a bilingual vocabulary size test (by Karami, 2012) were used. The results of

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this study showed that there is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL students' self-regulation capacity for vocabulary learning and their vocabulary size. Also, the results revealed that the metacognitive control provided a better prediction of learners' vocabulary size.

However, in spite of the proved potentials of self-regulation strategies for EFL learning, as evidenced in the existing literature, the relationship between self-regulated learning and English achievement of EFL learners is among the under-investigated research topics (Rahimi Laraki, 2021). This is while self-regulated learning has proved to be effective and helpful in learning process (Ozer & Akçayoğlu, 2021). As put by Ozer and Akçayoğlu (2021), self-regulation is among the affective factors with high effectiveness on language learning. Moreover, field observations show that the relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning and retention is among the issues which has not been heavily touched by researchers. With a view to these issues, this study aimed at investigating the relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning and retention among EFL learners.

In line with above objective, the following questions were addressed in the present study:

1. Is there a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning among EFL learners?
2. Is there a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention among EFL learners?

Material and Methods

The design of the present study was descriptive correlational. The participants of this study included 100 Iranian male intermediate EFL learners chosen from among 168 learners studying English at a private language institute in Kerman, Iran based on their PET scores. The original sample was selected through convenience sampling. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 30. To comply with research ethics, in sample selection, the consent of the authorities of the institute as well as that of the participants was taken at the outset of the study. Moreover, they were ensured about personal information anonymity and confidentiality. The following instruments were used in this study:

Preliminary English Test (PET): Preliminary English Test (PET) was used to homogenize the participants at the outset of the study. It consists of 67 items in three sections (i.e., writing, reading and listening). PET is considered as a second level Cambridge ESOL exam for intermediate level. This is a standardized test whose reliability has been reported as .95 by the Cambridge ESOL center. Moreover, its validity has been checked through factor analysis.

Researcher-made Vocabulary Test: A researcher-made multiple choice vocabulary test was used to measure vocabulary learning and retention of the participants. The test contained 20 multiple choice vocabulary items. The content of the test was based on the English Textbook which was already used in the institute. Validity of the test was confirmed through expert judgment. The reliability of the test was calculated through Cronbach's alpha as .80.

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At the beginning of the process of data collection, the formal procedures including taking the agreement of the authorities of the institute as well as the participants' consent, ensuring confidentiality of the participants' information, and the homogenization process were conducted. Then, the vocabulary test was run to measure the participants' vocabulary learning. One week later, the Persian version of Self-regulated Learning Strategies Questionnaire (MSLQ) was distributed among the participants to be filled. Before distributing the questionnaire, a brief instruction was given to the participants on how to fill the questionnaire. Two months later, again the vocabulary test was administered to measure the participants' vocabulary retention. This time interval is appropriate for measurement of retention of English vocabularies as documented in the related studies. That is, previous studies have proved this time interval as appropriate for the assessment of long-term retention of English vocabularies. It is worth mentioning that due to the constraints imposed on the procedure of the present study as a consequence of outbreak of Covid-19, data collection was conducted through social networks.

To analyze the data, to check the normality assumption of the distribution of data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run. Descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores was calculated to measure the participants' vocabulary learning, retention and self-regulated learning. Besides, to investigate whether self-regulated learning is correlated with vocabulary learning and retention, linear regression analyses used.

Results

To check the normality assumption of the distribution of data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run the results of which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Vocabulary test 1	1.30	0.066
Vocabulary test 2	1.21	0.103
Self-regulated learning questionnaire	1.11	0.164

As indicated in Table 1, the distribution of data was normal at %95 confidence level. Therefore, parametric tests can be used for the purpose of data analysis. Then, descriptive statistics was calculated to measure the participants' vocabulary learning, vocabulary retention, and self-regulated learning. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2. Results of Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Vocabulary test 1	15.57	2.23	0.70	11.00	20.00
Vocabulary test 2	15.69	2.26	0.39	10.00	20.00
Self-regulated learning	103.87	3.56	0.32	71.00	160.00

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Table 2 indicates that the mean of vocabulary learning of the participants were 15.57. And the standard deviation was 2.23. Moreover, the mean and standard deviation of vocabulary retention were 15.69 and 2.26. Additionally, 1.3.87 and 3.56 were the values of mean and standard deviation of self-regulated learning.

Having run descriptive statistics, the researcher ran two linear regression analyses, one to see whether self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning are correlated and the other one to investigate the relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention. The results of the regression analysis for the relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning are shown in the Table 3.

Table 3. Regression Analysis for the Relationship between Self-Regulated Learning and Vocabulary Learning

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	6.205	1.067		5.818	.000
	Self-regulated learning	.090	.010	.668	8.889	.000

As shown in the Table 3, there was a positive significant relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning (Beta=.668, t=8.889, p<.05) among EFL learners. Accordingly, the first research question 'Is there a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning among EFL learners?' was positively answered. The second linear regression analysis was run to see whether self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention are correlated. The results are shown in the Table 4.

Table 4. Regression Analysis for the Relationship between Self-Regulated Learning and Vocabulary Retention

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	7.276	1.173		6.202	.000
	Self-regulated	.081	.011	.591	7.262	.000

The Table 4 indicates that self-regulated learning was significantly correlated (Beta=.591, t=7.262, p<.05) with vocabulary retention. In this way, a positive answer was given to the second research question 'Is there a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention among EFL learners?'

Discussion

According to the results of data analysis, self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning were significantly and positively correlated among EFL learners. This means that higher self-regulated learning is associated with higher vocabulary learning. The other finding of the study was that there was a significantly positive correlation between self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention among EFL learners.

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Given that EFL learning is a complex phenomenon wherein many factors play a significant role, this relationship can be attributed to the mediating role of several variables. One of these variables can be the role of learning strategies which is closely related to the notion of self-regulation and self-regulated learning, as shown in the study by Sadeghy and Mansouri (2014). Another factor which can be referred to as a mediating factor is learners' autonomy which, according to Tavallai and Marzban (2015), is significantly influenced by self-regulated learning. Autonomy was repeatedly enumerated as one of the most important factors in EFL learning, thus its mediating role cannot be easily neglected. Furthermore, the mediating role of cognitive strategy use which proved to be significantly correlated with self-regulated learning in the study by Pintrich and De Groot (1990) can be referred to as a justification for the findings of the current study. Also, among the factors influencing on the relationship between self-regulated learning and vocabulary learning and retention, self-efficacy can be mentioned as argued by Mizumoto (2013). To Mizumoto (2013), self-regulated learning process and learners' self-efficacy are correlated significantly. Last but not least, it is not misplaced to attribute the results to the mediating role of motivation which has been shown to be correlated significantly with self-regulation (Lavasani & Hejazi, 2011).

In line with the current study, Choi, et al. (2018) documented that self-regulation strategies were positively associated with vocabulary knowledge of EFL learners. They attributed this association to the mediating role of motivation of learners. Moreover, consistent with the present study, Amirian, Mallahi, and Zaghi (2015), Aregu (2013), Liu, Lan, and Ho (2014), Mizumoto (2013), Ozer and Akçayoğlu (2021), Samah Mohammed Fahim El-Sakka1(2016, as cited in Rahimi Laraki, 2021), and Zarei and Hatami (2012) showed the effectiveness of self-regulation on vocabulary learning in EFL contexts. In a more general sense, the findings are in line, although indirectly, with the studies by Adkins (2005) and Zhao and Dong (2011), which showed a significant relationship between the self-regulated learning and different aspects of EFL learning.

Conclusion

The results of data analysis showed that self-regulated learning was correlated significantly with vocabulary learning among EFL learners. Additionally, a significant relationship was found between self-regulated learning and vocabulary retention of EFL learners. It cannot be denied that vocabulary learning and retention have been acknowledged as inseparable parts of language learning. Meanwhile, they are too difficult to be learned easily by EFL learners (Laufer, 1998). As acknowledged by the scholars (i.e., Cameron, 2001; Holden, 2001), the retention and retrieval of new words are considered as two difficult and challenging areas for EFL learners in learning English, despite their important role in language learning. It is hoped that using self-regulation strategies contributes to remarkable improvements in vocabulary learning and retention of EFL learners.

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that there is a need for some changes in the EFL educational system of Iran so that English teachers and learners can benefit from self-regulated learning in English vocabulary classes. Interestingly, in the literature, it has been shown that both teachers and learners had a positive attitude towards self-regulated learning and preferred to use it in

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learning English. Therefore, it seems that the time has reached for the arrival of self-regulated learning in English vocabulary classes in Iran, as supplementary to traditional methods of teaching English vocabularies.

The first implication of the study is that EFL teachers can use self-regulation training and instruction in their English classes in trying to improve their students' vocabulary short-term and long-term retention. The second implication is that EFL learners can benefit from self-regulation training and instruction provided to them in order to improve their own vocabulary short-term and long-term retention. Finally, material designers should develop the educational materials in a way that the use of self-regulation training and instruction is encouraged in English vocabulary classes.

The future researchers can replicate the present study with a more diverse sample in terms of age, gender, and English proficiency level. Moreover, they can explore the potential role of mediating variables in the relationship between self-regulated learning and short-term and long-term retention of English vocabularies. Last but not least, investigating the effect of self-regulation training and instruction on different English skills can add to the findings of the present study.

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