This study examined Persian intermediate and advanced EFL learners’ perceptions regarding (a) their own and their teachers’ responsibility in learning language autonomously; (b) their decision making ability in learning language autonomously; and (c) their autonomous learning activities inside and outside the classroom. To this end, a questionnaire designed by Chan, Spratt, and Humphrey (2002) was distributed among 67 intermediate and 65 advanced EFL learners. Statistical analysis of students’ answers showed that overall, advanced learners tended to assume more responsibility for their own learning, to perceive themselves to be highly capable of autonomous learning, and to practice more autonomous learning activities compared to the intermediate learners. In addition, data collected through the interviews with some of the participants suggested that learners’ perceptions were greatly affected by their previous educational experiences. Since intermediate learners were not largely engaged in making decisions related to educational materials and activities used in their classrooms, they considered themselves as less responsible for and consequently less capable of choosing learning materials and activities. The findings of the study, along with the pedagogical implications, are discussed.

Keywords: autonomous activities, decision making ability, learner autonomy, learner responsibility

Introduction

Over the past decades, many researchers (e.g. Benson, 2006, 2011; Benson & Voller, 1997; Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999), have emphasized that learner autonomy should be recognized as a major goal in language education. Some researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (e.g. Benson, 2000; Murphy, 2008;
Palfreyman, 2003; Richards, 2015) argue that language learners can benefit from autonomous learning. According to Nguyen and Gu (2013) promoting learner autonomy could result in students’ increased participation, motivation, and responsibility in learning the language.

In order to promote autonomy among language learners, examination of their views and perceptions towards autonomous learning is both necessary and useful since such inquiries can inform our understanding of what students think about autonomous activities, and the beliefs that they adhere to considerably influence their learning outcomes (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Oxford, 2001, 2015). Many SLA researchers have highlighted the importance of students’ beliefs in shaping and orienting their learning practices (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005), for instance, remark that learners’ beliefs and conceptions influence both their attitude toward language learning and their motivation to learn, and also shape their behaviors as well as actions in and outside the classroom. In addition, beliefs are important because learners consider them to be true and this guides their experience and behavior (Rubin, 1975). Distinguishing between learners’ positive and negative beliefs, Victori and Lockhart (1995) argued that

if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, if they attribute undue importance to factors that are external to their own action, they are not likely to adopt a responsible and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous.

(p. 225)

As Little (2007) indicated, the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other. According to the research (e.g. Benson, 2001; Dafei, 2007; Victori & Lockhart, 1995) carried out in the field of autonomy, the development of learner autonomy implies better language learning which ultimately leads to greater proficiency in language use. Ablard and Lipschultz (1998) also found out that students with different levels of language proficiency applied different autonomous strategies in their learning process.

An examination of the literature shows that there are a few research studies into learners’ attitudes and perceptions towards learner autonomy; however, there has, thus far, been no comparative investigation on the views and perceptions of learners at different levels of language proficiency towards autonomy. In the present study, an attempt was made to explore the possible differences between perceptions of intermediate and advanced EFL learners towards their responsibility and decision making ability for autonomous language learning as well as their practices of autonomous activities inside and outside the classroom.
Review of the related literature

Existing literature on learner autonomy in the context of language learning and teaching suggests that the concept of learner autonomy is perceived rather differently in different cultural and educational contexts (e.g. Benson, 2011; Little, 2007; Littlewood, 1999). One of the seminal studies which focused on learners’ perceptions and attitudes towards autonomy was conducted by Cotterall (1995). Cotterall (1995) investigated English learners’ beliefs about autonomous language learning through a survey questionnaire. The results indicated that learners hold different views about the teachers’ and their own role in learning, about the use of feedback in the classroom, and about their independence and confidence in study abilities. A further investigation by Chan (2001) about learners’ perceptions on learner autonomy, learners’ expectations of L2 teacher, and language preferences showed that learners expected their teachers to play a more facilitative role in the classroom. In addition, the majority of the learners pointed to the importance of learner autonomy in their learning process and expressed a thorough understanding of the notion of learner autonomy. Chan suggested that in an autonomy-oriented classroom, the teacher should encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning and increase their motivation and interest in the learning process. Similar findings with respect to EFL learners’ views towards their own responsibility and those of their teachers’ responsibility reported by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002). They concluded that learners did not have a good understanding of their own responsibilities and abilities and considered them to be their teachers’ responsibility. Spratt et al. (2002) pointed out that to develop autonomy by means of outside class activities, it is better to use activities that learners have already been engaged in.

Other researchers have investigated the influence of classroom instruction variables on the promotion of autonomy. For instance, the results of a study by Lüftenegger, Schober, Schoot, Wagner, Finsterwald, and Spiel (2012) indicated that perception of autonomy in the classroom was closely connected to students’ motivational beliefs. In addition, classroom activities such as self-determined performance and self-reflection of learning was a predictor of students’ strategy use such as self-monitoring and assessment of learning. The findings of their study revealed the significance of providing learners with suitable learning environments in order to make them ready for successful autonomous learning.

Recently, Humphreys and Wyatt (2014) reported that allowing learners to reflect together on aspects of their learning help them to improve autonomy. These reflective activities raised learners’ awareness of independent learning opportunities in their learning context and led them to be more active in their learning process. The results provided evidence that socially mediated autonomy with the
support of teacher could help L2 learners gain greater control and responsibility over their learning. Feryok (2013) reported on a similar case in which a teacher promoted learners’ autonomy by expanding students’ control over management of classroom activities, by organizing social interaction and mediation among learners, and by redefining various roles, rights and responsibilities to the learners.

In addition, Cole and Vanderplank (2016) found that adult EFL learners can achieve high levels of language proficiency without receiving any formal training. Comparison of high-level, classroom-trained EFL learners with fully self-instructed autonomous EFL learners showed that autonomous learners scored significantly higher on all formal assessments than classroom-based learners. In addition, fossilized errors, related to high-frequency structures of language, were more common among classroom-based learners compared to autonomous learners. The study also suggested that modern technology could bring substantial benefits for EFL learners by providing them with more accessible and naturalistic input, as well as a stress-free environment.

The relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency has also been investigated by few L2 researchers. For instance, Dafei (2007) explored the relationship between language proficiency and learner autonomy among EFL students in China. The findings of his study showed that learners’ language proficiency scores were positively and significantly related to their autonomy level. This finding implies that the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he/she achieves high language proficiency. In another study, Mineishi (2010) found some differences between successful and less successful Japanese learners with regard to their perception of learner autonomy. Less successful learners, compared to successful learners, tended to work together in groups, not to voice their opinions and questions, and to expect the teacher (rather than themselves) to be responsible for evaluating how much they had learnt. The differences showed that successful learners were more autonomous than less successful learners. In another study, Abdel Razeq (2014) investigated the readiness of Palestinian university students for autonomous learning of English as a foreign language. The results revealed that learners perceived their teachers as responsible for most of the areas related to their learning. Low achievers (those who had unsatisfactory command of the English language) perceived their teachers as being primarily responsible for most of the activities during English lessons in the classroom as their teachers’ main responsibilities. On the other hand, high achievers (those who had a satisfactory command of the English language) viewed classroom activities as a shared responsibility with their teachers.

As the above review shows, there exists a sizeable number of research studies on learners’ views and understanding of autonomy. To date, however limited attention seems to have been awarded to the views and perceptions of learners
with different levels of language proficiency on autonomy. The present study was set up to broaden the scope of studies done in the area of students’ perceptions of autonomous learning, and to include Iranian EFL learners who have different profile from previous studies. According to Abednia and Izadinia (2013), the educational system in Iran is primarily transmission-oriented and memorization-based. Currently, in most of EFL classes in Iran, learners are regarded as passive recipients of knowledge and the main focus of language teaching in these classrooms is based on learning language through grammar, memorization, and vocabulary (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). As the context of English language teaching in Iran is somehow different from the EFL teaching contexts reported in other studies, it could be helpful to see if similar findings could be reached. Thus, the present study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are intermediate and advanced Persian EFL learners’ perceptions of their own and their teachers’ responsibilities related to autonomous language learning?
2. What are intermediate and advanced Persian EFL learners’ perceptions of their decision making abilities related to autonomous language learning?
3. What autonomous activities are practiced by intermediate and advanced Persian EFL learners inside and outside the classroom?

Method

Participants

A total of 67 intermediate and 65 advanced English language learners in a language institute in Zanjan, Iran participated in the study. The participants were selected through convenience sampling. The institute organised different general English courses for various levels of proficiency, ranging from beginning to advanced levels. The main course book taught in the institute was *Top Notch* series (second edition) written by Joan Saslow & Allen Ascher (2012). The participants were considered as intermediate and advanced level learners according to the language institute standards and the placement tests that they had taken (Oxford Placement Test). Learners who were studying Top Notch 3A and 3B were considered to be intermediate and those who were studying Summit 2A and 2B were considered to be advanced by the institute. All of the participants were female, between 17–21 years old and none had ever been to an English-speaking country.
Instruments

As Chan, Spratt, and Humphrey (2002) believe, the perception of autonomy changes according to cultural and educational context; therefore, before making any effort to promote learner autonomy, one should investigate learners’ perceptions of autonomous learning. To achieve the purpose of this study, and to investigate EFL learners’ perceptions on autonomous language learning, a questionnaire designed by Chan et al. (2002) was utilized to examine Iranian EFL learners’ perceptions on autonomy.

First, the questionnaire was translated into Persian (the mother tongue of the participants) to suit the educational and cultural context in which the present study was carried out. Then, the translated version was reviewed by two experts and some items (4 items) were revised according to their comments. Next it was piloted with 20 EFL learners (other than the participants of this study). The estimated reliability of the questionnaire was calculated to be 0.90. The final version of the questionnaire comprised 50 items in three sections. The first section consisted of 13 items and focused on students’ views of their own and their teachers’ responsibilities. The second section which solicited students’ views of their own abilities in learning English consisted of 11 items. The last section which investigated students’ autonomous practices inside and outside the classroom contained 26 items.

In addition to the data collected through the questionnaire, a series of interviews were also carried out with 10 intermediate and 12 advanced learners who volunteered a follow-up contribution. The purpose behind the interviews was to complement the quantitative data through gathering additional information about the participants’ views of their own and their teachers’ responsibilities, their views of their own abilities in learning English autonomously, and their autonomous practices inside and outside the classroom.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 21. First, the mean score for each item of the questionnaire was calculated for both the intermediate and advanced learners. The obtained means were compared and classified based on Oxford’s (1990) comparisons of means method, which considers the mean scores ranging between 1.0 and 2.4 as ‘low’, between 2.5 and 3.4 as ‘medium’, and between 3.5 and 5.0 as ‘high’. To investigate any significant differences in the mean scores of intermediate and advanced learners’ perceptions on autonomous learning, a series of t-tests were conducted. Following a thematic analysis procedure, the interview data were also analyzed qualitatively.
Results

Students’ views of their own and their teachers’ responsibilities

The first section of the questionnaire assessed the intermediate and advanced EFL learners’ views of their own, and their teachers’ responsibility in learning English autonomously (the first research question). As Table 1 shows, compared to the intermediate learners, advanced learners considered themselves more responsible for their own learning. Overall, the advanced learners perceived themselves as being primarily responsible for all of the items related to their own responsibilities (Mean between 3.50 and 5.00) except for two items (Mean between 2.50 and 3.40) which received medium scores. That is, ‘choosing what activities to use to learn English in their English lessons’ (Mean = 3.25) and ‘choosing what materials to use to learn English in their English lessons’ (Mean = 2.95) received medium mean scores, showing that advanced learners regarded themselves as having medium responsibility for these activities. They also tended to perceive the teacher to be highly responsible for

Table 1. Mean scores of advanced and intermediate students’ views of their own and their teachers’ responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Advanced learners</th>
<th>Intermediate learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yours</td>
<td>Your teacher’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Make sure you make progress during lessons</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Make sure you make progress outside class</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stimulate your interest in learning English</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Identify your weaknesses in English</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Make you work harder</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Decide the objectives of your English course</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Decide what you should learn next in your English lessons</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Decide how long to spend on each activity</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Evaluate your learning</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Evaluate your course</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Decide what you learn outside class</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘choosing what activities to use to learn English in their English lessons’ ($M = 3.77$), and ‘deciding what they should learn next in their English lessons’ ($M = 3.42$).

The intermediate learners tended to perceive themselves as being highly responsible for ‘deciding what they learn outside class’ ($M = 3.75$), ‘deciding the objectives of their English course’ ($M = 3.70$), and ‘stimulating their interest in learning English’ ($M = 3.50$). Regarding the other items, they tended to consider their responsibility as medium ($M$ ranged between 2.50 and 3.40). They also tended to regard the teacher as mainly responsible for ‘choosing what activities to use to learn English in their English lessons’ ($M = 3.90$).

To statistically examine the differences between the mean scores of the intermediate and advanced learners’ perceptions of their own and their teachers’ responsibility, t-tests were carried out. To this purpose, the total scores of both advanced and intermediate groups were calculated for each part of the questionnaire (sum of the mean scores of items) and then the scores were compared using t-tests.

Table 2. T-test for the comparison of mean scores of intermediate and advanced learners’ perceptions of their own responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sum of means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Std. error mean</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced learners</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>50.65</td>
<td>7.17</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate learners</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>42.45</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 indicates, advanced learners’ total score ($M = 50.65$) is higher than that of intermediate learners ($M = 42.45$) and this difference is statistically significant ($\text{sig} = 0.000 \leq .05$), indicating that advanced learners perceived themselves as more responsible for their own learning than intermediate learners.

Table 3 shows the results of the comparison of mean scores of intermediate and advanced learners’ perceptions of their teachers’ responsibility.

Table 3. T-test for the comparison of mean scores of intermediate and advanced learners’ perceptions of their teacher’s responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sum of means</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error mean</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced learners</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>36.27</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate learners</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>38.67</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown, the advanced learners’ total score ($M = 36.27$) appeared to be lower than that of intermediate learners ($M = 38.67$) and this difference is statistically significant ($\text{sig} = 0.000 \leq .05$), suggesting that advanced learners perceived their teachers to be less responsible for their learning than intermediate learners.
Students’ views of their own abilities in learning English

To provide an answer to the second research question, advanced and intermediate learners’ answers to the second part of the questionnaire were analyzed. As Table 4 shows, advanced learners perceived themselves to be highly capable of autonomous learning across various items of the questionnaire except for ‘choosing learning activities in class’ (M = 3.47), ‘choosing learning materials in class’ (M = 3.40), and ‘deciding what they should learn next’ (M = 3.37). Intermediate learners, however, regarded themselves as having medium level of control over various activities, as listed in Table 2.

Table 4. Mean scores of advanced and intermediate students’ views of their own abilities in learning English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abilities</th>
<th>Advanced learners</th>
<th>Intermediate learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. Choosing learning activities in class</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Choosing learning activities outside class</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Choosing learning objectives in class</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Choosing learning objectives outside class</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Choosing learning materials in class</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Choosing learning materials outside class</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Evaluating your learning</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Evaluating your course</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Identifying your weaknesses in English</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Deciding what you should learn next</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Deciding how long to spend on each activity</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To statistically examine the differences between intermediate and advanced learners’ views on their own abilities in learning English autonomously, a t-test was conducted.

Table 5. T-test for the comparison of mean scores of intermediate and advanced learners’ perceptions of their own abilities in learning English autonomously

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sum of means</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Sth. error mean</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced learners</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>40.19</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate learners</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>31.37</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As displayed in Table 5, the results of the t-test indicated that the difference is significant (sig = 0.000 ≤ .05). Advanced learners (M = 40.19) perceived themselves
to be more capable of autonomous language learning compared to their intermediate counterparts \( (M = 31.37) \).

**Students’ engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities**

To answer the third research question, the learners’ answers to the last part of the questionnaire were analyzed in detail. Table 6 shows the mean scores of the autonomous English activities practiced by advanced and intermediate learners inside and outside the classroom. Activities like ‘noting down new words/meanings’ \( (M = 3.70) \), ‘reading grammar books on own’ \( (M = 3.52) \), ‘watching English movies’ \( (M = 3.50) \), and ‘taking opportunity to speak in class’ \( (M = 3.50) \) received the highest means by advanced learners. However, activities such as ‘reading newspapers in English’ \( (M = 1.85) \), ‘talking to foreigners’ \( (M = 1.97) \), ‘writing diary in English’ \( (M = 2.17) \), earned the lowest means.

For intermediate learners, no item received a high score (Mean scores ranging between 3.5 and 5.0). The activities that had medium mean scores were: ‘asking teachers questions when they don’t understand’ \( (M = 3.40) \), ‘noting down new information’ \( (M = 2.97) \), ‘noting down new words/meanings’ \( (M = 2.92) \), ‘taking opportunity to speak in class’ \( (M = 2.87) \), ‘doing grammar exercises’ \( (M = 2.82) \), ‘watching English movies’ \( (M = 2.72) \), ‘reading grammar and vocabulary books on own’ \( (M = 2.72) \), ‘practicing using English with friends’ \( (M = 2.42) \). Other activities were rated as low by intermediate learners, particularly those activities related to ‘going to see their teacher about their work’ \( (M = 1.97) \), ‘talking to foreigners’ \( (M = 1.77) \), and ‘reading newspapers in English’ \( (M = 1.67) \).

The results of the t-test showed a statistically significant difference (sig = 0.000 ≤ .05) between advanced and intermediate learners’ practices of autonomous English learning activities. As learners’ level of proficiency developed their practices of autonomous activities increased. That is, advanced students’ total mean score \( (M = 75.30) \) was higher than that of intermediate learners \( (M = 61.97) \).

**The results of the qualitative data**

The follow-up interviews with some of the participants of the study helped us to improve our understanding of the underlying reasons behind the results obtained in the quantitative round of analysis. Throughout the interview sessions, the majority of the intermediate learners pointed out that they considered their teacher to be more responsible for selecting learning materials since they were seldom given a chance to do so. This is not surprising at all considering the fact that instructional practices in Iran are teacher-centered and learners are mostly regarded as passive recipients of knowledge:
Table 6. Mean scores of advanced and intermediate students’ engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Advanced learners</th>
<th>Intermediate learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25. Read grammar and vocabulary books on own</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Done non-compulsory assignments</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Noted down new words/meanings</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Written English letters to pen pals</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Read English notices around you</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Read newspapers in English</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Sent e-mails in English</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Read books/magazines in English</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Watched English TV programs</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Listened to English radio</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Listened to English songs</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Talked to foreigners</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Talk to my friends in English</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Practiced using English with friends</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. Done grammar exercises</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Watched English movies</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Written diary in English</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Used Internet in English</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. Done revision not required by the teacher</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. Collected texts in English</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. Gone to see your teacher about your work</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. Ask teachers questions when you don’t understand</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. Noted down new information</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. Made suggestions to the teacher</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. Taken opportunity to speak in class</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Discussed learning problems with classmates</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. T-test for the comparison of mean scores of intermediate and advanced learners’ engagement in autonomous inside and outside class activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sum of means</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error mean</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced learners</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>75.30</td>
<td>10.06</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate learners</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>61.97</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Student 1: “We have to study the book which teacher introduces us and practice the activities inside it. Sometimes we are not interested in the topic of the assigned reading and writing activities. We have no choice but to do these activities”.

One of the learners also asserted that:

Student 2: “Although one cannot deny the important role that teacher plays in deciding the useful and effective materials for teaching, sometimes it is necessary to let the students choose what they want to learn. In this way English classrooms become more interesting and enjoyable”.

This kind of spoon-feeding and traditional teaching style adopted by the teachers, without trying to challenge and engage students in the teaching and learning process, would fail to promote the required motivation and interest of learners in learning. In addition, this traditional approach could ultimately reduce autonomous learning among students. As Ushioda (2003) claims, involving learners in making relevant choices and decisions about their learning not only generates the necessary motivation for learning but also promotes high degree of autonomy among learners.

Unlike the intermediate learners, some of the advanced learners pointed out that sometimes their teacher gave them freedom in selecting supplementary material to practice in the classroom:

Student 3: “sometimes our teacher gives us a chance to choose our lectures’ topic or to bring some additional activities which are not in our book. For example we bring English short stories and jokes which are really interesting for us”.

Another point which was mentioned by advanced learners was that if they were given an opportunity to select learning materials they would choose them according to their needs and desires. One of the interviewees claimed that if she were given freedom in selecting classroom activities she would choose them according to her needs and weaknesses:

Student 4: “I know my needs and my weaknesses. I need to learn how to speak in English, and I know that I need more practice to improve my speaking. I also know that I need to learn more words and grammar. I need to improve my pronunciation as well”.

According to Macalister (2012), gaining information about the needs and wants of learners is the main catalyst for giving attention to learner autonomy and independent learning. EFL teachers by focusing on learners’ language needs, EFL teachers could help them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and consequently
assist them in becoming autonomous learners in order to fulfil their potential in developing the required skills and competence.

With regard to the learners’ perceptions of their own abilities in learning English autonomously, some of the advanced learners indicated that they were aware of their strengths and weaknesses in learning English and can manage their learning:

Student 1: “I think we can learn more by doing speaking and listening activities, but they are somehow neglected in our English classes”.

Student 2: “We’ve never given a chance to choose classroom activities. Listening to songs, watching English movies and discussing different topics are more interesting, I think”.

Learners viewed themselves as capable to act autonomously if they were given the chance. Such capabilities need to be supported by teachers who are willing to give learners the opportunity to take charge of their own learning. Giving learners a chance of acting autonomously will greatly assist them to improve their language skills.

The comments made by advanced learners showed that they perceived themselves as highly capable of managing learning activities if they were given an opportunity to do so:

Student 3: “If I were a teacher I would give more freedom to my students to do the activities they like and practice what they prefer. Since some activities such as watching movie or listening to songs are not used in classroom I do them by my own outside the classroom”.

Student 4: “We have to study the main book and cover the required lessons. There is no extra time to spend on other activities which we prefer to do”.

When asked about whether they like to select learning materials, unlike advanced learners, intermediate learners indicated that they were not fully aware of the useful materials and tasks for learning and considered themselves less capable of designing and setting course materials and objectives:

Student 5: “Teachers know better than us what materials are useful for us. They know our weaknesses and accordingly they give us tasks and activities to perform. I can’t find relevant material to practice English on my own”.

These comments clearly overlap with the answers given to the items in the first part of the questionnaire. Since intermediate learners were not largely engaged in decisions related to materials and activities used in their English classrooms, they considered themselves as less responsible for and consequently less qualified
Advanced and intermediate EFL learners’ perceptions and practices of autonomous learning

for choosing learning materials and activities. This may affect their motivation and consequently their autonomy in learning English language. Teachers should be cognizant of the fact that varying the activities used in the classroom and giving learners the chance of selecting interesting tasks and topics, as supplementary materials, will promote learners’ motivation to learn and autonomous learning. As Ushioda (1996) stated L2 motivation and learners autonomy go hand in hand and autonomous learners are motivated learners as well. In the same vein, Dickinson, (1993) asserted that “enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning . . . and perceiving that their learning successes and failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control” (p. 173–74).

For the third part of the questionnaire on learners’ engagement in autonomous activities inside and outside class, the interview data largely confirmed the questionnaire results. Of the activities that both intermediate and advanced learners frequently practiced outside the class, noting down new words/meanings, ‘reading grammar books on own’, and ‘watching English movies’ were the most common ones.

Student 1: “I note down new words in my notebook and review them later”.

Student 2: “Sometimes I don’t completely understand the grammar points taught in the class so I read grammar books to understand them fully”.

Student 3: “I listen to English songs and watch English movies and programs. I think these activities are helpful in improving my speaking and pronunciation”.

Student 4: “I find listening to English songs interesting. I find their transcriptions from the internet and in this way I can understand them better”.

Student 5: “We have little opportunity for listening activities in the class so I try to watch English movies and programs at home. I find PRESS TV useful for this purpose”.

There were also some other activities practiced just by advanced learners outside the class, but not as frequently as those mentioned above.

Student 6: “I enjoy reading English stories. I learn lots of English words in this way”.

Student 7: “Sometimes I practice speaking English with my parents or my sister at home”.

Student 8: “I sometimes try to find English equivalents for the Persian sentences or phrases we use in our daily life”.
Activities that got the lowest mean scores were ‘reading newspapers in English’ and ‘talking to foreigners’. The comments made by learners indicated that learners’ lack of self-confidence in their own capabilities could potentially block their engagement and interactions with foreigners. Interviewees asserted that:

Student 7: “I think in this digital world no one reads newspapers in print. I watch news in TV”.

Student 8: “I’m not so confident in my English. I’m likely to make a lot of mistakes in talking to foreigners”.

Student 9: “I speak English with my friend freely because I know our knowledge about English is the same. But I think foreigners’ English are better than mine. I may make a lot of mistakes and look ridiculous”.

The comments made by the interviewees revealed that some learners, especially the intermediate learners, made no effort to study English out of the class and relied entirely on classroom activities as the main source of their learning. Teachers need to inspire EFL learners to make more use of the available learning resources outside the classroom and raise learners’ awareness of the benefits and advantages of using outside-school activities in improving their language proficiency.

Discussion

The present study aimed at examining the intermediate and advanced EFL learners’ perceptions regarding autonomous language learning in terms of (a) their own and their teachers’ responsibilities in learning language autonomously; (b) their decision making ability in learning, and (c) their autonomous activities inside and outside the classroom. The statistical analyses of the results revealed significant differences between the advanced and intermediate learners’ perceptions regarding the three dimensions of autonomy. Both quantitative and qualitative findings provided adequate evidence that advanced learners tended to assume more responsibility for their own learning compared to the intermediate learners. These results supported the findings of some of the previous studies that have found a relationship between EFL learners’ autonomy level and their proficiency level (e.g. Dafei, 2007; Mineishi, 2010). It seems that doing well in learning English motivated learners to be more responsible and to take more control over their learning. According to Schmenk’s (2006), this is an ‘automatization process’, where proficient learners start accepting some responsibility for their own learning while less proficient learners continue to depend largely on their teachers. This could imply that
improving learners’ proficiency in English is critical for helping them to become autonomous learners and become responsible for their own learning.

Although advanced learners perceived themselves to be responsible for some aspects of their learning, they still tended to regard their teacher as more responsible for ‘deciding what they should learn next in their English lessons’, ‘choosing what materials to use to learn English in their English lessons’, ‘deciding the objectives of their English course’, and ‘making sure they make progress during lessons’. Similarly, intermediate learners assumed that their teacher was primarily responsible for ‘choosing what activities to use to learn English in their English lessons’, ‘deciding the objectives of their English course’, ‘deciding what they should learn next in their English lessons’, and ‘deciding what they learn outside class’. Given the current circumstances in the Iranian educational system, and the fact that it is a primarily teacher-centered enterprise (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013), these findings may not be surprising. In Iranian schools as well as language institutes, learners are often regarded as passive recipients of knowledge, teachers are traditionally expected to implement and deliver the planned curriculum (Atai & Mazlum, 2012), and learning and teaching are primarily based on a pre-specified English textbooks. In such a context, then students are rarely engaged in decisions related to materials and activities they study in the classroom. This may have an impact on the anticipation of their future success, and the amount of effort they devote to their learning. As Schunk (1984) suggests, learners’ self-efficacy beliefs can be influenced by their past educational experiences. Also, learners’ attribution beliefs may lead them to assign their success or competence to external factors like teacher behaviour more than internal factors like their own learning competence or intelligence (e.g. Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004).

Overall, the participants’ perceptions of their abilities in learning English autonomously were positive. The intermediate learners rated their abilities in learning English autonomously as medium. On the other hand, advanced learners perceived themselves as highly capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning, if they were given the chance to do so. Interestingly, items such as ‘deciding what they should learn next’, ‘choosing learning materials in class’, and ‘choosing learning activities in class’ received medium mean scores, indicating that learners considered themselves as having medium control over selecting their learning materials. Subsequent interviews with participants also confirmed the questionnaire results. Since intermediate learners were not practically engaged in decisions related to selecting materials and activities used in their English classrooms, they considered themselves as less responsible for and consequently less capable of choosing learning materials and activities. Moreover, the interview data suggested that involving learners in making relevant choices and decisions about
their learning generates the necessary motivation for learning. In their discussion of the most important macro-strategies that language teachers could use to enhance motivation in their classes Dörnyei and Csizér (1998), identified promoting learner autonomy as one of the ‘ten commandments for motivating language learners’. They asserted that encouraging creative and imaginative ideas, inspiring questions and other contributions from the students, sharing as much responsibility to organize the learning process with students as possible, and involving students in choosing the learning materials will ultimately lead to increased learner motivation as well as autonomy. In the same line, Spratt, et al. (2002), in their study on EFL learners’ views towards their own and their teachers’ responsibility to operate autonomously, concluded that motivation was a key factor which influenced the extent to which learners were ready to learn autonomously, and that teachers play an important role to in increasing learners’ motivation before they train them to become autonomous.

Regarding autonomous inside and outside class activities, the participants of this study, both advanced and intermediate learners, took advantage of ‘noting down new words/meanings’, ‘reading grammar books on own’, ‘watching English movies’, and ‘taking opportunity to speak in class’. On the other hand, ‘talking to foreigners’ and ‘reading newspapers in English’ were rated as low by both groups of learners. Moreover, the advanced learners tended to practice more autonomous learning activities than intermediate learners. This could support the findings of some previous studies (e.g. Dafeie, 2007; Schmenk, 2006) that reported high-proficient learners are more autonomous, motivated, and confident of their abilities in learning English. In addition, high-proficient learners are actively engaged in various kinds of classroom activities and are well aware of self-management and self-monitoring strategies that contributed positively to their achievement and learning potential (Dafeie, 2007).

Conclusion

Riley (1996) argues that the beliefs learners hold about learning profoundly shape their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures. Learners who believe that they need the constant presence of a teacher in the process of their learning are likely to encounter problems in performing autonomous and self-directed activities. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, learners’ beliefs are constructed in the everyday context of learning and can be modified or transformed in different social contexts (White, 2008). Thus, through assigning autonomy-supportive activities, EFL teachers can help their students to realize that they should assume responsibility for their own learning. Teachers can effectively make learners aware
of the fact it is not just the teacher who should take the responsibility for whatever goes on in the classroom (Burkert, 2011). Even in traditional systems of education, where there are various types of constraints, which may impede the implementation of autonomy-supportive strategies, there is still room for flexibility and autonomy (Nasri, Tahid Dastjerdi, Eslami Rasekh, & Amirian, 2015). Teachers should be aware that autonomous learning is a learnable skill in the same sense that other academic skills are. Thus, they should encourage the development of this skill, by embedding it within their process of language teaching and evaluation. In other words, teachers need to teach the skills required to become an effective autonomous learner, in the same way as they do other generic and discipline-specific skills (Railton & Watson, 2005).

Despite the above-mentioned points, it should be indicated that the present study is not without its limitations. Only a limited number of subjects from a single language institute participated in this study. Further, the data of this study were collected only from female learners. Future research could be undertaken to determine whether gender or other learner variables play any role on EFL learners’ perceptions and practices of autonomous learning. Further research is also needed in different contexts to compare the results.

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