

# Effect of Self-regulated Strategies on Learners' Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning: Junior High School EFL Students in Focus



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## Citation

Taghipour Ahangar, E. (2023). Effect of Self-regulated Strategies on Learners' Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning: Junior High School EFL Students in Focus. *International Journal of Language and Translation Research*, 3(1), pp. 1-14.

## Research Article

**Available online**

### Keywords:

Self-regulated Learning, Learners' Autonomy, Vocabulary Learning, EFL Context

### Abstract

The present study tried to indicate the effectiveness of self-regulated strategies on second grade junior high school learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary. To do this, out of 46 students of two intact classes who were selected based on cluster sampling, 40 of them labeled as pre-intermediate ones and participated in this study. Then, they were randomly assigned in two groups as control and experimental, each with 20 students. Participants of the experimental group subjected to employ self-regulated learning strategies for ten sessions, however the control group followed the normal way of teaching with no treatment. To gather data, learner's autonomy questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004) was used. That is to say, the questionnaire specified the students' autonomy in vocabulary learning at the end of the teaching period in both groups. Data were analyzed through SPSS software, and analysis of findings indicated a significance difference between the participants of two groups in terms of learning autonomy. Finally, the study concluded that using self-regulation strategies have significant effect on EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary improvement. Findings of this work provide positive experience for students as well as teachers. It is hoped that they can reveal the importance of the mentioned strategies in the educational system.

### تأثیر استراتژی‌های خودتنظیمی بر استقلال زبان‌آموزان در یادگیری واژگان: دانش‌آموزان دبیرستان در کانون توجه

پژوهش حاضر سعی دارد اثربخشی راهبردهای خودتنظیمی را بر استقلال دانش‌آموزان پایه دوم متوسطه در یادگیری واژگان نشان دهد. بدین منظور، از بین 46 دانش‌آموز دو کلاس سالم که بر اساس نمونه‌گیری خوشه‌ای انتخاب شدند، 40 نفر از آن‌ها به عنوان پیش‌متوسط برچسب‌گذاری شدند و در این پژوهش شرکت کردند. سپس به طور تصادفی در دو گروه کنترل و آزمایش هر کدام 20 دانش‌آموز قرار گرفتند. شرکت‌کنندگان گروه آزمایش به مدت ده جلسه از راهبردهای یادگیری خودتنظیمی استفاده کردند، اما گروه گواه روش عادی تدریس را بدون درمان دنبال کردند. برای جمع‌آوری داده‌ها، از پرسشنامه خودمختاری یادگیرنده که توسط ژانگ و لی (2004) تهیه شده است، استفاده شد. یعنی پرسشنامه استقلال دانش‌آموزان را در یادگیری واژگان در پایان دوره آموزشی در هر دو گروه مشخص می‌کرد. داده‌ها با استفاده از نرم‌افزار SPSS مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفت و تجزیه و تحلیل یافته‌ها نشان داد که بین شرکت‌کنندگان دو گروه از نظر استقلال یادگیری تفاوت معناداری وجود دارد. در نهایت، این مطالعه به این نتیجه رسید که استفاده از راهبردهای خودتنظیمی تأثیر معناداری بر استقلال زبان‌آموزان زبان انگلیسی در بهبود واژگان دارد. یافته‌های این کار تجربه مثبتی را برای دانش‌آموزان و همچنین معلمان فراهم می‌کند. امید است که بتوانند اهمیت راهبردهای مذکور را در نظام آموزشی آشکار سازند.

**واژگان کلیدی:** یادگیری خودتنظیمی، خودمختاری زبان‌آموزان، یادگیری واژگان

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P-ISSN:2750-0594  
E-ISSN:2750-0608

## Introduction

Self-regulation is a psychological concept, defined as self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behavior that are planned and adapted based on performance feedback to achieve self-set objectives (Zimmerman, 1990). In other places, Zimmerman (2008) viewed self-regulated learning (SRL) as setting aims, planning, selecting and employing strategies, self-monitoring one's effectiveness and self-evaluation. Pintrich (2000) also stated that self-regulated learning is "an active and constructive process whereby students set goals for their learning, and then try to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior guided and constrained by their goals, and the contextual features in the environment" (p.453). Moreover, Aregu (2013) defined self-regulated learning as an active learning process, in which students use various strategies to develop their cognition and to monitor their behavior. Similarly, Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) defined SRL as an approach to make learners autonomous in such a way that they are behaviorally, motivationally, and met cognitively active and able to take responsibility for their own learning and problem-solving. This process of making learners autonomous implies that self-regulation is an ability which can be improved.

Learners' self-regulatory capability plays a significant role in learning vocabulary (Graves & Fink, 2007). There is no doubt that vocabulary is the most essential factor in learning a language as a native or foreign. As Wilkins (2002) noted without vocabulary, nothing can be expressed and that vocabulary is even more important than grammar. Özkiraz (2015, p.34) also in the same view mentioned that "no learning can be achieved completely if the learner lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge". He added that having learnt an amount of vocabulary the students will be able to communicate, maybe not in full sentences but they will be able to express themselves. However, without knowing the vocabulary, everything will be more challengeable if the student has no dictionary. "If language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh" (Harmer, 2001, p.153).

As there is a changed view in language learning and teaching, the more emphasis is on learners' role and participation. In learner - centered education, teachers are more than orchestra leaders and learners need more than learning. Language knowledge in this learner – centered approach cannot be even understood without considering the goals and purposes of the learners. Hedge (2006) argued that students should select their own homework, they are self- motivated ones who wants to learn and have their plans for their achievements. More importantly, some

scholars as Holec (1987) and Benson (2003) emphasized on the necessity of autonomy in education. In their view, students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and get a higher sense of confidence in their own learning ability. Also, students who depend on themselves in learning vocabulary are more able to succeed academically and more motivated than those who do not have effective strategies in learning by themselves. In learner-centered approach, learners can generalize their own knowledge and think actively. As Dickinson (1987) noted, the learner has to learn the process of learning and to be able to manage the complex learning network of learning goals, materials, sequencing of the materials, deciding how materials shall be used, deciding on tasks to be done, keeping records and making evaluations in order to reach this level of being able to use language to create meanings of a social kind and to participate in verbal contest and verbal display.

In learner-centered classrooms, students need to know strategies to generalize their knowledge and use it outside the classroom. "Research to learner strategies had made an important contribution to the field of ELT by highlighting the possibility of becoming more self-reliant in learning and by generating discussion of how learners can be trained to take on more responsibility for their own learning" (Hedge, 2006, p.79). According to Holec (1985) learner training should prepare students to direct their own learning so that they may gradually move from a state of dependence on a teacher to the greatest degree of independence or autonomy. Learning training is seen as taking learners further along the road to full autonomy. Also, self-directed learning is the realization of a learner's potential for autonomy. Therefore, emphasis should be focused on providing them with skills and raising an awareness for language learning strategies to teach how to learn languages (Nuray, 2015).

In renewed educational system, learners as constructors of their own learning, self-regulation can get special attention. As traditionally Iranian EFL learners depend on teachers, most attention must be paid to the pendulum movement from teachers' responsibility to the learners. As mentioned earlier, vocabulary is the most fundamental aspect of language learning. However, the limitation of classroom-based vocabulary learning to cover large amount of vocabulary, implies the necessity of learning vocabulary independently and regulate their learning effectively. Despite different research on self-regulated strategies, to the author's best knowledge, no study exactly explored the impact of such strategies on learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning. Accordingly, the present study tries to bridge this gap through analyzing the following research question and hypothesis.

**RQ1.** Do self-regulated strategies have effect on EFL learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary?

**H01.** Self-regulated strategies do not have effect on learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

In the cognitive literature on learning and instruction, autonomous learning is referred to as "self-regulation". The ability to take responsibility for learning often refers to learners' ownership of many learning processes traditionally owned by teachers such as setting goals; choosing learning methods, materials and tasks; monitoring and evaluating progress. In Vygotsky's theory, the goal of learning is to develop an independent, self-regulated, problem-solving individual. This can occur only with the help of more capable others (teachers, more competent peers, parents, or others), who offer assistance to the learner. This assistance is metaphorically known as scaffolding, i.e., the external structure that supports and holds up a building under construction. There comes a time when the edifice needs less and less external support or scaffolding. When something is no longer needed, it is gradually removed.

For instance, in higher-order cognitive development; the "more capable other" remove the scaffolding bit by bit from the individual learner as the learner becomes increasingly independent and self-regulated (Tavallali and Marzban, 2015, p75). The theoretical framework for this research is based on Oxford's (2011) self-regulation model of L2 learning, which is a continuation of Vygotsky's model of "dialogic, self-regulated learning" and Zimmerman's (1990) social-cognitive model of self-regulated learning. These models conceptualized learning characteristics of those language learners who are actively involved in and responsible for their own learning. This framework is consistent with the language learning methodology which focuses on the autonomy of learners who are viewed as agents of their own learning process (Ellis, 2012; Griffiths, 2008).

Jafarigohar and Morshedian (2013) analyzed the impact of three different journal writing techniques as individual journal writing, collaborative journal writing with peers, and collaborative journal writing with the teacher, on upper-intermediate EFL learners' self-regulation. 60 female students were selected and randomly assigned to four groups. The results revealed that collaborative journals that provide the chance to benefit from their teacher's or peer's feedback could significantly increases learners' self-regulatory skills. Findings of the study also confirmed

the individual journal writing as a form of reflective practice to improve learners' self-regulation significantly. In another study, the same authors (Jafarigohar & Morshedian, 2014) analyzed the effect of self-regulation instruction on the EFL readers' ability to make within-text inferences while reading. Two intact intermediate classes of an English language institute were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. The experimental group was trained in self-regulatory processes which were directed at EFL reading comprehension for ten sessions, while the control group received the routine, traditional reading instruction involving pre-, while-, and post-reading tasks and activities.

The results of ANCOVA test indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test particularly in term of within-text inferencing. Thus, self-regulation instruction significantly contributed to learners' ability to make correct within-text inferences while reading in English as a foreign language. In a similar context, Maftoon and Tasnimi (2014) examined the effect of self-regulation on EFL learners' reading comprehension. 149 Iranian EFL language learners studying at Islamic Azad Universities were selected randomly and put into two experimental and control groups. The experimental group received direct teaching along with task-based instruction on self-regulation in reading. The results showed the rejection of the null hypothesis, thus concluding that self-regulation has a significant effect on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

Nejabati (2015) studied the effects of teaching self-regulated learning strategies on upper intermediate EFL students' reading comprehension. They were assigned to the experimental and control groups. The experimental group received training on self-regulated learning strategies and how to use these strategies in their reading comprehension course, while control group did not receive any instruction. According to the data of independent sample t-test, experimental group performed significantly better on posttest administration of the reading test. Moreover, Tavallali and Marzban (2015) explored the instructional efficacy of self-regulated learning strategies on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy. 40 Iranian intermediate learners were randomly divided into control and experimental group. Findings indicated that there was a significant difference between the participants in the two groups concerning their level of learning autonomy. However, no significant relationship was found between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy. It was also noted that there was no significant relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and learning autonomy in the control and experimental groups.

Hemmati et al., (2016) investigated the effect of training EFL learners in self-regulation of reading on their EFL literal and critical reading comprehension. Two intact experimental groups were taught self-regulatory reading processes, while two control groups received the traditional, routine reading instruction. Statistical analyses revealed that self-regulation instruction could significantly improve participants' EFL literal and critical reading comprehension, but their proficiency level did not moderate the effect of self-regulation training.

These findings can encourage EFL teachers to apply SRL strategies to reading tasks and activities. In the same year, Zarei et al., (2016) analyzed self-regulated learning strategies as predictors of reading comprehension. 119 Iranian B.A. and M.A. students of university were selected to participate. They were asked to respond to the self-regulation trait questionnaire. Findings indicated that from among the six components of self-regulated learning strategies, only planning and effort components were significant predictors of reading comprehension.

Fathi, Ahmadnejad and Nouroddin Yousofi (2019) examined the effects of a blog-mediated writing course on L2 students' writing motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. 46 Iranian EFL learners of university were selected and randomly put into the control and experimental groups. The control group was taught using traditional writing instruction, whereas the experimental group was taught using a blog-mediated writing course. Results showed that integrating blogs into EFL writing instruction helped the experiment group to have more writing motivation and writing self-regulation than the control group that only had received regular in-class instruction. However, the blog-mediated writing course decreased the writing self-efficacy of the EFL students. Although some studies in the L2 literature have addressed self-regulated learning strategies and autonomy, few have studied considered both variables within the SRL framework. Also, vocabulary learning is ubiquitous and occurs throughout the learning of a language, which particularly seems to require strong conscious efforts and strategic learning for knowledge increment and refinement. More importantly, as mentioned earlier, no study exactly focused on the effectiveness of self-regulated learning strategies on high school EFL students' autonomy in learning vocabulary.

### **Method**

At the beginning of the study, two intact classes of 46 English students were selected based on cluster sampling method. In accordance with Dornyei (2007) cluster sampling, the students of a high school (2nd grade), located in Babol, Mazandaran, were selected as the sample of this study.

At first, they took part in a proficiency test which is Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and 40 of them labeled as pre- intermediate EFL students. Then, they were divided in two groups, i.e., Experimental Group (EG) and Control Group (CG), each with 20 participants. All were female student with the same level of proficiency in both groups. After that, their autonomy level were collected through the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Zhang & Li, 2004) in both groups upon the completion of the treatment in EG and the conventional teaching in CG. That is to say, the questionnaire specified the students' autonomy in vocabulary learning at the end of the teaching period in both groups. It is worthy to note that given Iranian EFL community, the employment of this significant questionnaire could play a remarkable role in investigating autonomy in vocabulary learning. Also, such a questionnaire provides a comprehensive understanding of the nature of EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning. It consists of 30 items, each includes Five-Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

As the purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of self-regulated strategies on EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning, thus it was on the basis of quasi experiment which has two groups with no randomization. Treatment as one of the most important steps of the research procedure was done in ten sessions. The control group took the normal course of instruction while the experimental group was exposed to the treatment in the form of instructions on how to use self-regulated strategies in learning vocabulary. The treatment was done to analyze the effect of students' awareness of self-regulated learning strategies as personal self-regulated learning strategies, behavioral self-regulated learning strategies, and environmental self-regulated learning strategies on their autonomy in vocabulary learning. That is to say, the students of EG received the treatment in order to know how to use self-regulation strategies. In Boud's (2000) words, an autonomous learner is the one who is prepared to take some remarkable responsibility for his/her own learning. In order to be good autonomous students, they should make decisions about their own learning, set their realistic objectives, plan their work, develop strategies for dealing with new and unexpected situations, evaluate and analyze their own work and learn from their own successes and failures which would help them to be more efficient learners in the future. More importantly, autonomous learners willingly partner with peers in learning and are reflective about their own learning.

After the treatment, to highlight the extent of their autonomy in vocabulary learning, both groups were asked to answer the autonomy questionnaire in a limited time (30 min). Their answers would be confidential and would be utilized for research only. In fact, they should check the most

appropriate answer to each statement based on their learning experience. Considering the students' proficiency level, the questionnaire was translated into Persian and reliability and validity of it were checked by the researcher. The reliability was analyzed through Cronbach's Alpha which was .83, and for validity, two experts observed the items before administration and they did not report any irrelevant points. In the last step, the collected data through the questionnaire were analyzed by SPSS software using descriptive statistics, and as two sets of data are non-paradigmatic, Willcoxon and Mann Withney U were used. Finally, the tests scores were gathered for analyzing and interpreting by the researcher.

### Results and Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the current study analyzed the effectiveness of self-regulated learning strategies on EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning. Data were analyzed through pre-and posttest. The first, second, and third tables show the participants' total mean scores on learning autonomy in vocabulary knowledge for the control group based on their answers to the items in the questionnaire.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Learning Before Treatment*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
<b>C pre</b>	20	1.95	3.29	2.4857	.09306	.41617
<b>C post</b>	20	1.90	3.86	2.6524	.13069	.58446
<b>Valid N (list wise)</b>	20					

**Table 2**

*Mean Ranks of Vocabulary Learning Before Treatment*

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
<b>Control</b>	Pretest	20	18.90	378.00
	Posttest	20	22.10	442.00
	Total	40		

As shown in table 1, the mean score in the control group pre-test is 2.4857 and in post- test is 2.6524. As table 2 shows, mean of pretest is 18.9, and the mean of posttest is 22.10. In table 3, the significant difference within the control group is .398 which is higher than .05, showing that the



control group's level of learning autonomy does not change in pre- test and post- test, so there is no meaningful difference between two tests in control group.

**Table 3**  
*Test Statistics Before Treatment<sup>a</sup>*

Tests	Control
Mann-Whitney U	168.000
Wilcoxon W	378.000
Z	-.868
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.386
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.398 <sup>b</sup>

As there was treatment in experimental group, the following tables indicate that participants in the experimental group were significantly more autonomous language learners than those in the control group after the treatment. In table 4, before the treatment, the mean of pre-test is 3.29 and the mean of posttest is 4.29 which indicates that the level of learning autonomy of the EG group in learning vocabulary is higher than the CG. Also, the significant difference,  $P < 0.05$ , showing that the level of learners' autonomy is higher before treatment.

**Table 4**  
*Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Learning After Treatment*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
<b>Posttest</b>	20	2.57	4.29	3.3286	.13123	.58686
<b>Pretest</b>	20	2.10	3.29	2.4929	.08485	.37947
<b>Valid N (list wise) 20</b>						

**Table 5**  
*Mean Ranks After Treatment*

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
<b>Test</b>	Pretest	20	12.55	251.00
	Posttest	20	28.45	569.00
	Total	40		

**Table 6**  
*Test Statistics After Treatment<sup>a</sup>*

	Test
Mann-Whitney U	41.000
Wilcoxon W	251.000
Z	-4.308

Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.000 <sup>b</sup>

**Table 7***Mean Ranks in Pre and Post Tests*

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Pre - post	Negative Ranks	20 <sup>a</sup>	10.50	210.00
	Positive Ranks	0 <sup>b</sup>	.00	.00
	Ties	0 <sup>c</sup>		
	Total	20		

**Table 8***Test Statistics in Pre and Post Tests <sup>a</sup>*

		Pre - post
Z		-3.923 <sup>b</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.000

At the end of study, the participants with knowledge of self-regulated strategies by implementing these strategies in learning vocabulary, received a higher level of learning autonomy. Thus, the experimental foundation shows that the null hypothesis cannot be accepted as self-regulated strategies had positive effect on the students' autonomy level in vocabulary learning in the EFL context. It should be noted that vocabulary has an essential role in learning English language. It is obvious that learning a foreign language needs learning words of that language. The words are saved and retrieved in the human brain. The learners should repeat the words if they want to recall them and employ them for communication. Language learning strategies are known as central issue in teaching and learning, especially in encouraging learners' autonomy. These days, language teachers try to make an interesting environment for teaching vocabulary and not employing traditional methods. Students in traditional methods imitated the teacher and repeat every word which is not meaningful leaning. Therefore, they do not have any motivation for participating in the class, and no interaction find between them as it is completely teacher-centered (Shahriarpour & Kafi, 2014). This study provides new data and views for employing self-regulated strategies in learning vocabularies and such data have effect on teaching vocabulary.

The results of this research are in accordance with the findings of some previously studies in the related literature. For instance, Hemmati et al., (2016) reported that self-regulation instruction

could significantly improve participants' EFL literal and critical reading comprehension. These findings can encourage EFL teachers to apply SRL strategies to reading tasks and activities. Also, findings of this study are partially support the study of Zarei et al., (2016) who mentioned that among the six components of self-regulated learning strategies, only two components were significant predictors of reading comprehension. Additionally, the results are in line with Nejabati (2015) declared the positive effects of teaching self-regulated learning strategies on students' reading comprehension. However, findings of this work are not in line with Tavallali and Marzban (2015) who examined the instructional efficacy of self-regulated learning strategies on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy. They found no relationship between the participants' use of self-regulated learning strategies and their learning autonomy.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

As mentioned in the previous part, findings indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the participants in the control group and in the experimental group concerning their level of learning autonomy, suggesting that after treatment, the participants of the experimental group were more autonomous language learners than those in the control group. That is to say, in conducting the present study, the experimental group showed a noticeable improvement from the pre-test to the post-test, this is likely due to the self-regulation strategies they received. In fact, the treatment group which received additional vocabulary instruction incorporating the use of self-regulation strategies revealed greater achievement than the control group receiving traditional vocabulary instruction. Accordingly, the study concluded that using self-regulation strategies have significant effect on EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary improvement. According to the quantitative analysis of received data, it can be said that self-regulated strategies provided the advantages over the conventional method of teaching in developing vocabulary as a language sub skill. This difference was due to the mentioned method since the researcher controlled all extraneous variables.

Being an autonomous learner means using different learning strategies. Actually, learners need to be able to employ vocabulary strategies to deal with unknown vocabulary in listening or reading texts, and to make up for gaps in productive vocabulary in speaking and writing. Step by step, they gain fluency in using known vocabulary and to learn new words in isolation. Most of these strategies can begin to be improved in the earliest English classes (Nation, 2001).

In student's autonomous world of learning, the teacher's role is decreased as facilitators. However, it does not mean that teachers are passive in learning process. They actually have different roles as teaching vocabulary relevant to the tasks as well as judging and giving instruction in strategies that help retention. Language teachers should enhance autonomous learning since it is of great importance for students. Besides, they should consider these effective strategies in teaching process to learn vocabulary autonomously.

On the basis of findings, the research has some implications. The results provide positive experience for students as well as teachers. They help lecturers to be creative in their teaching methods and students to be active and creative. Moreover, EFL teachers can increase their students' awareness of these learning strategies and encourage them to employ them in learning language in order to make them more autonomous learners. More importantly, teachers need a firm intellectual understanding of self-regulated learning strategies in order to encourage students to develop language skills. Furthermore, findings can be used to redesign the courses at language institutes, schools, and other educational settings. This study like other ones has some limitations as the sample and time. The number of participants was not sufficient and treatment occurred in short period of time.

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