




## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EFL TEACHERS EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNERS AUTONOMY



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### ABSTRACT

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Studies on learner autonomy show that teacher' perceptions of emotional intelligence and learner autonomy might be interrelated. The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' emotional intelligence and their perceptions of learner autonomy. To do so, 180 Iranian EFL teachers were selected through convenience sampling. The data were collected through administering a learner autonomy scale and emotional intelligence instruments. The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and Pearson Product correlation. The results showed that there is a significant correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' emotional intelligence and their perceptions of learner autonomy and only some components of EI (Emotional Intelligence) significantly predict teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. The findings might be useful for teacher educators and teachers.

**Contribution/ Originality:** Among the related studies, no one has addressed the relationship between the EFL teachers' emotional intelligence and their perceptions of learner autonomy. The findings contribute to the field of teacher education to see whether teachers with different levels of emotional intelligence have the same or different perceptions of learner autonomy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learner's autonomy has recently turned into a major area of interest in foreign language teaching. Consequently, the concept of learner's autonomy has attracted a lot of attention by different scholars in both the international context of ELT (e.g., (Schmenk, 2005; Vickers and Ene, 2006; Miller, 2007; Smith, 2008; Smith and Ushioda, 2009; Benson, 2010; Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012)) as well as the Iranian ELT setting (e.g., (Haghi, 2009; Heidari, 2010; Kashefian-Naeeni and Riazi, 2011; Nematipour, 2012; Khaki, 2013)). Since a couple of decades ago, there has been a plethora of studies on the definition of learner's autonomy and the reasons for promoting it, its implications for foreign language teaching and learning. Highlighting the importance of learner's autonomy, different scholars (e.g., (Cotterall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003)) maintained that autonomous learning can enhance the

quality of language learning, foster democracy in societies, guide students for life-long learning, and allow learners to exploit learning opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom.

In modern education, learner's autonomy is conceived as one of the main ultimate goals of pedagogy. It is also perceived as the only way of gaining proficiency in different fields after graduation and thus adapting to changing social conditions and demands. Learner's autonomy is no longer a new idea in the history of education. Changes in the twentieth century in philosophy, social and political sciences as well as psychology have led to a growth of interest in autonomy as an educational goal (Finch, 2000). Learner's autonomy is a goal which is perceived as linked to motivation (Brown, 2001). Creating learner's autonomy in the individual greatly depends on individual self-motivation. Gardner and Miller (1999) stated that autonomy involves the process of "finding a way to encourage the learners to move from teacher dependence towards independence" (p. 8). Likewise, Benson (2011) claimed that learner's autonomy refers to the control of one's own learning. Gardner and Miller (2011) proposed that "the main purpose of the advancement of self-available learning assists the learners to be autonomous (p.78)." Given the importance of learner's autonomy, it is of significance to investigate different factors which may play a role in the enhancement of this important variable.

Another important construct which might have a relationship with the way teachers perceive different concepts in the domain of EFL is emotional intelligence. Intelligence is a psychological concept associated with learning on which educators make a lot of professional decisions. Various theories and definitions by different scholars (e.g.,(Goleman, 1995; Bar-On, 1997)) have so far been provided on intelligence, and many investigations (e.g.,(Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Mayer and Salovey, 1997)) have been conducted to measure the capabilities of human intelligence. Christison (1998) argued that intelligence determines educational achievements, social status and the career selection and success. According to Akbari and Hosseini (2008) intelligence is a developing concept. Different investigators have claimed that flexibility and intelligence are closely related to each other, being flexible paves the way towards individual goals, and various kinds of human intelligences exist.

According to Salovey and Mayer (1990) the subject of emotional intelligence was first addressed by Darwin who, in the context of survival, spoke of the importance of emotional expression. They further assert that the traditional definitions of intelligence in the 1900s stressed cognitive aspects such as memory and problem-solving. Over time, however, many influential researchers in the area of intelligence study began to acknowledge the significance of non-cognitive aspects, such as emotional intelligence.

Many studies on learner autonomy have set as their aim the degree of autonomy and responsibility learners enjoy (e.g., (Little, 1991; Chan, 2003)). Some research studies explored the relationship between learner's language skills and their learner autonomy (e.g., (Dafei, 2007; Haghi, 2009)). As Little (1991) stated, involving learners in deciding and plan their language competence would encourage them, and learning would be more desirable for them.

One way through which Iranian EFL learners' lack of autonomy can be dealt with is to investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers with respect to learners' autonomy. In fact, teachers' knowledge and awareness in this regard is of great significance. It is also believed that "more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor" (Sanders *et al.*, 1997). They also state that the "single largest factor affecting academic growth of populations of students is differences in effectiveness of individual classroom teachers" (P. 59)

According to Gremmo and Riley (1995) second language learning is becoming more student-centered, focusing on how to enhance teaching toward how learners develop their learning. In addition, they proposed that there are two reasons for this change. That is, the aims of language learning, viewpoints into language, and the process of language learning. More importantly, they claimed that this shift in community has destabilized individual learners' language learning aims, new viewpoints into language, and language learning, in order to increase in the comprehension of what the language learning process contains. Benson (2001) argued that "autonomy can be

enhanced, but not taught". Little (2004) stated different ways for developing learner autonomy, with the description and focus on the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and concentrating on the importance of learner autonomy through the teacher's role as facilitator in the process of its easiness.

Therefore, it is of much significance to study teachers' perceptions towards learners' autonomy in an attempt to help teachers as well as teacher educators to gain more awareness into the possible drawbacks and lack of knowledge and skills the teachers may have concerning the important concept of autonomy. The findings of this study can be used to improve teachers' awareness in terms of the perceptions they have and how they can help language learners become more self-directed and efficient language learners.

Given the importance of learners' autonomy and teachers' perceptions in the field of EFL, and the fact that teachers' emotional intelligences might have significant relationship with the notion of learners' autonomy. The current study aims at investigating the relationship between EFL teachers' personality types, emotional intelligence and their perceptions of learner's autonomy.

### 1.1. Research Questions

In line with the purposes of the study, the following research questions were addressed:

- (1) Is there any significant correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of learner's autonomy and their emotional intelligence?
- (2) Which component of emotional intelligence best predicts the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of learners' autonomy?

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1. Learner's Autonomy

The concept of autonomy which is perhaps grounded in a universal human tendency to seek control over one's life has long engaged the minds of people. As a common human tendency, autonomy is displayed in different ways by different people. How learner autonomy is conceptualized differs from time to time, context to context, and culture to culture. In its most basic form, as Kumaravadivelu (2003) states, "It represents a fundamental desire for freedom of thought and freedom of action in personal, economic, social, political, and other walks of life" (p. 131).

Since three decades ago, learners' autonomy has been greatly emphasized in educational settings (Waterhouse, 1990; McClure, 2001; Benson, 2001;2007; Dang, 2010). According to Little (1991) autonomy is defined as the individual's ability to critically reflect, to make decisions and act independently. Consequently, a person as a learner has the following responsibilities: being independent from the instructors, assuming the real ownership of learning, being willing to interact and work with others, and pushing themselves to make progress on their path to learning.

Holec (1980) defined learner's autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", and he added that "the autonomy is not instinctive ability but must be gained either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in an organized, considered way", and mentioning that "to take charge of one's learning is to have the responsibility for all the decisions regarding all aspects of this learning" (p.3).

On the contrary, there are also opposing ideas which emphasize that the development and implementation of learner's autonomy is an "experience-based learning process for teachers and learners alike" (Dam, 1995) and that it requires fairly substantial changes to the established roles of teacher and learner. Following the learning-to-learn approach, many studies have been conducted to enrich the general understanding of the concept of learner's autonomy (Wenden, 1991; Broady and Kenning, 1996). This shift can be traced through changes in the terminology that is used to characterize our profession. It began with language teaching and in the late 1980s, moved to "language teaching and learning and culminated in the 1990s with language learning" (Mishan, 2005).

These changes reflect the recognition that it is the learners who stand at the center of – and ultimately controls the learning process. Pedagogical intervention cannot induce learning in students who lack motivation or learning

strategies. This factor of control, and the responsibility this brings with it, is central to learner's autonomy: "The main characteristic of autonomy is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning, over and above responding to instruction (Boud, 1988).

As Dickinson (1987) noted in full autonomy there is no involvement of a 'teacher' or an institution. The L2 learner does not rely on the materials tailored to the learner. Little (1991) claimed that Autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. The notion of autonomy means that the learner has a high degree of freedom but it is important to insist that the freedoms conferred by autonomy are never absolute, always conditional and constrained (p.4-5). Holec (1981) pointed out that "a learner training course should take students from their states of varying degrees of dependence to the state of the greatest degree of independence or autonomy which is possible in a given set of circumstances" (p.272). Dickinson (1993) noted in his book "independence does not entail autonomy or isolation or exclusion from the classroom; however, it does entail that learners engage actively in the learning process" (p.1).

## 2.2. Emotional Intelligence

Emotion is considered to play a significant role in SLA (Second Language Acquisition). In the psychological field, the emotionally related concept is EQ, which is also called EI (Emotional Intelligence), a different notion from IQ (Intelligence Quotient). It is often used to assess the improvement of emotional intelligence and is considered to be another vital component of succession personal learning and job performance.

The term EI was coined by American psychologists (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Later, Harvard psychologist Goleman (1995) published Emotional Intelligence, in which EI was named the capacity recognize one's own feeling, fear, motivations, and intentions, as well as the motivations and desires of others. Subsequently, Bar-On (1997) generated his own EQ questionnaire (EQ-i) to measure personal EI.

Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined emotional intelligence as "the ability to perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions to promote personal growth" (p. 185). Based on this, they made ability-based model in which EI is defined as aptitudes manifested in certain adaptive actions. In line with this model, it can be argued that EI consists of four types of abilities:

- (1) Perceiving emotions—the ability to perceive emotions in faces, pictures, voices, and cultural objects— together with the ability to identify one's own emotions;
- (2) Using emotions—the ability to attach emotions to help different cognitive activities, like thinking and problem solving;
- (3) Understanding emotions—the ability to understand emotionally charged to appreciate complicated relationships among emotions such as recognizing and describing how emotions change over time; and
- (4) Managing emotions—the ability to control emotions in both ourselves and in others. Consequently, the emotionally intelligent person can attach emotions, even negative ones, and work with them towards the desired goals.

Goleman's simplified definition of emotional intelligence at first displaced the more careful scientific definition of Mayer and Salovey in the public imagination, although interest has turned back in part to their work, which provides the most convincing case for the idea.

Goleman's treatment like Mayer and Salovey's study drew on research in psychology, neurophysiology, and cognitive science. For this, he drew on their original 1990 article but increased it with many of his own observations based on other parts of the scientific literature.

In Goleman's opinion, a strong correlation does not exist between the Intelligence quotient (IQ) and success in life, though popular view mainly connects success with this dimension. As stated by Goleman, success is associated mainly with emotional intelligence. It should however be noted that adult income, completion of high school, accomplishment of higher education, prevention of dependence on welfare, avoidance of criminal conviction, and

several other factors normally considered aspects of a "successful" life correlate very strongly with IQ, and there is not enough evidence to suggest similar correlations with EI.

Further, Bar-On (1997) defined EI as "being concerned with effectively understanding oneself and others, relating well to people, and familiarizing and coping with the immediate settings to be more successful in dealing with conservational demands" (p. 16).

There have been various efforts to associate the emotional and social mechanisms of Emotional Intelligence. Gardner (1983) for instance, puts for the concept of personal intelligence based on emotional (intrapersonal) intelligence and social (interpersonal) intelligence.

The Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology, in order to explain this situation, suggested and approved of only three main theoretical models:

- (a) The Mayer and Salovey (1997) which describes EI concept as the capability to identify, understand, manage, and use emotions to improve thinking, measured by an ability-based measure.
- (b) The Goleman (1998) which views this concept as a wide array of capabilities and skills that drive managerial show, measured by multi-rater assessment.
- (c) The Bar-On (2000) which describes a cross-section of connected emotional and social abilities, skills, and organizers that influence intelligent behavior, measured by self-report within a theoretically reasonable multi-model approach including interview and multi-rater assessment.

One of the pioneers in EI is Bar-On. He introduced the term EQ in 1985 to describe an approach to evaluate emotional and social functions. Bar-On's model seeks to graph the impact of emotional and social competencies, skills, and organization on intelligent behavior.

Bar-On (1997) defines EI as "an array of non-cognitive abilities, capabilities, and skills that affect one's capability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and processes" (p. 14).

The Bar-On (1997) is divided into five segments:

- (d) Intrapersonal: includes measures of self-awareness confidence, self-regard, self-actualization, and independence;
- (e) Interpersonal: includes empathy, social relationship and social accountability;
- (f) Stress management: includes stress tolerance and instinct control;
- (g) Adaptability: includes problem solving, reality testing, and
- (h) General mood: includes pleasure and positivity.

According to Pan and Block (2011); Pajares (1992) made a comprehensive review of how the concept of "beliefs" had been formed in educational psychology till the 1990s.

### 2.3. Previous Empirical Studies

An inquiry on EI, personality, and the quality of social relationships was undertaken by Lopes *et al.* (2002). In this study, relations between emotional intellects, measured as a set of capabilities, and personal characters, as well as the contribution of both to the alleged quality of one's interpersonal relationships, were examined. In a survey of 103 college students, they found that emotional intelligence and personality traits were linked with parallel self-reports of pleasure with social relationships. Based on the ability model of emotional intelligence Another investigation examining self-report ability found rough associations between emotional intelligence dimensions and the big five personality dimensions chiefly extraversion and neuroticism (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2002).

Vakola *et al.* (2004) explored how emotional intelligence and the Big Five dimensions of personality can assist organizations to alter at the individual level by probing the connection between these attributes and attitudes toward organizational change. The study involved 137 professional participants who finished self-report inventories evaluating their emotional intelligence, personality traits and attitudes toward organizational modification. The results confirmed a relationship between personality features and employees' attitudes toward change. Brackett and

Mayer (2003) in their study demonstrated that emotional intelligence is very connected to neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness, but moderately connected to openness to experience.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Participants

The Participants of the present study were 180 Iranian EFL teachers chosen based on convenience sampling due to availability and manageability reasons. All participants were Iranian EFL teachers who were teaching in English institutes of Tehran, either as part time or full time. The age range of the participants was from 26 to 39 and they were from both genders. Due to availability and manageability reasons, the participants were selected through convenience sampling procedure.

#### 3.2. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in the present study a description of which follows:

##### a. Emotional Intelligence Inventory

In brief, the EQ-i contains 90 items in the form of short sentences and employs a 5-point response Likert scale with answers ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree. This scale is suitable for 17-year-old individuals and they need about 40 minutes to complete the scale. It consists of five sub-scales: intrapersonal, interpersonal, general mood, adaptability and stress management. The reliability of this questionnaire was established by piloting the instrument and running Cronbach's Alpha on the collected data.

##### b. Attitudes towards Learner's Autonomy Scale

The instrument used for gathering information for EFL teachers' attitudes towards learners' autonomy in this study was a questionnaire which was originally developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). It consisted of 37 items which were in the form of Likert-scale. Cronbach's Alpha was run on the gained scores to assure the internal consistency of the instrument.

#### 3.3. Design of the Study

The present study adopted a descriptive research design in the sense that there was no manipulation in the research context. In fact, the data on the three variables were collected through the use of three questionnaires and no changes were made in the environment. Therefore, the answers to the research questions were sought in the natural context of language learning.

#### 3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The individuals who met the criteria mentioned in the Participants section were contacted by the researcher. A brief description was provided about the nature of the study and the purpose of data collection. When the participants agreed to participate in the study, a package consisting of the three developed questionnaires were distributed among them. The participants were required to read the instruments carefully and answer them completely. During the process of data collection, care was taken to consider the ethical issues of the research. Moreover, they were assured that the collected information was kept confidential. Also, they were informed that the collected data were used for research purposes only.

#### 3.5. Data Analysis

In the present study both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to examine the research questions. As for descriptive statistics means and standard deviations of the scores were calculated and used. Concerning



inferential statistics, the researcher used Pearson correlation coefficient formula to explore any significant relation between the variables of the study. Moreover, stepwise multiple regression analysis was also used to explore which component of emotional intelligence best predicts the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of learners' autonomy.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Results of Research Question One

The first research question aimed at exploring the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of learners' autonomy and their emotional intelligence. In order to answer this question, the correlation coefficient between the teachers' mean scores on learner's autonomy and emotional intelligence was submitted to Pearson Product Correlation. The results including descriptive statistics and Correlation test are presented in the following tables.

**Table-1.** Descriptive statistics of teachers' scores on EI and LA

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
LA (learner autonomy)	125.8	14.50	180
EI (emotional intelligence)	286.50	25.26	180

As shown in the above table the teachers' mean scores on LA and emotional intelligence are 125.80 and 286.5, respectively

**Table-2.** Correlation between teachers' scores on EI and LA

		Emotional intelligence
Learner autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.333**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
	N	180

As it is shown in the above table, there is a significant correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' scores on perceptions about learner's autonomy and their emotional intelligence ( $r = 0.33$ ,  $N = 156$ ,  $p = 0.001 < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and it could be strongly argued that the higher teachers' emotional intelligence the higher their scores on perceptions about learner autonomy.

### 4.2. Results of Research Question two

The second research questions aimed at exploring the components of emotional intelligence which best predict the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of learners' autonomy. In doing so, the teachers' scores on the fifteen components of emotional intelligence as predictors and their scores on learner autonomy were submitted to a linear regression analysis, the results including descriptive statistics, model summary, are presented in the following tables.

**Table-3.** ANOVA for regression model

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	8436.319	13	648.948	3.810	.001
	Residual	24184.521	142	170.314		
	Total	32620.840	155			

As it is shown in the above table, the regression analysis is significant ( $F_{(13, 142)} = 3.81$ ,  $p = 0.001 < 0.05$ ). Therefore, it could be argued that at least one of the predictors significantly predicts the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. The results of regression analysis are shown in table 4

Table-4. Summary of Regression Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	SRE
1	.509 <sup>a</sup>	.259	.191	13.05

As it is shown in the above table, the components of emotional intelligence predict 19% of the learner autonomy variance ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $r^2 = .25$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.19$ ). In the following table, the correlation coefficients between the components of emotional intelligence and learner autonomy are presented.

Table-5. Correlation Coefficients between the components of EI and Learner Autonomy

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	82.07	10.97		7.4	.001
Problem solving	-6.84	5.70	-1.634	-1.2	.232
Assertiveness	-.140	.395	-.028	-.35	.723
Happiness	-1.61	10.52	-.338	-1.5	.878
Reality testing	-2.92	4.98	-.686	-.58	.558
Emotional self-awareness	1.85	5.55	.388	.33	.739
Interpersonal Relationship	.923	2.316	.218	.39	.691
Optimism	-.084	2.185	-.016	-.038	.970
Social responsibility	11.2	4.54	2.67	2.48	.014
Impulse control	5.2	6.764	1.09	.782	.435
Self-reliance	-1.8	2.275	-.43	-.81	.416
Flexibility	.36	2.200	.072	.168	.867
Reflectivity	-5.4	2.58	-1.5	-2.09	.038
Empathy	1.341	.685	.342	1.957	.04

As can be seen in the above table, empathy ( $b = .34$ ,  $p < .05$ ) is a significant predictor of EFL teachers' perception of learner autonomy which indicate that larger teacher's empathy is related to higher perception of learner autonomy.

Results also show that social responsibility ( $b = 2.67$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) is a significant predictor of EFL teachers' perception of learner autonomy which indicate that larger teacher's empathy is related to higher perception of learner autonomy. Moreover, the results of the study show that reflectivity ( $b = -1.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) is a significant predictor of EFL teachers' perception of learner autonomy which indicate that larger teacher's empathy is related to higher perception of learner autonomy.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed at exploring the relationship between EFL teachers' emotional intelligence, and their perceptions about learner autonomy. First of all, results indicated that there is a significant correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' scores emotional intelligence and their perceptions about learner' autonomy. Therefore, the second null hypothesis was rejected and it could be strongly argued that the higher teachers' emotional intelligence the more positively they think of the learners' involvement in different components. The finding also revealed that the particular measure of EI (Goleman, 2001) used during present research imitates emotional intelligence as a trait; however, this is in contrast with findings by Caruso *et al.* (2002). According to Caruso *et al.* (2002) EI is found to be an independent construct of personality. It is possible that the independence is observed because Caruso *et al.* used an ability based measure of EI. in the other hand, in differentiate validity study of EI conducted by Schutte *et al.* (1998) realized that EI measure did not correlate with the big five personality measures except for openness to experience. These results are in contrast with the present research; the reason for this difference could be that the focus of validation study conveyed by Schutte *et al.* (1998).



The next finding of the study was that empathy, social responsibility, and reflectivity are significant predictors of EFL teachers' perception of learner autonomy. It could be justified that teachers who are more reflective, socially responsible, and empathetic do like to interact with the students, welcome the students' ideas, perceptions, and attitudes towards the content of the syllabus, teaching and learning strategies, as well as the assessment strategies and approaches. That is, why these traits are significant predictors of learner autonomy.

The finding of the present study has theoretical implications for psychologists in general and psycholinguists in particular to reformulate their perception of the role of personality trait in general intelligence and emotional intelligence. The finding can also be implied by English Language teachers to bear in mind that all teachers can practice learner autonomy in EFL setting. More specifically, the results can be used by Iranian EFL learners to know that all EFL learners with different personality types agree to welcome the learners' contribution to teaching and learning process and accordingly through cooperation between teachers and learners, mismatches between them are reduced and learning conditions are maximized.

Due to the limitation of the study, the researcher was not able to take into account the components of learner autonomy, the other researcher is welcome to replicate the study and analyze the data one more time to see whether there is any difference between the teachers' scores on different components regarding their personality trait.

Age, teaching experience, and degree of the teachers might influence the results. The other researchers are recommended to replicate the study, focusing on the ignored variables. Cultural issues might also be influential. Therefore, the other researchers are recommended to replicate the study in the other settings to see whether teachers' cultural background affects their performance on learner autonomy and emotional intelligence.

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