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**A Qualitative Case of Four Iranian EFL Learners'  
Autonomous Behavior in Out-of-class Contexts: A Call  
for Understanding Learners' Personalized Approaches  
to Learning**

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**Abstract**

The main aim of this study is to problematize the role of out-of-class learning in the specific English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) context of Iran by examining the ways in which four learners attempted to revamp their English language ability on their own in out-of-class settings. In so doing, we draw on the concepts of agency and autonomy in the field of L2 research to understand and explain learners' self-directed practices for language learning within situations outside the classroom. Data were collected through in-depth interviews in which the students were asked to describe their personal approaches to English learning, use and practice in any situations beyond the classroom, most possibly hidden from their teachers. Three rounds of semi-structured interviews were carried out with the learners on an individual basis during May 2012. Thematic analysis of the interviews suggests that despite the dearth of naturalistic learning opportunities in our context, Iranian EFL learners take a variety of individual and collective initiatives to create authentic opportunities of language learning, use and practice for themselves in out-of-class contexts such as on-campus and outside the university. Based on the findings, it can be argued that in order to foster learners' more active role in their learning, greater attention should be paid to their personally-conducted, autonomous English learning activities outside the classroom.

**Keywords:** agency, autonomy, EFL, L2, Out-of-class learning

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Autonomy

Research in the field of second/foreign language (L2) teaching/learning has witnessed an exponential growth of interest in clearer description of autonomy in theory and a more effective fostering of it in practice since Henri Holec's (1981) pioneering work (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997; Cotterall, 1995; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1992; Huang & Benson, 2013; Little, 1991, 1997; Nunan, 1995; Reinders, 2010; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Ushioda, 2011). Whether defined as "the ability to take charge of" (Holec, 1981, p. 3) or "take significant responsibility for" (Boud, 1988, p. 23, cf. Cotterall, 1995) one's own learning, autonomy refers to language learners' more self-directed and independent states of learning.

Benson (2011) defines autonomy more comprehensively as "the capacity to take control over all aspects of one's learning" (p. 61). Building upon previous aspects, namely *learning management* (Holec, 1981) and *cognitive processing* (Little, 1991), Benson (2001) created his model of autonomy by complementing a third dimension to learner's control upon learning: *learning content*. An autonomous learner is capable of controlling all these three interdependent dimensions effectively vis-à-vis the factors influencing her language learning (Benson, 2011).

Learning management generally constitutes the tangible behaviors and their underlying attitudes aimed at planning, implementation and assessment of one's learning. The behaviors, however, may take various forms for individual learners in each of the phases of setting learning objectives, selecting learning methods, monitoring the learning process and evaluating the outcomes. Therefore, the interplay between individual differences in learning style and learning strategies (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003) and the choice of accessible resources in more informal learning contexts (Palfreyman, 2006) can, to a large extent, determine the specific routes learners personally take to execute learning management (Benson & Gao, 2008). Control over cognitive processing aspect of language learning involves adoption of an active approach toward the mental engagement with the learning enterprise. Adequate and selective attention to the linguistic input confronted and further connecting it with the previously gained items

(Bialystok, 1994); reflection upon the learning experience and elicitation of subsequent directions for learning (Little, 1997); and monitoring these cognitive progressions and informing oneself of the results of this evaluation (Wenden, 1998), all are deemed to be characterizing learners with effective control upon cognitive processing. Controlling the content of language learning, can readily be connected to learning purposes. The need to learn specific content is a constructive cycle built upon learners' personal reasons for learning. However, in institutional setting, learners are usually prescribed learning materials which they might or might not actually wish to deal with (Cotterall, 2008). In the latter case, learners with stronger sense of personal autonomy may shift from the formal goals set for them to more idiosyncratic objectives, in order to approach the sort of learning that best suits their own purposes (Littlewood, 1999; Macaro, 2008). Littlewood's (1999) distinction between proactive and reactive autonomy is very helpful in understanding learners' degrees of (in)dependence in language learning. According to his view, proactively autonomous learners personally take actions to conduct their learning from goal setting to evaluation, whereas the reactive ones significantly depend on others (curriculum, teacher, etc.) to set learning directions for them.

## **1.2 Out-of-class learning**

A noticeable form of self-direction with respect to learners' freedom for identification of learning needs, setting learning goals and further operationalization of them in practicing different language skills is out-of-class learning (Reinders, 2010). Learners' activation of their L2 outside the classroom is long established as a desirable goal of L2 education (Nunan, 1995). Despite these, the out-of-class activities that are aimed at language learning have only recently started to receive the attention they deserve in L2 research (Benson & Reinders, 2011) particularly within EFL contexts (Cortina-Pérez & Solano-Tenorio, 2013). Categorized under a resource-based approach to language learning (Benson, 2011), out-of-class learning includes any sort of activities that lead to language learning in the contexts outside the classroom. Benson (2011) views out-of-class learning as entailing learners' deliberate and "independent interaction" with material,

social and technological resources available to them to self-direct their own learning (p. 127), and further classifies it into three broad categories: 1- self-instruction (making use of different resources to teach oneself a foreign language, often without a formal intervention); 2- naturalistic language learning (learning through direct contact with target language environment or speakers); and 3- self-directed naturalistic learning (seeking out to create authentic learning opportunities for oneself). One can see these activity groups as a continuum, with self-instruction on one extreme and naturalistic language learning on the other, and yet, self-directed naturalistic learning as a mid-point of it containing features of both previous categories. In a more precise description, Benson (2011) states that, “out-of-class learning is typically initiated by the learner, makes use of authentic resources, and involves pleasure and interest, as well as language learning” (p. 139). According to this description and following Benson’s (2011) call for more research in this area on the ground that “out-of-class learning makes a significant contribution to higher levels of language proficiency” (p. 139), the present study will primarily focus on learners’ experiences of self-directed naturalistic learning. Such learning takes place through learners’ individualistic actions and/or their participation in “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that are often situated within their personalized learning environments outside the language classroom. In other words, this paper endeavors to reach an understanding of learners’ “private” language learning activities outside the classroom (Hyland, 2004), both individually and chorally.

There exists a disproportionate body of literature that has centrally focused on out-of-class language learning compared to the studies investigating classroom learning. In addition, they have mostly been carried out along the quantitative paradigm, with the goal of identification and quantification of out-of-classroom language learning activities or resources (Pearson, 2004; Pickard, 1996; Ryan, 1997; Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002). Pickard’s (1996) descriptive study, for example, with a group of German students of English language revealed that listening to the radio and reading newspapers and novels for leisure purposes were their most frequent out-of-class language learning strategies. Although the term ‘activities’

(Freeman, 1999) is used to describe learners' out-of-class learning throughout this paper, it should be noted that Oxford's (1990) definition of language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8), overlaps a great deal with that term. In this regard both terms share a focus on learning-oriented actions.

Another out-of-class language learning research is that of Spratt et al. (2002) who surveyed 508 students and reported that the most frequent activities among the learners were those related to entertainment and communication, such as using the Internet in English and watching English speaking movies. They further concluded that:

Teachers seeking to promote autonomous behavior in the form of outside-class activities may have more immediate success if they build on those that students already engage in, rather than on those activities which would require students to change their attitudes or behavior. (p. 256)

Evident, within these lines, is the salience of exploration of learners' personalized and self-directed learning activities beyond the classroom. Previous research (Hyland, 2004; Marefat & Barbari, 2009, and Pickard, 1996) holds that learners tend more to engage in practice of receptive rather than productive skills in out-of-class contexts. In case of Pickard's study, this largely had to do with the scarcity of speaking opportunities in the EFL context of the learners. Marefat and Barbari (2009) reported that more proficient Iranian EFL learners employed reading and lower proficient learners used listening activities for learning outside the classroom. However, this might not always be the case. For example, media, in the form of popular culture, such as English speaking movies and songs are proved to be effective learning (and not only listening) tools (Domoney & Harris, 1993; Li & Brand, 2009), particularly for learning every-day language of native contexts. In a seminal study with Japanese learners of English language who had no experience of living or studying in an English speaking environment, Murray (2008) suggested that popular culture plays a 'prominent' role in their learning. He documented how watching movies,

listening to songs and reading pop magazines in English cater to learners' needs in three broad dimensions of 'why', 'what' and 'how' of language learning, i.e. psychological processes of controlling motivation, provision of the content, as well as the choice of methods for learning.

Another feature of out-of-class learning is its freedom from formal preordination and predefined frames for learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Benson (2011) speculates that "out-of-class learning is not a structured arrangement for teaching and learning" (p. 140), which basically can render as an absolute freedom for learners in controlling various aspects of their learning through enactment of their preferred learning initiatives, given the available resources within a context (Palfreyman, 2006). In the same vein, Huang and Benson (2013) maintain that learners can potentially develop their learning autonomy, given that they possess a desire for learning, enjoy the ability to learn, and are granted the sufficient freedom to conduct their learning. In turn, the interrelationships of the three elements of desire, ability and freedom, which together conjure up the capacity called autonomy, can effectively develop through out-of-class learning activities. As a result, discussion upon out-of-class learning, from the perspective of autonomy, has become a core topic within L2 autonomy research now (Chick, 2011; Inaba, 2013; Menezes, 2011). Nonetheless, more stress has been placed recently upon the need to ascertain the qualitative components of language learning that takes place in situations within individual learners' personal spaces such as homes, workplaces and lives (Benson & Gao, 2008) because qualitative research helps uncovering and understanding phenomena in their naturally occurring environments (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This mostly involves stepping into the real life of learners and dissection of the activities that aid them with language learning within their social world. In so doing, drawing on the concept of 'agency' sounds necessary, to which we turn next.

### **1.3 Agency in learning**

Agency is the ability to apply personally-relevant learning approaches to the items to be learnt (Ahearn, 2001; Toohey & Norton, 2003). The underlying notion of agency is a practical understanding of the links between one's

learning goals and possibilities for their fulfillment within specific situations, which triggers taking action. That is to say, high degrees of autonomy often go hand in hand with the exertion of agency to prioritize personal learning agendas and go about achieving those goals both inside (van Lier, 2008) and outside the classroom (Shedivy, 2004). Agency can also happen in a collective level, which means choral measures for learning such as study groups or self-organized language practicing events, as well, might positively impact learners' autonomous learning behavior and management (Chang, 2007). A type of regular and self-organized English meeting, termed as 'English corners' has been captured by Gao (2009), where Chinese learners in various cities and universities regularly met up in public places to practice speaking English. More recently, a study in Finland has suggested that the mere multiplicity of learning opportunities does not lead to greater learning outcomes and autonomy (Kalaja, Alanen, Palviainen & Dufva, 2011). Rather, the authors argue **that** learners' perceptions of their own agency to make use of these opportunities within a given context count more important. Flowerdew and Miller (2008) also examined learners' creativity for learning English in light of the dichotomy of individual agency and social structure. They concluded that to aid learners with their learning, we need to concentrate more on their learning moves situated within their personal lives. This, arguably, has to commence with a sound understanding of what learners already do in their private domains to learn (Hyland, 2004; Murray, 2004; Spratt et al., 2002).

Boosting learners' agency in out-of-class language practice and use becomes specifically important in the Iranian EFL context where English language is still taught at schools in a traditional fashion (Abednia, 2012; Farhady & Hedayati, 2009; Papi, 2010), learners have no contact with native speakers (Roohani & Rabiei, 2013) and success in learning English by mere attendance to regular school classes sounds improbable (Ahmadi & Eslami, 2011). In addition, English language has no concrete usage in the social context of Iran, which severely constrains learners' agency and their chances for learning in naturalistic settings. This situation necessitates that, besides the limited hours of instruction they are exposed to in formal classrooms, learners demonstrate agency and actively take initiatives to create learning

opportunities for themselves beyond educational walls either individually or collectively, as both are approximately compatible with their values (Ghorbani, Bing, Watson, Davidson & LeBreton, 2003).

#### **1.4 Research questions**

During the time that learners spend outside the language classroom, they are strongly supposed to remain active in taking initiatives that end in language learning. This concern particularly looms large in EFL contexts, such as Iran, where learners have limited chances of exposure to authentic input and naturalistic learning. Creation of novel learning opportunities through exploitation of the existing resources beyond the classroom, then, becomes one of most important factors that determine language learning success. That is to say, as learning agents, learners consistently need to go about doing activities that heighten their control over different language skills. With consideration to the aforementioned postulations, the authors believe that personal and purposeful ways through which our learners engage **in** their learning outside language classroom are highly important issues that have been neglected thus far. Therefore, the following questions were posed for this study:

1. In what ways do Iranian EFL learners create informal opportunities for learning English in out-of-class contexts?
2. What do they learn through their preferred out-of-class activities?

#### **2. Method**

Based on a comprehensive literature review, an open-ended survey of out-of-class learning activities was prepared. Using convenient sampling, the survey was administered to fifteen accessible learners on campus. Every effort was made that only first- and second-year students fill in the survey because the third- and fourth-year students supposedly cope with more specialized credits that might or might not have a focus on learning general English language. An item at the end was allotted to ask the respondents if they were interested in further cooperation with the researchers through a discussion about their English learning. After analyzing the responses, through purposive sampling six of the learners who had provided their



contact information were selected to be interviewed according to the richness and variation of their out-of-class learning activities. This was to ensure having respondents with wider spectrums of learning activities. Two of the learners refused to be interviewed and left the study. Prior to the interview sessions, the purpose of the study was clearly reiterated to the remaining four participants and they were assured that their data will be used only for research purposes. Learners' demographic information is presented in Table 1. (For confidentiality of learners' identities, they are given pseudonyms).

Table 1. Interviewees' general information

	<b>Ali</b>	<b>Bahram</b>	<b>Sasan</b>	<b>Saba</b>
Age	21	19	20	20
Year of Study	2	1	2	2
Major	Translation	Translation	Translation	Literature
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female

## 2.1 Participants

As the study aimed at exploring an understanding of out-of-class language learning as representation of EFL learners' agency and autonomy, a multiple case design was selected. The participants in this study were four language learners from the University of Kashan. They were one female and three male students. Three of them were from Isfahan (Bahram, Sasan, Saba) and one (Ali) from Kashan. Ali, Sasan and Saba were sophomores and Bahram was a first-year student, however, they were all passing credits on general skills of English. Ali was the only learner who had not gone to language institutes, while Bahram had four, Sasan had five, and Saba had two years of English learning experience prior to coming to the university. Ali's greatest ambition in learning English was coverage and learning of almost all the terminology and techniques related to reading and translating news, press and political texts. Bahram's strongest aspiration was to become a fluent English speaker. Sasan's goal for mastering English language was to become a professional tour guide. Saba's ultimate goal of English learning was gaining the essential skills to interact and fluently speak with other English speakers, especially foreigners.

## 2.2 Interviews

The instrument utilized for data collection in this study was semi-structured interview. Sequences of three face-to-face interview sessions were carried out with each learner to reach enough depth and breadth (Polkinghorne, 2005) with a one-week interval during May 2012. Prior to the sessions, an interview guide was prepared merely to keep the interviews focused but adequate room was left for following up emergent lines of inquiry. Coupled with the insights derived from the analysis of learners' articulations in the first session, the multiple parts of the nine questions in the interview guide were planned to specifically inform the second interview sessions (See Appendix).

Development of rapport with interviewees through informal questions related to their language learning history comprised the first session. We asked learners about their previous learning experiences before coming to the university and what actually happened that they took on learning English at a university level. Following the analysis of learners' comments from the first session, an in-depth investigation, in light of the research questions and the interview guide, followed in the second session which involved probing learners' personal actions for learning English beyond the classroom. The third interview mainly included clarification of the reported accounts based on the transcripts of the former two sessions, where learners were required to provide more nuances of information in situations that they had described for learning English beyond the classroom.

Interviews were conducted in learners' L1 (Persian) for the absolute clarity of the questions and answers, except for one of the participants who was willing to have it in English. Their lengths were variable between 35 and 65 minutes according to the information the learners had to share (average: 50 min). Learners' permission was asked for audio recording at the beginning of each session. One week after termination of the interviews, member checking was applied to increase the descriptive validity of the data (Maxwell, 1992). Copies of the transcripts were submitted to due participants to verify appropriateness of transcriptions and to add or change any information they felt necessary. Any modifications in this stage were triangulated with participants' survey responses. Afterwards, we kept in

touch with the learners via email and phone to clarify any ambiguous points within their accounts and to ensure the decency of our interpretations.

### **2.3 Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze and report the main patterns within and across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007). Initially, the data were thoroughly transcribed, repeatedly read and openly decoded. This facilitated the entailment of all potential codes in this stage, which could be words (e.g. Internet), phrases (e.g. language institutes), sentences (e.g. I watch a lot of English movies without subtitles), or larger bodies of data (e.g. extended utterances of sentences, phrases and words). The analysis of the codes was rather cyclical than linear, with major back and forth reviews within the different phases. Having all the data (from the twelve interviews) coded, the second-level coding was applied, in which the main reported activities were placed into separate tables labeled with each participant's name. Next, we highlighted activity codes which were significantly meaningful in relation to the research questions and also classified their details to find out if and how those activities have led to any specific learning. These activities emerged to be, directly and/or indirectly, related to watching English movies or TV programs, listening to English music songs, playing offline and online games, downloading and reading music lyrics, reading any English texts at hand and irrelevant to formal instruction, informal and self-initiated language practice, participating in self-organized group learning, talking to peers and tourists in English. At the end of this phase, through re-analysis and collation of the codes and informed by data extracts, we reassembled the units to seek for the most meaningful and recurrent themes. With the nominated themes in mind, the transcripts were reviewed several more times to verify the results. It is worth noting that the transcripts reported in the following section are translations of the ideas expressed, except the one mentioned above.

### **3. Results**

Following the data analysis, the key themes were found to be: 1) Agency in learning English whether individually or in a group by resorting to the

accessible resources beyond the classroom; and, 2) Learners' inclination for engagement in learning modes that are accompanied by entertainment. Shedding light upon the specific forms that these patterns took for individual learners along with presentation of the translation of pertinent data extracts in English follow next.

### 3.1 Agency in personal and group learning

Learners reported various activities in which agency in creating innovative opportunities for learning as well as using English language outside the classroom is implied or is explicitly evident. These activities can be divided into two categories: personal learning initiatives and self-organized group learning. However, learners might be active in one or both of these activity categories. Saba reported seeking English speaking opportunities through a traveling website. Although no meetings had occurred for her yet through that website, thanks to her personal learning experiences, she had benefited from the intercultural interaction potential in talking with foreigners.

I am a member in a website called 'couchsurfing.org' . . . you can host tourists and talk to them . . . but, so far, I have only chatted with them by sending emails and haven't hosted anyone yet, because I am mostly here [at university] and [I] only get back home on some weekends. But if I go to historical places here [in Kashan] I try to have a conversation with the foreigners . . . actually I have learned a lot of things by talking to people with foreign cultures.

(Saba, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Ali and Bahram described a learning situation in which they would carefully examine the English discourse on different products like food packages, clothes tags and cosmetics.

If I see a[n English] text like the . . . simple expressions and words on a food product package or on back of a bottle . . . I pay close attention to them.

(Ali, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Bahram described his experience with more elaboration. He believed every English text is a good resource for learning at least one or few English words.

I am very sensitive about [the English used on] the things I buy. . . I always try to check the information tags on the clothes or the ingredients of a snack that I buy. . .there might be an interesting word for me there . . . I'm sure I find new words but there might be interesting words that stick in my mind immediately . . . it happens a lot.

(Bahram, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Further, he pointed to a successful prior learning experience of this kind in his workplace. He had learned new chunks of English language by reading the texts used on products such as medicines and cosmetics.

I've worked in a pharmacy for two years . . . before university. Many words on the medicines may be familiar to me [now] or . . . the instructions on products, like how to use a soap, how long a shampoo should remain [on head] before rinsing, how long a facial mask should stay on, with what kind of water it should be washed, how it should be washed, etc.

(Bahram, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Bahram also described a voluntarily carried group activity with his friends where alertness to catch English errors from each other's speaking was the rule. Group agency manifested itself in monitoring language output of other in a less stressful situation than the classroom.

One thing that I like about our informal discussions with my friends is . . . catching 'mistakes' from each other . . . while speaking . . . we even detect grammatical mistakes, [and tell each other] . . . for instance . . . you should have said this in past tense, why did you say it in present tense . . . then he also has to find our mistakes. I really like this . . . [because] everyone, then, has to speak correctly [in English].

(Bahram, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

However, the dynamics of this activity was not revealed until Bahram said 'making mistakes' during the discussions is not a simple matter and the

explicit feedback they receive from each other profoundly affect their conceptualizations of their abilities to produce accurate English language. In the excerpt that follows, he explained about a very common error among Iranian EFL learners, related to the parts of speech. His statement shows how his out-of-class learning has proved to be functional in practicing speaking.

For example, once, while talking with friends, I wanted to say 'I agree', but I said 'I am agree' and they all started to laugh . . . although I knew that . . . from my [grammar] book. But my friends' laughing-at-me made me always remember this grammatical point and never make that mistake again inside the classroom.

(Bahram, 3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

Another account on out-of-class collective activities was put forward by Ali, the phenomenon that we have termed as '*mobilized language clubs*'. In informal meetings with his friends from different years of study, Ali described how the members try to inform each other of any recent expansion in their English language repertoire in a question and answer format.

On the way to the [university] self-restaurant, or in the second floor prayers room, when we, students of English, see each other, we start telling each other some new words and expressions we have learnt, and ask for synonyms and meanings . . . it's like a question and answer session.

(Ali, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Elsewhere, he expresses some other learning possibilities within the club. It seems that the club is a working activity for its members mostly because they see themselves able to control the content of their learning, compared to the classroom where they have no power over its discourse. These informal short gatherings had tremendously helped learners dig into different domains of English vocabulary. In addition, the language club has no stable setting and might take place anywhere and anytime learners find themselves free to chat, hence mobilized.

Another thing is that some situations happen and then someone who knows [the English term for] it says, 'who knows how to

say this situation in English?' . . . for example, a senior told us if you tell someone that you are good-looking, but s/he assumes you are making fun of him/her, although you are telling the truth . . . do you know . . . what's the expression for it in English? We said no, and he said it's called 'double-edged compliment'. I've learned lots of expressions this way. For example, while walking in campus, we ask [each other] 'how to say this unfinished building block in English, how to say brick in English . . . or even how to say noisily moving water in throat, or how to describe a certain [body] movement by English words' . . . or sometimes someone says a term of a special field, and then others continue . . . for instance, how to say mammal, and then another person says how to say 'birds that hatch eggs'.  
(Ali, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

### 3.2 Learning through fun and entertainment

Learners' preference for learning in ways which proffer some degrees of fun and entertainment showed itself in various ways. One of the most interesting accounts with such theme belonged to Sasan. As a definite pastime of his, playing football video games had aided him to endow with authentic English input.

One thing I am frequently in contact with is video games. I don't know if you have seen PES games or if you play Pro Evolution . . . I really love the commentary part of [match] reports. During the game, it happens a lot that instead of focusing on the game, I pay attention to the commentator's words . . . I like it so much.

(Sasan, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

The cognitive processing of the reporter's discourse through noticing and reflection upon it, fueled by his keen interest in football, had synthesized a perfect learning opportunity for Sasan. This had further excited him to find the expressions rather useful in one of his classes, hence his out-of-class and in-class learning connected.

I have also used those expressions . . . in one of our ‘reading newspaper’ classes . . . there were a series of terminology of sports, and one part was football . . . I started to say the pitch, bars, like crossbar, midfielder, goalkeeper, etc. It was fascinating that only I could answer the football-related questions, because I had carefully noticed them in that video game . . . very interesting.

(Sasan, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Learners, variably, signified that listening to English music songs, watching English speaking movies, TV series and programs have made up a significant portion of their out-of-class learning strategies. With an exception to Ali, who never listened to English songs and scarcely watched English movies, the other learners reported that they use them for learning on an every-day basis.

Among all activities I mostly learn by music and movies . . . because they are happy, and make you curious to find out about the end [of them]. It’s like both fun and education – simultaneously. I would listen to a music song several times and my aim is to . . . find out its meaning and sing with it and somehow memorize it . . . I also get their lyrics . . . from the Internet . . . to check their meanings.

(Saba, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Sasan’s account suggests that movie subtitles and song lyrics had appeared to become a self-assessment tool for him in terms of controlling learning content as well as management of his learning in relation to the listening skill.

What I like most to do for learning are music, movies and film series . . . I would also read books but not as much. First, I listen several times because I like myself to comprehend the music text, but I also get the lyrics to compare [with my own guesses] . . . I also watch movies without subtitles as far as I can, but sometimes after that I watched without subtitles, I would watch once more with English subtitles to see how much I have understood [correctly].



(Sasan, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

However, Ali expressed reluctance in practicing English language via pop culture. His personal approach to upgrading his L2 listening took other shapes.

I don't watch movies . . . and the same goes to music . . . I mean if it is for improvement of my English, I say, forget about music, and listen to audio files instead . . . [like] audio-books, news, talk shows.

(Ali, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Nevertheless, Ali also practiced integration of fun into his learning activities through online, incidental vocabulary acquisition tests.

Sometimes I play online vocabulary games . . . or idiom games which I have accidentally run into [while surfing the net] . . . when I take a test there, if something interesting shows up, I'd take a note of it . . . these words and idioms are useful for the informal gatherings with my friends where we tell each other about new words and expressions.

(Ali, 3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

#### 4. Discussion

Placing the control of various aspects of the learning process in learners' hands has long been a burning issue for language teachers. The learners in this study displayed initiatives in autonomous selection and implementation of the activities that can serve as strong means of personal fulfillment in language learning. This implies, *inter alia*, the learners' preference for engagement in activities that are more in congruence with their personal interests. As proposed by other researchers, EFL learners' overall success in language learning is principally contingent upon their autonomous learning moves beyond educational contexts without teacher's mediation (Murray & Kojima, 2007; Macaro, 1997). In addition, in such contexts learners can enjoy the freedom to make effective decisions *vis-à-vis* the when, where and how of their learning (Benson, 2011), hence exerting realistic control upon their learning. These claims proved to be substantially affirming the out-of-class activities reported by the four learners in this study. The learners'

diverse learning experiences in a range of contexts outside the classroom, including on-campus and in their wider social world outside the university, were indicative of their high sense of learning autonomy. Providing oneself with informal learning opportunities, specifically in a non-supporting EFL context like Iran (Abednia, 2012; Papi, 2010), can be justified by the learners' desire to satisfy personal learning needs and achieve independence in learning.

The out-of-class activities recorded in this study can be taken as true reflections of Iranian EFL learners' autonomous behavior since they stemmed from learners' own interest in learning English, and not their teachers' expectations. In the light of the distinction made by Littlewood (1999), participants in the present study proactively engaged in reading different texts on products and commodities, using online language games and taking part in mobilized language practice groups. Such proactive engagement practically allows learners to better progress in their learning pursuit because learning actions that are chosen personally by learners often increase their autonomy (Huang & Benson, 2013). Given the opportunity to exercise agency, autonomous learners often tend to learn the content correspondent to their personally identified learning needs (Cotterall, 2008) and practice in ways that best suit their personalized learning style (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003).

Nonetheless, teachers need to pay due attention to the importance of learners' development in out-of-class contexts. In reality, learners already do many activities on their own to learn English in situations other than the language classroom (Hyland, 2004; Spratt et al., 2002). Teachers' awareness of such autonomous initiatives may contribute to the incorporation of those learning moves into models of instructed L2 learning. To develop the sense of learning responsibility in learners, teachers can pinpoint these activities and build on them through engaging learners with complementary tasks inside the classroom. The first practical step, in this respect, is to fully understand learners' personalized approaches to learning English, some of which were described in this study.

Personal agency in creation and/or exploitation of opportunities associated with language learning in out-of-class settings was found to be

profoundly influential in the ways that the learners in this study developed their English language ability. If they made use of certain activities to learn, it was mainly because those activities accommodated their learning preferences, needs and goals, and fostered more independent learning through personally viable methodologies. This can explain why and how, 1- Sasan's interest in football had encouraged him to learn specific terms through gameplay and further use them in one of his classes; 2- Bahram's career was the driving force behind his learning of pharmaceutical terms and his keen ambition to become a fluent English speaker had encouraged him to participate in self-organized group speaking practice; 3- Saba's desire to communicate with foreigners had led to visiting historical places and her personal hobbies of listening to music and watching movies had turned out to be decent means of English learning; and 4- Ali's friends taught each other new vocabularies in voluntarily arranged gatherings and his disorientation to popular culture had led him to practice listening the materials of his own interest. In this vein, our results are in line with the view that agency in learning can dispel the structural constraints and bring the learning process more under learner's personal control (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008; Kalaja et al., 2011).

Alavinia and Siyadat (2013) argue for the use of fun and entertainment as a key element in determination of learners' preferred learning activities and content. In this regard, we believe that it would be more productive to provide a range of learning materials and methods for learners and ask them to choose from them instead of setting one uniform learning option for all. This might increase the possibilities of an overlap between learners' in-class and out-of-class activities, thereby encouraging learners to become more effective learners through their preferred learning activities. The insight that digital games can provide an efficient opportunity for language learning supports Chick's (2011) findings where male gamers sought to learn English through sport digital gameplay. Another major form of learning with entertainment in our context appeared to be attending to the authentic input enveloped in pop culture products, such as movies and songs. It can be argued that these cultural products are the best accessible tools for exposure to authentic English language in our context. Moreover, they contain

elements of popularity, which make them appealing to the learners. Learners in this study strongly preferred to try at activities that include both fun and language learning concurrently (Benson, 2011), such as learning by games, songs and movies. This finding suggests support for the studies that point to the high functionality of pop culture for language learning (Li & Brand, 2009; Murray, 2008).

However, this study does not lend support for the claim that learners only practice receptive skills in out-of-class contexts (Marefat & Barbari, 2009; Pickard, 1996). Although no writing practice was reported by the learners, they described various events within which self-directed speaking practice in a less stressful environment stood out (Krashen, 1982). The learners took initiatives outside the language classroom to increase their control upon their L2 speaking skill by forming small practice groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The use of these self-organized learning events reveals genuine evidence of how Iranian EFL learners cope with independent group language learning in non-monitored situations. The learners' attempt at improving their L2 vocabulary circle and their speaking skills through informal contacts in out-of-class situations (mobilized language club) is also comparable to Gao's (2009) and Gao, Cheng and Kelly's (2008) studies in China. Such informal gatherings share a focus on learners' interest in creation of learning opportunities independent of the pedagogical goals set for them and encourage more meaningful learning through interaction.

All results and postulations of the present study can be explained by the simple fact that learners can utilize a vast number of resources for learning English outside the classroom (Benson, 2011) even in an unsupportive context. The human resources include peers and other English speakers. Self-directed learners understand the plausibility of learning through such resources and attempt to put themselves in situations that can facilitate learning by communication and interaction with others. The other notable resource involves use of technological tools where inquisitive learners often find a chance to practice learning English by exploiting them to practice their agency and heighten their control over different language skills, such as listening to songs and watching movies, playing online/offline games and reading extracurricular texts.

### **5. Conclusions**

This study endeavored to shed light on the less-known learning activities that learners independently do to improve their English ability. The first purpose of the study was to explore EFL learners' actual language learning activities outside the classroom, mainly because these activities often have to do with learners' own interest in language learning, rather than institutional obligations. The second concern of the study was to delineate the English language content and skills that learners acquire through their out-of-class activities. Findings attested that although there are very few naturalistic learning opportunities in our EFL context, learners demonstrate agency in creation of miscellaneous authentic opportunities of English language use and practice outside the classroom through self-directed naturalistic learning. To conclude, we suggest that in order to help learners with attaining more control over various dimensions of their language learning in an instructed EFL context, every individual teacher needs to raise learners' attention to understand the importance of their own role in their learning success and encourage them to systematically develop their out-of-class learning. A practical notion in this respect can be spending a part of class time on explicit discussion of learners' actual out-of-class learning practices. This might stimulate less autonomous learners to become more active in learning and also enhance class teaching procedures.

### **6. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

This study was carried out as a multiple case study with focus on four participants all studying in one department. Further research with more participants from across the country may provide more credibility to the current findings. More qualitative data can also be gathered and used to develop a deeper understanding of out-of-class language learning. Data saturation and theoretical sampling as two tenets of grounded theory design can open another possibility for further research. No doubt, a more reasonable understanding of out-of-class learning can be achieved by delving into other dimensions of such practices including the relation between out-of-class and in-class activities, learners' exploitation of available resources for self-regulation of their learning. Longitudinal studies,

particularly, are needed to examine learners' development of autonomy. Journal diaries and group interviews are the two other qualitative research instruments that can be used in this regard. Equally important is the exploration of teachers' cognitions about out-of-class learning. There is too little research that assesses teachers' views on the role of the learning that happens beyond classroom walls.

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### Appendix Interview Guide

1. Almost how much time do you spend on doing language learning activities outside classroom per week?
  - Almost how many times do you repeat each activity during the week?
2. What activities do you practice to improve your...
  - Listening? / Reading? / Writing? / Speaking? / Grammar and Vocabulary?
3. Do you carry out your activities on an Individual/Pair/Group basis?
  - Why individually/pair/group? How do you do that? What do you learn from these activities? Set an example.
4. Who encourages you to conduct those activities outside the classroom?
  - Self / Teacher / Family / Others
5. What is interesting about these activities? Why is it interesting to you? How do you engage yourself with the activities?
6. When are you usually most active in doing out-of-class learning activities?
  - Beginning/middle/end of each semester
7. What is the nature of the activities you do for each skill?
  - Memorizing
  - Communicating
  - Note-taking
  - Comparing and contrasting
  - Other
8. What sources do you use to carry out an activity?
  - Books (self-study/story/...)
  - Magazine/Newspaper
  - Media (TV/Radio/...)
  - Computer software
  - Internet
  - Friends
  - Other
9. Where do you usually try to learn outside the classroom?
  - Self-Access Center
  - Dorm
  - Faculty self-study center
  - Home
  - Other