Interface Between Learner Autonomy and Group Dynamics: The Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This descriptive study looked into Persian learners' autonomy and its ties with in-class group dynamics. The participants were undergraduate learners and M.A. students together with their teachers. Data were collected, using a questionnaire, on the participants' beliefs about autonomy, their autonomous behaviors, and their perceptions of group norms and group cohesiveness. Corresponding teachers, however, provided data just on their learners' group norms and cohesiveness. Data were analyzed using a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, a Man-Whitney U test, the Kendall's-tau b correlation coefficient and a Kruskal-Wallis test. Results revealed that the participants' autonomous beliefs were not much realized in their behaviors. However, the participants and their instructors had similar ideas about how cohesive their classes were. It was also found that the length of time the participants spent in the academic setting positively correlated with their autonomous behaviors and their group cohesiveness. Overall, the results suggested that a more serious approach to training both democratic L2 teachers and autonomous L2 learners should be taken in the Iranian context of education.

Keywords: Group Cohesiveness; Group Norms; Learner Autonomy; Learners' Perceptions

1. Introduction

The idea of obedient students who look at the teacher as the sole provider of information in the classroom has long ceased to be an intriguing fascination to the world of educators. As Joshi (2011) has stated, "the world of pedagogy has been shifting rapidly from the authority to democracy since 1960s" (p. 25). Moreover, with the advent of technology, the classroom as the sole place for learning is no longer an acceptable norm, as people can stay home and learn anything from language to astronomy through computers, phones, and so on. It is in such a world of innovations that L2 learners are needed to be more responsible and to take some of the roles that traditionally were in the realm of teachers. Generally defined as having the responsibility for learning and the ability to make decisions about the learning process, learner autonomy has gained more importance and has been the

focus of serious research and debate since the 1980s. Though L2 researchers have varied in their perceptions of autonomy from narrower perspectives to broader ones, they all consent that autonomy is not a tool for learning, but a goal in itself. Therefore, as long as learning is considered to be a life-long process, L2 teachers' main responsibility is promoting L2 learners' autonomy so that they can manage the process by themselves (Liu, 2012; Thanh Nga, 2014).

One way to promote autonomy is team work as, based on the contextual approach to learner beliefs (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011), beliefs are socially constructed and contextually situated. In other words, they are created in social groups and relationships and evolve along with changes in the context. A cohesive group in which L2 learners cooperate well can, then, enhance not only L2 students' linguistic take-in, but also their enthusiasm, self-efficacy, and social personality.

Considering the paucity of data on the abovementioned issues in case of Persian language learners, the present study sought to explore their perceptions of group dynamics and personal autonomy, as they make progress to higher levels of L2 knowledge in order to detect possible relations/differences between the two. This piece of research was also aimed at examining the degree to which such L2 learners' perceptions of autonomy go together with their autonomous practices. Of interest to the researchers was also revealing how the learners' perceptions and practices of their group cohesiveness matched those of the teachers who were running such classes.

2. Literature Review

As Meskill and Rangelova (2000) have summarized it, cognitive psychology views efficient learning accomplished through understanding L2 learners and their interpretations of their personal learning experiences. Little (2007) perceives learner autonomy as the optimal learning aim which leads to efficient learning. On the other hand, Zhong (2010) stresses that L2 learners' autonomous learning is governed by their beliefs. Al Ghazali (2010) characterized beliefs as both dynamic and emergent because they evolve according to situation and can change as a result of change in context. Also, in his theory of Reasoned Action, Ajzen (1988) indicated that it was the attitude and beliefs of the students which (in)directly affected their intentions and actions. So, not only do beliefs affect how L2 students learn, they also affect how well they learn (e.g., Balcikanli, 2010; Joshi, 2011). And, as beliefs do not necessarily lead to actions, most L2 researchers agree that a classroom intervention strategy is needed that can affect both L2 learners' beliefs and behaviors. This is the key point to the present study, as we believe working in groups during the class can be one such a strategy. Having set the objective, the following attends to the key issues in research on learner autonomy and group dynamics:

2.1 Learner Autonomy

Generally speaking, the few studies which investigated L2 teachers' opinions about learner autonomy yielded disappointing results. One such study was Thanh Nga (2014), attending to the extent to which Vietnamese teachers understood the concept of autonomy and how they applied it in their teaching practice. She collected data from 188 teachers through two phases of her study, utilizing both quantitative methods (i.e., a researcher-generated survey) and qualitative methods (i.e., interviews, stimulated recall interviews, video observations). Thanh Nga found that the teachers lacked understanding about learner autonomy and, subsequently, there was no evidence of practicing autonomy in their classes.

On the other hand, Thanasoulas (2000) believes that it is not easy for L2 teachers to let L2 learners solve problems for themselves and to change their role from the "purveyor of information to a counselor or manager of learning resources" (p. 2). He considers the shift of responsibility from L2 teachers to L2 learners only achievable as a result of a series of changes to the curriculum towards a more learner-centered kind of learning. Such changes could be initiated, Martinez (2008) suggested, by listening to student-teachers and by integrating learner autonomy into preservice teacher training programs. She believed that listening to student-teachers as L2 learners, and not as future teachers, would help them see things through the eyes of L2 learners and arrive at an inner perspective so they could contribute to that change of paradigm which was prerequisite to learner autonomy. What she recommends is developing a "learning to learn competence" (p. 121) on the part of such L2 teachers, making it possible to keep their teaching/learning approach in line with new findings, as a result of which future L2 teachers would be willing to make use of such findings and, subsequently, reexamine their own subjective perception of teaching and their approach to it.

Likewise, Balçikanli (2010) claimed that L2 students would be able to behave autonomously if, and only if, their teachers created a classroom culture where autonomy was accepted. His claim was based on a study of 112 student-teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Adopting a questionnaire from Camilleri (1997) and later interviewing 20 of the participants, he found that the student-teachers were generally positive toward the adoption of learner autonomy to the extent that it would not interfere with their authority (in issues like making decisions on time and place of the course or the textbooks to be followed). However, there is a general consensus among such L2 researchers that L2 teachers would not become "redundant in the classroom, abdicating their control over what is transpiring in the language learning process" (Thanasoulas, 2000, p. 1). Al Ghazali (2011) suggests that the L2 teacher's support will give L2 learners the impression that a safety net exists.

Examining the bulk of studies on autonomy from L2 students' viewpoint brings us to some shared findings. Balçikanli (2010) advocated learner autonomy on the grounds that it made L2 students more enthusiastic about learning and increased their level of self-esteem and motivation. Of course, he adopted a broad definition for learner autonomy from Holec (1981, p. 3) as "encouraging students to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired.:

Dafei (2007) elicited data from a sample of 129 non-English majors in a teacher college through a questionnaire and interviews. She found a significantly positive correlation between the learners' autonomy and their improved English proficiency. In fact, she was able to show that in so far as there was no difference among the learners in terms of autonomy, no significant difference could be found in their language proficiency. She recommended learner training and strategy training to enhance L2 learners' autonomous thinking, a suggestion in line with Benson's comments (2001) on why the L2 students were passive towards autonomous learning. Benson (2001) mentioned two reasons for such unwillingness: That the L2 students tended to have an authoritarian view of the teacher, and that getting used to a new autonomous classroom took a lot of time and energy on their part.

Talley (2014), in a survey of a group of Taiwanese students in which 112 first-year non-English majors who answered a 47-item questionnaire, found that they considered autonomy as significantly beneficial because of the positive learning environment it would create, but also that this positive attitude entailed development of learning strategies in the students so that they would have an opportunity to control the learning process. It can be concluded so far that the degree to which learner autonomy is cultivated, brought forth, and enriched depends on the learning context. It is time now to attend to the second key issue of this study: group dynamics:

2.2 Group Dynamics

Back in the 1980s, Stevick (1980, p. 4) claimed that "success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom," an idea later supported by work done by other researchers (e.g., Senior, 2002). She had 28 teachers of English, who were all teaching within the communicative framework, answer an open-ended questionnaire and extended interviews with them. She reported that the participants had made the prior assumption that an atmosphere of classroom cohesion was a necessary precondition for the development of linguistic proficiency through oral practice.

Moreover, as Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 69) claimed, "humans have three basic psychological needs that enhance motivation and personal health including autonomy, competence, and a sense of relatedness (cohesion)". This brings us to the issue of cohesion, defined differently by L2 researchers (e.g., Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994) as a sense of belonging or, more recently by Ratzburg (2004), as the degree to which members of the group desire to remain in the group. This closeness and "we feeling" of the group, in Dornyei and Murphey's (2003, p. 62) sense, links the members to one another and to the group itself (Forsyth, 1990), and research has shown strong bonds between a cohesive class and the level of productivity (Clement et al., 1994; Ellis, 1994; Dornyei, 1997, Fraser, 2004).

Such studies have shown that the higher the cohesion grows, the greater its effect on group productivity is. The effect, however, may not always be positive. It was observed that in classes without a goal, cohesion helped L2 students socialize but with little productivity, a conclusion made by Emura (2009) based on observing two actual classes. That is why Dornyei and Murphy (2003, p. 71) stress that "group cohesion should coexist with a strong goal-oriented productivity norm." Actually, what dominates a cohesive group is a set of appropriate norms or rules that are discussed and adopted by the members in order for the group to be constructive and long-lasting. A cohesive class or a bonded class has also been documented to be more motivated, more self-confident, and less anxious (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Colibaba, 2009; Chang, 2010; Thanasoulas, 2002).

In his article, Paydon (2012) provides a model of class motivation showing a hierarchy of classroom features each of which leading to the next one. The model can be summarized as: structure → trust → cohesion → performance → personal growth. What is of interest to our discussion is the stance cohesion takes in the model and its contribution to personal growth. On the one hand, group cohesion is a prerequisite for good class performance. On the other hand, it satisfies an "inherent human need" as Dornyei (2001, p. 8) calls it. No need to say that personal growth entails learner autonomy. This is supported by Heron (2006) whose definition of a successful class group is the one which is simultaneously task-oriented (i.e., cooperating with other group members) and personal-work oriented (i.e., concentrating on individual work).

Regarding this, Calajda (2012) puts emphasis on the role of the teacher in group dynamics, another factor which seems necessary to attend to in this brief review of the topic. Advocating for democratic L2 teachers, he reiterates Dornyei and Malderez (1997) in that it is the teacher who can help L2 students create a positive class atmosphere and become more goal-oriented. In that respect, the teacher acts as a facilitator of group cohesion and a team builder (Matsumoto, 2010). Of course, there are those who see L2 students' roles as crucial as that of the

teacher's (Alfaro & Navarrete, 2010) because not all responsibility should be placed on teacher's shoulders in a modern language classroom. Considering the importance of learner autonomy and group dynamics in the teaching/learning environment and the paucity of data on how these are realized and practiced in the Persian context, the following research questions were formulated and addressed in this study.

1. Do Iranian EFL learners' perceptions and practices of autonomy differ across different years of academic study?

2. Are there any differences between EFL learners' and their teachers' perceptions of group dynamics?

3. Is there any relationship between EFL learners' group dynamics and autonomy?

4. How do EFL learners' perceptions and practices of autonomy and group dynamics vary according to their years of academic study?

3. Method

The current developmental study aimed at eliciting perceptions and practices of L2 participants about their autonomy and group dynamics. Besides, for making comparisons, the data were also collected from the participants' teachers regarding the perceptions they had of their students' autonomy and group dynamics. Details on the participants, the instrument, and the procedure of data collection are presented below:

3.1 Participants

The population addressed in this study comprised adult Persian-speaking undergraduate and graduate L2 learners of English and their university instructors, all in the Iranian academic context. The undergraduate sample included 130 EFL learners, aged between 18 and 23, who were sophomores ($n = 49$), juniors ($n = 40$) and seniors ($n = 41$). The graduate sample was 22 M.A. students of TEFL, aged between 23 and 27. The participants' instructors were 19 Ph.D. holders and Ph.D. candidates of TEFL, aged between 30 and 50. All the participants were studying or teaching at Sheikhbahaee University, Isfahan, Iran. The participants, totaling 171, were from both genders. The student groups were recruited regardless of their level of language proficiency. The reason was that in studies of such nature, the variable that is important and may make a difference is time. The longer a learner is engaged in learning, the more likely he or she feels autonomous (Zhong, 2010). Along the same lines, the longer an L2 learner spends with a particular group of classmates, the more positive the attitude he or she develops with respect to the group (class) cohesiveness (Thanasoulas, 2002). Therefore, the learner groups were selected based on time factor.

3.2 Instrumentation

To collect the participants' level of autonomy and learner group characteristics, a questionnaire adapted from Chan (2007) was used. This questionnaire had three sections. Section A included 10 statements on individual learners' perceptions of their own level of autonomy. The respondents were asked to fill out two columns: beliefs (i.e., responsibility toward a particular deed) and actions (i.e., the extent to which the deed was actually performed). The sample items in the first section were "*I evaluate my own learning and progress,*" "*I stimulate my own interest in learning English,*" and so on. In sections B and C, the questionnaire measured the participants' perceptions of their own group characteristics of cohesiveness and norms, respectively. Regarding the former, nine group cohesiveness statements, such as "*This group is composed of people who fit together*" and "*I know most of my classmates and we all get along very well*" were rated. The latter included 10 group norm statements, such as "*helping my classmates with their school works*" and "*handing in assignments on time.*"

The rationale behind using this questionnaire was the systematic procedure Chan (2007) followed to design the questionnaire and the convincing arguments he posed for developing the individual statements. Thorough review of the relevant literature on autonomy and group processes and classroom observation notes were stated as two resources for the developed statements. To check the suitability of this instrument for the academic context in the present study, the questionnaire was piloted on 16 L2 learners (i.e., four from each target group, 12 undergraduates, and four graduate learners) before being administered to the larger groups of participants. The purpose for implementing the pilot study was to assess the time required to administer the questionnaire, the quality of the instructions, and the quality of the individual statements before they were actually used for research purposes. The results of the pilot study were used to correct the problems in vocabulary and spelling in sections A and C and to revise lack of clarity regarding the instructions in section A. Therefore, all the required modifications and adjustments were made to the adapted questionnaire before it was administered to all the participants. The data collected in the pilot study were also used to measure the reliability estimate of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. It was reported 0.74 by Chan (2007), pointing to an acceptable level of internal consistency. Table 1 shows the internal consistency of the scale, as calculated for each subsection of the questionnaire in the present study:

Table 1. *Internal Consistency Estimate*

	Beliefs	Behaviors	Norms	Cohesiveness
Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient	0.54	0.67	0.77	0.70

3.3 Procedure

Prior to collecting the data, the respondents were informed that participating in this study was completely voluntary and that their responses would be rated and analyzed anonymously. The questionnaire was administered to all five research L2roups at the end of the Fall semester in 2013. The participants filled in the questionnaire within the time limit obtained from the pilot study (15 min) and as they attended their regular and weekly scheduled classes in their university. The elicited responses of each group were, then, classified based on the questionnaire sections (A, B, and C). After that, they were scored using a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*pointing to the least*) to 4 (*indicating the most in the due continuum*). The scale scores were determined by summing the items for each participant. Therefore, the maximum score for each participant's perception of learner autonomy was 40 for each of the two columns (i.e., beliefs and actions) and those of group cohesiveness and norms were 36 and 40, respectively. The collected data were, further, processed on SPSS to investigate the extent of any possible change in the elicited cross-sectional perceptions of the participants across the different research target groups.

4. Results

As to the first research question, the results of the descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score of the participants' autonomous beliefs was consistently higher than that of their autonomous behaviors in each of the four groups of participants (see Table 2):

Table 2 *Descriptive Statistics for Autonomous Beliefs and Behaviors of L2 Learners*

							Percentiles		
		N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	25th	Median	75th
Sophomores	Beliefs	49	23.42	3.64	15.00	30.00	21.00	23.00	26.00
	Behaviors	49	14.42	3.61	10.00	21.00	12.50	16.00	19.00
Juniors	Beliefs	40	22.62	4.39	11.00	30.00	21.00	23.00	25.00
	Behaviors	40	16.45	4.66	6.00	26.00	13.00	17.50	19.00
Seniors	Beliefs	41	22.85	4.40	12.00	30.00	20.50	24.00	26.00
	Behaviors	41	17.19	4.55	11.00	28.00	14.500	19.00	22.00
M.A. Students	Beliefs	22	23.09	3.26	16.00	29.00	21.00	23.00	25.25
	Behaviors	22	19.54	3.90	12.00	27.00	17.00	20.00	22.00

Moreover, the mean scores of the participants' autonomous beliefs remained almost the same across the four groups (ranged between 22.62 and 23.42), whereas the means of their autonomous behaviors increased as the duration of their go-togetherness increased (ranged between 14.42 and 19.54).

Because the data were on the ordinal scale, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to further analyze the observed differences between the participants' autonomous beliefs and behaviors in each of the four groups. This test is used to compare ranks from the same sample at two different times or conditions. It is the nonparametric alternative to the paired samples t test. The results are reported in Table 3:

Table 3. *Differences Between Learners' Autonomous Beliefs and Behaviors in Four Groups*

	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	M.A. Students
Z	-5.25	-5.29	-5.05	-3.16
Asymp. *Sig.* (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.002
r	0.53	0.59	0.55	0.47

As Table 3 shows, there was a significant difference between the participants' beliefs and behaviors about autonomy across the four groups. Indeed, for all the learner groups, autonomous beliefs had a significantly higher rank than their autonomous practices. It should also be mentioned that, for each group, the effect size (r) was large (above 0.14), pointing to a large difference between the two variables (Cohen, 1988).

Regarding the second research question, a Man-Whitney U test was run to see if there was any statistically significant difference between the participants' and their teachers' perceptions of learner group dynamics. This test is the nonparametric alternative to independent samples t test and evaluates whether the ranks of the groups differ significantly. As the data were on an ordinal scale, Man-Whitney U test was the appropriate statistical measure to use. According to the results (see Table 4), there was no significant difference between the sophomores and their instructors in their perceptions of group norms ($U = 97$, $z = -0.76$, $p = 0.44$, $r = 01$) or group cohesiveness ($U = 64$, $z = -1.74$, $p = 0.08$, $r = 0.03$):

Table 4. *Differences Between L2 Learners' and Their Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Group Dynamics*

	Sophomores		Juniors		Seniors		M.A. Students	
	Norms	Cohesiveness	Norms	Cohesiveness	Norms	Cohesiveness	Norms	Cohesiveness
Mann-Whitney U	97.000	64.000	63.000	60.000	100.000	88.000	14.000	15.000
Wilcoxon W	112.000	79.000	883.000	880.000	961.000	949.000	267.000	268.000
Z	-.764	-1.748	-1.867	-1.962	-.088	-.513	-1.595	-1.509
Asymp. *Sig.* (2-tailed)	.445	.080	.062	.050	.930	.608	.111	.131
Exact *Sig.* [2[*] (1-tailed Sig.)]	.467[a]	.084[a]	.064[a]	.051[a]	.945[a]	.631[a]	.128[a]	.151[a]

a. Not corrected for ties.
b. Grouping Variable: Level

Considering the second group (i.e., the junior students and their teachers), the Man-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference between the teachers and learners in their perception of group cohesiveness ($U = 60$, $z = -1.96$, $p = 0.05$, $r = 0.04$). However, no significant difference could be detected between them with respect to group norms ($U = 63$, $z = -1.86$, $p = 0.06$, $r = 0.04$). The Man-Whitney U test, again, revealed no significant difference between the senior students and teachers on their perceptions of group norms ($U = 100$, $z = -0.08$, $p = 0.93$, $r = 0.00$) or cohesiveness ($U = 88$, $z = -0.51$, $p = 0.60$, $r = 0.01$). As for the M.A. students and their instructors, the Man-Whitney U test showed no significant difference among them either on group norms ($U = 14$, $z = -1.59$, $p = 0.11$, $r = 0.00$) or on group cohesiveness ($U = 15$, $z = -1.50$, $p = 0.13$, $r = 0.00$).

To answer the third research question, a Kendall's-tau b correlation coefficient was performed to find the relationship between the participants' autonomy and dynamics in each of the four groups. Again, this coefficient is nonparametric which is used for ordinal data. It is a measure of rank correlation: the similarity of the orderings of the data when ranked by each of the quantities. The obtained results (see Table 5) for the first group revealed no correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.08$, $n = 49$, $p = 0.4$). This was the case for the second group ($r = 0.01$, $n = 40$, $p = 0.8$) and the third group ($r = -0.06$, $n = 41$, $p = 0.5$), as well:

Table 5. *Correlation Between Participants' Group Dynamics and Autonomy*

			Sophomores		Juniors		Seniors		M.A. Students	
			Autonomy	Dynamics	Autonomy	Dynamics	Autonomy	Dynamics	Autonomy	Dynamics
Kendall's-tau b	Autonomy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.084	1.000	.017	1.000	-.066	1.000	.289
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.406	.	.879	.	.557	.	.065
		N	49	49	40	40	41	41	22	22
	Dynamics	Correlation Coefficient	.084	1.000	.017	1.000	-.066	1.000	.289	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.406	.	.879	.	.557	.	.065	.
		N	49	49	40	40	41	41	22	22

In case of the M.A. students, the Kendall's-tau b correlation coefficient revealed a positive correlation between the participants' group dynamics and autonomy. However, it must be pointed out that the correlation was small and, therefore, insignificant ($r = 0.28$, $n = 22$, $p = 0.06$).

The fourth research question was addressed using a Kruskal-Wallis test to track down the changes in the four variables across the different years of academic study. The rational for using Kruskal-Wallis was that it allowed comparison of the scores for three or more groups. This test is the nonparametric alternative to the one-way between groups ANOVA. Kruskal-Wallis converts scores to ranks, and the mean rank for each group is then compared. As the data were ordinal, this test was the appropriate measure to use. The results are reported in Table 6:

Table 6. *Test Results for Observed Changes Across Different Years of Academic Study*

	Beliefs	Behaviors	Norms	Cohesiveness
Chi-Square	.599	13.392	4.727	16.060
df	3	3	3	3
Asymp. *Sig.*	.897	.004	.193	.001

a. Kruskal Wallis Test
b. Grouping Variable: Level

According to Table 6, the results revealed statistically significant differences in autonomous behaviors and group cohesiveness across the different groups (χ^2 = 13.39, p = 0.00 and χ^2 = 16.06, p = 0.00, respectively). However, there were insignificant differences in learner beliefs and group norms across the four groups (χ^2 = 0.59, p = 0.89 and χ^2 = 4.72, p = 0.19, respectively). Regarding the significant differences found in autonomous behaviors and group cohesiveness across the four groups, Table 7 presents the mean rank for each group of the participants:

Table 7. *Mean Ranks for Four Groups of Participants in Autonomous Behaviors and Group Cohesiveness*

Level	*N*	Behaviors Mean Rank	Cohesiveness Mean Rank
Sophomores	49	56.76	80.01
Juniors	40	65.22	92.91
Seniors	41	66.40	98.40
M.A. students	22	96.80	67.11
Total	152		

As reported in Table 7, an inspection of the mean ranks for the groups suggested that the M.A students displayed the most autonomous behavior followed by the junior and senior groups. The sophomore learners showed the least autonomous behavior. Moreover, an inspection of the mean ranks for the groups suggested that the seniors had the strongest impression of their group cohesiveness, followed by the junior and sophomore groups, respectively. The M.A. students were satisfied the least with their group cohesiveness.

5. Discussion

This results of study show that the participants' perceptions of their autonomy were consistently and significantly higher than their practices of autonomy, regardless of the number of years they were involved in undergraduate studies and their level of education. These observed differences between the beliefs and actions of the learners have already been acknowledged in the literature (Ajzen, 1988; Carr & Ponton, 2000; Chang, 2007). According to Ajzen (1988), the reason for this discrepancy lies in the learning environment which prevents the learner from realizing his or her beliefs and perceptions in language classroom settings. Further,

Thanh Nga (2014) recognizes the teacher as the most immediate factor within a learning environment and claims that, on the one hand, L2 teachers generally lack the required understanding of learner autonomy and, on the other hand, there is an association between their perceptions and their actual teaching practices regarding learner autonomy. This situation, consequently, may hinder putting beliefs into practice on the part of L2 learners.

In fact, whereas L2 students should be encouraged to access and use resources in their contexts, to carry their learning, and to develop strategies for taking greater responsibility for their learning (White, 2003), studies show that teachers and student-teachers are not willing to involve their students in what White (2003) calls administrative issues such as deciding on the course book or time and place of classes which do not reside in the realm of students (Balçikanli, 2010; Benson, 2001; Thanasoulas, 2000). On the whole, they agree with the idea that L2 students should be involved in the decision-making process concerning objectives of the course, classroom management, homework tasks, and selection of materials in order to manifest their predispositions for autonomy through their behaviors. Along the same line, Joshi (2011) suggests that the teacher in an autonomous class should be a guide, a cooperator, and an initiator—rather than an authority. This implies that, to develop the responsibility on the part of L2 learners, L2 teachers have vital roles in the learning process of their students.

The reasons why this vital responsibility is not usually fulfilled have so far been dealt with in several research projects (e.g., Balçikanli, 2010; Barillaro, 2011; Lacey, 2007; Smith, 2003). Barillaro (2011) is concerned with institutional pressures where L2 teachers have a strict syllabus to follow and deadlines to meet which makes the development of learner autonomy a very daunting task. Lacey (2007) claims that L2 teachers are not usually willing to bring more learner autonomy into the classroom 'due to the cultural stereotypes they have of their students' (p. 17). He further suggests that L2 teachers could be afraid of handing over some responsibility to their learners for fear of losing control, especially if they have had control of the classroom for most of their teaching lives. In other words, an authoritarian role, together with highly structured tasks, appears to many L2 teachers as safer and more efficient than leaving L2 students on their own devices (Dornyei & Malderez, 1997). Finally, Smith (2003) believes that L2 teachers and students coming from non-Western cultures could have reservations as they may see learner autonomy as a Western concept not suitable to their culture or educational system, resulting in little evidence of L2 learners' practicing of learner autonomy as compared to what they perceive as their own learner autonomy. This line of discussion can be generalized to include the situation in Iran where the learners face the same features: authoritative instructors, inflexible time tables and syllabi, and traditional

classrooms. Therefore, it would not be far from expectation that the Iranian learners' autonomous behaviors lag behind their beliefs.

Regarding the second research question, the results pointed to the insignificant differences between the participants' perceptions about their own group dynamics and their teachers' perceptions of students' group dynamics in all the four groups. This vicinity of L2 teachers and students' perceptions is highly coveted in L2 pedagogy (e.g., Jean & Simard, 2011; Ruescha, Bown, & Deweya, 2012), the lack of which may potentially be the source of perceptual mismatches (Gabilon, 2012; Horwitz, 1988; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; McCargar, 1993) and result in learner dissatisfaction and resistance such as unwillingness to participate in classroom activities (Bloom, 2007; Canagarajah, 1993; Hawkey, 2006; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1998, 2001). What we found in the current study runs counter to the L2 teaching literature which provides us with abundant empirical evidence on the existence of mismatches between learner and teacher beliefs (Brown, 2009; Jean & Simard, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Ruescha, Bown, & Deweya, 2012). This is a fortunate finding which can possibly prevent student dissatisfaction and promote in-class cooperation. If we can hope that the student-teacher distance is diminishing in our country at the present time, new gates would open to reforming the educational process as it goes on inside classrooms. If more trust can be cultivated between the two parties involved, trends in education can then take the place of the old ones.

What concerned the third research question was the covariation between L2 learners' autonomy and group dynamics. The results indicated no significant correlation between the two across the four groups, which was more or less in line with Chang (2007) who found a very weak correlation between the L2 learners' autonomy and their group dynamics that "was not strong enough to reach any definite conclusion" (p. 330). This finding is unexpected, however, considering the pivotal role that group cohesiveness has on L2 learners' personal growth and, as a result, their autonomous learning.

The last research question dealt with L2 learners' cross-sectional perceptions and behaviors in order to examine the role of their length of go-togetherness in the changes observed the across different groups. The results revealed significant changes across the groups in their autonomous behaviors and group cohesiveness and not in their autonomous beliefs and group norms. To explain the observed changes in L2 learners' autonomous behavior, we should refer to the results of the first research question revealing that there were significant differences between the participants' autonomous beliefs and behavior in each of the four groups. Besides, referring to the related descriptive statistics (see Table 2), it was shown that whereas the participants' autonomous beliefs were almost high even in the sophomore group with just one year of academic study, their autonomous

behavior was low (*M*: 14.4) in the same group, but gradually improved in the coming years (*M*: 19.54). This significant improvement in autonomous behaviors can be accounted for by the positive correlation between L2 learners' autonomy and their improved English proficiency documented in the literature (Dafei, 2007). In fact, learner training and strategy training are what the participants in this study might have benefited from during their academic studies to enhance their actual practice of learner autonomy.

However, in spite of the observed progression across the groups in learner autonomy, the participants' overall unwillingness toward autonomy was quite noticeable in the results of the descriptive statistics (see Table 2) and can be explained by Benson's (2001) comments on such passive behaviors toward autonomy. He claims that L2 students have already developed an authoritarian view of the teacher before coming to language classes and believe that getting used to a new autonomous classroom requires them to take a lot of time and energy. Regarding the two variables studied under group dynamics, significant changes were observed in group cohesiveness—and not in group norms. This may be due to the fact that as the number of years of go-togetherness increases, L2 students' shared educational objectives may be more negotiated, thereby the areas of commonality increasingly emerge. This may result in the strengthening of their socialization (Emura, 2009) which, in turn, gives rise to their cohesiveness. The enhancement of group cohesiveness, however, is not always for the better (Emura, 2009), as it may jeopardize productivity if "not coexisted with a strong goal-oriented productivity norm" (Dornyei & Murphy, 2003, p. 71). But if the above condition is met, group cohesiveness satisfies an "inherent human need," as Dornyei (2001, p. 8) calls it. No need to say that this personal growth entails learner autonomy. In this case, there can be a successful class group which is task-oriented, that is, cooperating with other class members and personal-work oriented, that is, focusing on their own individual work (Heron, 2006).

As to group norms, the insignificant change across the four groups can be addressed by the current understanding that the formation of group norms is admittedly a long-term endeavor and inherently requires a longitudinal investigation if its genuine and practical enhancement is to be delved into. Thus, the development of group norms takes place over time and may not be amenable to such a cross-sectional study, leading the researchers in this study to practice care and caution in generalizing the obtained results and admit the urgent need for further investigations of this variable.

All in all, the findings recognize a need for a systematic approach in teacher education, as suggested by Camilleri (1999) following Dornyei and Malderez (1997) who challenge the traditional authoritarian teacher role from the

perspective of group dynamics and believe that such a role does not allow "for the group to structure itself organically, nor for the members to share increasing responsibility, and thus it is an obstacle to group development" (pp. 75-76). In contrast, they argue for a democratic teacher role that encourages L2 students to share their thoughts and opinions. Such a role can guarantee a sense of security for L2 students when they want to have their own voice in classroom community, giving rise to the establishment of good rapport in classroom setting. Achieving this democratic role is, unquestionably, a daunting task and, according to Barillaro (2011), needs preparation and support. He further suggests that such preparation can come through "in-service teacher workshops or idea-exchange sessions" (p. 16) and through the institution as a support structure which allows for "greater flexibility in teaching and offers an avenue where teachers can receive guidance in how to promote learner autonomy" (p. 16).

6. Conclusion

Overall, what we found was that the results obtained using a questionnaire for the Iranian B.A. and M.A. EFL learners, with different years of academic study, were compatible with other studies (Carr & Ponton, 2000; Chang, 2007). The idea is that there appear to be large differences between L2 students' beliefs and actions. Balçikanli (2010) and Thanh Nga (2014) believe that it may be due to the most immediate factor in the learning environment, that is, the teacher. Further, the findings point to a fortunate reality in the Iranian academic context, and that is the vicinity of the L2 learners' and their teachers' perceptions regarding learner autonomy, highly welcomed in L2 teaching contexts (Ruescha, Bown, & Deweya, 2012). Furthermore, there seemed to be no correlation between the participants' autonomy and their group dynamics which is in line with the literature (Chang, 2007). Finally, a significant improvement was observed at the different cross-sections in terms of the participants' autonomous actions and group dynamics and not in terms of autonomous beliefs and group norms, which is supported by the present understanding of the variables (Emura, 2009).

Generally speaking, the findings point to a need for some modification in teacher education (Camilleri, 1999) toward developing a democratic teacher role in L2 teaching programs in a way that promotes group processes in classrooms. As Hadfield (1992) claimed, "successful group dynamics is a vital element in the teaching/learning process" (p. 10). This may lend support to Clement et al. (1994) who suggest "the tasks, the teacher, and the learner group are perceived as aspects of classroom reality, significantly affecting student L2 learning behavior" (p. 440). This study adds to the body of literature by casting light on the importance of group dynamics and learner autonomy in L2 learning environments and verifies that such variables deserve more attention in language classrooms. Definitely, more research

studies need to be conducted to explore the covariation between group processes and autonomous behaviors in different educational settings if we are to have enriched insights about the way these variables work in classrooms with such a recognized complexity.

Whereas the present study was an attempt to be an improvement over previous studies in several ways and illuminated understanding of the importance of the variables under study in L2 learning, it does not aim to generalize the results. The first reason was the sample size which makes the results not generalizable to all Iranian EFL students. With a larger and more representative sample, the results would have been more accurate. The next limitation was lack of a reliable measure of learner autonomy and group processes. Carr and Ponton's (2000) example shows that if somebody shows autonomous behavior, we cannot be sure that this person firmly believes in it. Similarly, Chang (2007) claims that having autonomous beliefs does not always result in actions for various reasons. She argues that "the goal is to use autonomous beliefs and actual autonomous behaviors in tandem to examine individual learner's level of autonomy to provide a way to fill in more of the complex puzzle in the realm of learner autonomy" (p. 326). The third limitation was the matter of time which might have reduced the effectiveness of the study. Successful mastering of group processes and learner autonomy requires a long-time practice, trial and error, and instructors' guidance. The quantitative nature of this study is considered as another limitation. Think-aloud protocols can be used by L2 researchers to examine what happens in L2 learners' cognition and metacognition when thinking about their own autonomy and group dynamics.

Thus, even though the findings are limited to the aspect of learner autonomy and group dynamics from this limited local context, we hope they provide some possible research directions for future studies.

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