Iraqi EFL Preparatory School students' Perception about Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract

Different learning styles and preferences are taken into account by student-centered teaching methodologies. These methods stress the value of individualized learning activities that may be customized to meet each student's requirements and interests. SDL has been used in this paradigm especially in language teaching. This research examines the attitudes of EFL fifth preparing students in Iraqi towards self-directed learning. They were randomly identified and 100 grade 5 preparatory school students were chosen to sample in the study in the academic year 2023-2024. The questionnaire used in the study is a modified version of the Shen et al. (2014) to identify their opinions. The results show that this group of students are motivated and tough and wants to study. They can assess their learning objectives, determine their educational requirements and compare new material with their experiences. They also employ powerful strategies and keep track of their progress and demonstrate that they know their advantages and disadvantages. Also, the ingenuity of the youngsters in finding education materials indicates the significance of SDL in language learning and their potential to become effective learners.

1. Introduction

The manner in which information is collected and utilized has greatly differed over the past years owing to the reality that information is currently available freely across numerous sources. This has challenged the assumption that information is unchanging and therefore cannot change, as well as the assumption that authorities are the only ones who know the right and complete information. Also, the traditional

learning paradigm that placed a lot of stress on memorization of material in small portions has been substituted by a problem-focused approach. This is a contemporary form of thinking, according to Alemayehu, L., & Chen, H.-L. (2023), which centers on conceptual knowledge, integration and deeper knowledge of information.

As our knowledge of information and learning has grown, memorization has become less significant and knowing how to learn has become more crucial. Mastering this ability enables people to independently manage their education, use newly acquired knowledge in a range of contexts, overcome obstacles, and display qualities like adaptability, confidence, and a desire to study. They are adept at using a range of learning strategies and are conscious of their learning preferences, interests, and abilities (Hofmann, 2008).

In today's competitive world, the education system has to prioritize enabling individuals to become more knowledgeable and take charge of their own education. Developing pupils who take charge of their education and want lifelong, continuous learning is the aim. Self-learning is the ability of an individual to effectively manage their time and knowledge, respond to their learning needs, and overcome challenges. This process includes making informed decisions about educational options. One important strategy to help with this is self-directed learning, which empowers students to take control of their educational journey. (Alfin, 2019).

According to Ayu, M. (2020), self-directed learning has been successfully applied in elementary and secondary educational settings. There are several key components to this method. Giving students greater autonomy and responsibility to select their own study methods is the first step in this process. Second, SDL is seen as a continuous quality that occurs to varying degrees in all individuals and in all learning environments. It is vital to keep in mind that SDL doesn't always mean studying by yourself or without other people.

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

The majority of students, according to the literature review, rely heavily on their instructors or professors, which some scholars attribute to teacher-centered education

practices. With these approaches, students mostly play a passive role in their education and have few opportunities to actively participate. According to others, students may not be conscious of their ability to learn independently.

The issue of preparatory school students' poor understanding of self-directed learning and its impact on their academics and personal growth is addressed in this study. Even while self-directed learning is increasingly managed as a crucial skill for both academic success and lifetime learning, there isn't many researches on how preparatory school students perceive and experience it. Understanding their opinions is necessary to create effective educational strategies and interventions that fit their needs and preferences.

1.2 Aim

Finding out how Iraqi EFL fifth-prep school students perceive self-directed learning is the aim of the research. According to the hypothesis, there is little variation in how people view self-directed learning.

1.3. Definition of Basic Terms

To maintain uniformity and clarity throughout the research, the next terminology is defined both theoretically and practically.

1.3.1. Definition of SDL

Self-directed learning is a teaching approach in which students are in responsibility of their own education. Those who actively engage in and manage their own learning are known as self-directed learners. These individuals are capable of selecting appropriate learning strategies, utilizing relevant resources, and setting realistic goals in order to accomplish their objectives (Bosch, 2017).

1.3.2. Students' Perception

Perception means the concepts, attitudes, experience, and values which influence how pupils understand and perceive certain subjects. It contains their personal opinions and evaluations on these concepts. Zulfikar (2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-directed learning

Douglass, C., & Morris, S. R. (2014) goes on to describe SDL as any self-initiated effort to enhance knowledge, skills, achievements, or personal development using a range of methods in a range of contexts and at any time. This point of view says that SDL strongly emphasizes pupils actively engaging in challenging assignments and developing the skills and knowledge required to overcome those challenges.

Van Gelderen (2010) stated self-directed learning as a self-motivated process that incorporates a variety of elements to enhance learning. This point of view holds that self-motivation is the cornerstone of self-directed learning, getting students to select their learning objectives and evaluate their own progress. Students may set goals, stay motivated, and assess their own development. Students may study at anytime, anyplace, and at any stage of life since they get the freedom to select, prioritize, and organize their educational activities.

Self-directed learning takes into account people's physical and mental preparedness to be in control of their own education. It encourages students to actively supervise and manage their coursework, choosing and putting into practice the instructional methods that best suit their needs. According to Alfian (2019), this approach is predicated on the notion that students are ultimately responsible for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their educational experiences.

2.2 Process of Self-directed learning

According to Morris, T. H. (2019), self-directed learning is a method that attempts to provide students the resources they require in order to manage their own education. It consists of helping students define their learning goals, find relevant resources, use effective study strategies and evaluate their development. Similarly, Sefton-Green (2015) stresses the significance of intrinsic motivation and self-teaching in his definition of SDL in terms of autodidactism.

Self-directed learning refers to a learner-centered approach "that emphasizes how people take charge of and control their own learning, as opposed to following prescribed processes to reach some goals," claim Song and Hill (2007). Furthermore, the importance of ownership by the learner and self-monitoring in self-directed learning is pointed out by scholars such as Brockett and Hiemstra (2018), They point out important aspects of the SDL process, as:

1. Ownership of Learning: Students are in charge of planning and directing their educational journeys.
2. Self-Monitoring: Constant introspection and modification to enhance learning methods and results
3. Flexibility: The ability to adjust to different situations and educational requirements.
4. Autonomy: Making decisions about learning objectives and strategies on one's own.

Panadero, E., Jonsson, A., & Botella, J. (2017) theoretical framework of transformational learning suggests that self-directedness is a central component of the liberating process of perception shift. According to this concept, the idea of self-directed learning is the basis of the concept of andragogy and Mezirow describes it as an organized and ongoing process of helping individuals to learn. This is meant to help pupils become more autonomous and self-directed learners, empowering people to be in charge of their own education and adapt appropriately to new situations.

It is essential to help students become more self-directed, and personally responsible in their education. Zhu, M., & Bonk, C. J. (2019) reveal that adults can employ self-directed learning to set objectives, consider alternatives, select viable plans and critically analyze their advancement. This reflective process can help students to keep track of their progress and make wise decisions to realize their goals.

2.3 personality characteristic of Self-directed learning

SDL has been studied from a psychological perspective. This viewpoint highlights that people with a variety of difficulties and personality types can benefit

from self-directed learning. Zhu, M., & Doo, M. Y. (2022) asserts that understanding personality traits is essential to understanding self-directed learning because psychological traits and personality traits often transfer across various learning contexts. Students must exhibit important personal qualities including initiative, self-efficacy, and intrinsic drive in order to be self-directed. Along with identifying their individual learning requirements, they also need to establish specific learning goals, create efficient strategies to reach these goals, assess the learning process, and be ready to take on new challenges. Buana, N. R., & Miftachudin. (2021).

Additionally, students must learn to discern between supporting information and main themes. Self-directed learning, as defined by Teh, W. (2021)"an approach where learners are motivated to assume personal responsibility and collaborative control of the cognitive (self-monitoring) and contextual (self-management) processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes." This emphasizes how crucial both individual and group efforts are to overseeing and assessing the learning process.

Hiemstra (2018) asserts that any adult may develop into a self-directed learner. This implies that people have different levels of personality characteristics related to self-directed learning, from very low to very high. However, as people age, these personality traits become more noticeable, usually showing up more clearly in late adolescence.

2.4 Factors affecting self-directed learning

Numerous internal and environmental factors can affect self-directed learning (Aruan, 2013).

Aruan (2013) asserts that internal elements that impact self-directed learning come from within the person, such as innate characteristics that are present from birth and serve as the foundation for further development. Important internal factors include learning styles, education, gender, emotion, health, talent, and cognitive capacity. These factors have a big impact on how well a student can participate in and gain from self-directed learning. *Gender,* disparities between male and female may show up in a

number of areas related to education, such as academic achievement women are frequently praised for their steady academic achievement. Their total academic achievement can be attributed to their outstanding language skills. Intellectual abilities research shows that women often do better than males on specific intellectual tests, indicating variations in cognitive abilities and talents. *Learning, Methods* In order for a student to succeed academically, he or she must recognize and use study techniques that suit their unique learning styles. Students that participate in self-directed learning are better able to comprehend ideas, identify areas in which they need to improve, and create efficient methods for learning and implementing what they have learned (Aruan, 2013). *Mood and Health,* it is thought that students' emotional and physical well-being affect their ability to learn on their own. A student's mood may have a big impact on how motivated they are to learn on their own; happier moods tend to make students more motivated and prepared to take charge of their education (Aruan, 2013).

Intelligence, self-directed learners are superior at managing their behavior in both cognitive (applying, analyzing, synthesizing, assessing, and knowing) and emotional (accepting, reacting, respecting, adapting, and embracing personal responsibility) domains of conduct. Autonomous behavior is also linked to a skeptical mindset toward external authority. These self-sufficient students may engage in class and make decisions without external influence. Accordingly, intelligence has a big influence on how people learn to be independent (Aruan, 2013). *Education* students should be provided the resources they need to recognize and realize their full potential as well as encouragement to act independently. This calls for providing pupils with a range of experiences that foster the growth of ideas, values, generalizations, initiative, intellect, creativity, emotions, and other critical attributes. People with greater levels of education tend to be more self-assured since they are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Aruan, 2013).

Environmental factors an external component is something that originates outside of the individual, often known as an environmental element. These elements have a big impact on personality development, both favorably and unfavorably. Supportive family and community have a big impact on a person's personality, especially when it comes to ideas and lifestyle choices. Fostering qualities like

independence and the ability to study on one's own is part of this. Aruan (2013). *Study Time*, among the most crucial elements of preparing for independent learning is setting aside specific time for individual study. Letting students identify their own learning requirements is one way to promote learning autonomy. For students to successfully implement autonomous study and meet their educational objectives, effective time management is crucial. *Learning Environment,* Classrooms, lecture halls, discussion rooms, campus areas, etc. can be considered LE. In order to increase students' self-learning awareness and desire to study, we must provide students with a warm and comfortable study environment. *Learning Motivation*, One of the key elements that encourages students to actively engage in the learning process, concentrate on their objectives, and finish their study assignments is learning motivation. It comes under two types: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when the learner internally motivates himself to understand the importance of self-study and to engage in it out of his own interest. Extrinsic motivation, on the contrary, is affected by external factors such as examinations, marks, and others' incentives. Both types help promote involvement and commitment to learning. *Parental Style*, the home is the most significant and foundational environment for a child's education as parents have a significant influence on how their children are formed, guided, and taught. Parenting styles have a significant impact on a child's development and growth. Good parenting techniques that demonstrate accountability and concern may provide kids the support and direction they need to advance both personally and academically.

2.5 Components of self-directed learning

Several elements of self-directed learning were found by Benson and White (2016) and are explained below.

Needs Analysis through self-report Students studying analysis are urged to examine their own learning priorities and needs. Thinking back on their strengths and weaknesses can help students identify specific areas of language that need improvement. This helps them to better focus their learning and achieve their goals. Goals and Objectives students select broad goals that relate to more general learning goals. These goals are then divided into specific, measurable objectives that serve as

stepping stones in the process of achieving their ultimate goals. This process helps to create a systematic and focused approach to learning. Materials Selections students take an active role in selecting educational materials that suit their specific needs and goals. Because of the flexibility, accessibility, and applicability of these materials, they can be accessed at any time, by any student in any location. Learner Strategies students are accountable for discovering and using effective study and practice methods. These techniques are tailored to suit their unique learning needs and help them enhance their understanding and knowledge of the subject. Self-assessment demands that pupils evaluate their own learning outcomes by considering their achievements and areas in which they still need to improve. This process is used to identify what must be changed and prepared for the following steps of the educational journey. Self-Reflection (SR) SR is an essential part of SDL, as it allows students to critically consider their educational experiences. Students may learn a lot about their strengths and shortcomings and modify their approach by analyzing the tactics that worked and pinpointing areas that need work. In the end, this will assist them in enhancing their learning results.

2.6 The Teacher`s Role in Facilitating Self-Directed Learning

In SDL, teachers are essential in promoting learner autonomy. Deliberate modifications to reflective practices and classroom activities can result in significant progress. Karlsson et al. (2007) state that there are several types of preparation needed to get pupils ready for autonomous learning. Methodological Preparation giving pupils the abilities and techniques required for successful self-directed learning. Psychological Preparation developing self-assurance, drive, and an attitude that supports taking charge of one's education. Social/Political Preparation promoting teamwork, critical thinking, and awareness of the larger social context of education. During their educational travels, students benefit from this kind of preparation as they move toward increasing independence and responsibility.

Autonomy, according to Merhi, M. I. (2015), is the capacity of students to make important methodological choices during their educational journey. This include establishing learning objectives, choosing materials, keeping an eye on the learning

process, and assessing results. This is furthered by Benson (2001), who highlights the necessity for students to have authority over the subject matter they study choosing what they want to learn and how. This gives autonomy a social and political component, implying that educators who want to promote student freedom must take these larger factors into account in addition to technical ones. The following will be the main duties of the instructor. Transitioning from Information Provider to Learning Facilitator: Teachers no longer only impart knowledge; they now guide and steer the whole learning process, empowering learners to take responsibility for their education. Determining and Meeting Student requirements: In order to successfully support their learning journey, teachers must determine the unique requirements of their students and respond to them in a timely and appropriate manner. Providing Resources: To support students' self-directed efforts and enable autonomous learning, it is crucial to make sure that enough and pertinent resources are available.

2.7 Self -Directed Learning Models

SDL is generally categorized using three primary model types. *Linear Models* according to these models, learning occurs in a methodical and systematic manner via several phases, including goal-setting, planning, resource selection, execution, and assessment. Every step logically builds on the one before it (Knowles and Tough, 1979). *Interactive Models* the dynamic and interrelated character of the learning process is emphasized by interactive models. They acknowledge that students may go back to previous phases, modify their approaches, and constantly improve their objectives and techniques in response to criticism and introspection (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018). Instructional Models the primary focus of instructional models is on the role that teachers play in encouraging self-directed learning. They offer structures for instructional methods and exercises that help students become more independent, such modeling, assisting, and scaffolding self-directed learning behaviors (Deschacht, N., & Goeman, K. (2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 The Population and Sampling

The study's population consists of Iraqi fifth-grade EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students enrolled in Al-Diwaniya Governorate for the 2023–2024 academic year. To reflect the larger group of fifth preparatory students, a sample of 100 students was chosen randomly from the schools.

3.2 Instrument

Students' opinions of self-directed learning are assessed using a modified version of the Shen et al. (2014) questionnaire. Ten items on a five-point Likert scale, from Never (1) to Always (5), make up the questionnaire. In fifteen minutes, students can finish the survey.

1. RESULTS

The study's results were derived from an analysis of the students' questionnaire responses. The primary statistical measures used to evaluate replies based on the selected choices are the standard deviation and the arithmetic mean. The standard for evaluating students' awareness, motivation, and comprehension of self-directed learning is a mean score of three. An indicator is said to be highly viewed when its mean score is three or above, and negatively regarded when it is less than three. To give a precise image of how students perceive SDL, the indicators are organized in decreasing order based on their mean ratings. This method highlights the subjects in which students demonstrate the greatest and least amount of expertise. As seen in table (1), the results indicate that children exhibit a high degree of SDL awareness, motivation, and comprehension.

Table (1)

Student Responses to the SDL Questionnaire: Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and Ranks

Item No.	Items	N	M.	Std. Dv.
3	**Responding to questions is something I like doing.**		4.10	1.011

4	Despite the challenges I confront, I will not stop learning.		4.02	1.124
2	My accomplishments and shortcomings motivate me to keep learning.		3.75	0.945
7	I can connect recently learned material to personal experiences.		3.85	0.826
10	I am able to assess my own learning results.		3.55	0.978
1	I am aware of what I need to learn.	100	3.64	0.941
8	I am conscious of both the advantages and disadvantages of my learning.		3.58	1.286
5	I am aware of the learning techniques that will help me achieve my objectives.		3.57	1.100
9	I am able to track my progress in learning.		3.48	1.241
6	I am able to locate educational resources.		3.26	1.191

The sample mean (3.609) was compared to a theoretical mean of 22 with a standard deviation of 0.30782 using a one-sample t-test. The null hypothesis suggested no significant change in attitudes toward self-directed learning, despite the alternative hypothesis suggesting a significant difference.

With 99 degrees of freedom, a t-value of 12.035 was computed. A statistically significant difference between the sample mean and the predicted mean was shown by a p-value of less than 0.002. As a result, the null hypothesis was disproved, demonstrating that opinions on self-directed learning varied greatly. Table (2) displays the results.

Table (2)

The research sample's mean scores, standard deviations, T-values, and p-value

Sample Mean	Theoretical Mean	Std. Deviation	N	DF	t-value	p-value
3.609	22	0.30782	100	99	12.035	0.002

V. Results Discussion

Investigating how Iraqi EFL preparatory school students see self-directed learning a crucial aspect of language training is the aim of this study. The study focuses on people's awareness and how they perceive and use self-directed learning., motivation, and understanding of this learning style. The findings indicate that:

1. Most students showed a strong sense of interest and enthusiasm for learning, and they generally had a positive attitude about asking questions.
2. The findings suggest that students are resilient and determined to continue their studies in spite of obstacles or disappointments.
3. Students view both their achievements and setbacks as motivating factors that encourage them to work toward learning goals and ongoing development.
4. By effectively relating freshly learned content to their own experiences, students showed that they could form insightful connections that improved their comprehension of the subject matter.
5. According to the replies, students have a high level of self-awareness and the capacity to evaluate and analyze their own learning outcomes in order to track their development and achievements.
6. The majority of students demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and the capacity to pinpoint areas that need development by having a comprehensive knowledge of their learning objectives.
7. Pupils showed an understanding of their unique learning preferences and styles, which might guide their method of instruction and enhance their entire educational experience. Additionally, they showed that they understood their learning strengths and weaknesses.

8. The students' answers revealed a thorough comprehension of the learning techniques supporting their specific objectives, indicating their capacity to modify their method of instruction in order to produce the intended results.

9. Students demonstrated a proactive attitude to self-evaluation and self-regulation that improves their overall academic performance by successfully tracking their learning progress.

10. Most students demonstrated proficiency in locating and applying educational resources, demonstrating their ingenuity and capacity to obtain materials that complement their learning goals and requirements.

11. Finally, teachers or policymakers can take these findings in consideration when start designing their plans of teaching or when designing curricula.

5. Conclusions

The study results confirm the idea that the students of the Iraqi EFL preparation school are positive about SDL. The overwhelming most of students displayed a wish to learn, perseverance in the face of adversity and encouragement by both success and failure. They had the skills of evaluating their learning outcomes, recognizing their own learning requirements, and connecting the new information with the old one. Moreover, students also showed high levels of skill in assessing their own learning development, in knowing the correct learning strategies, and in possessing a good perception of their learning strengths and weaknesses. They also innovated in the process of discovering, obtaining, and utilizing learning resources that would enable them to accomplish their academic objectives.

These results demonstrate the value of self-directed learning as a language acquisition strategy and the possibility that Iraqi EFL preparatory school students might develop the abilities necessary for lifetime learning. This pro-active attitude of the students to the learning process, which is reflected by their skills to establish objectives and evaluate their own development and use resources, means that they can become more independent and self-regulated learners. Based on this, establishing an atmosphere that supports SDL can be a key factor in shaping the performance and personal growth of students. Thus, our results support the possibility that the Iraqi EFL

preparatory school students will be able to become effective SDL who would be able to cope with the requirements of both the academic and the real-life circumstances.

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إدراك طلاب المدارس الإعدادية العراقية لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية حول التعلم الذاتي

Abstract in Arabic

الأساليب التعليمية التي تعطي الأولوية للطلاب تدرك تنوع أساليب واهتمامات المتعلمين. تسعى هذه الأساليب إلى تسليط الضوء على أهمية الأنشطة التعليمية الشخصية التي تتناسب مع احتياجات واهتمامات الأفراد. في هذا الإطار، ظهرت التعلم الذاتي كاستراتيجية مستخدمة على نطاق واسع، لا سيما في تعليم اللغات. تستكشف هذه الدراسة تصورات طلاب الصف الخامس الإعدادي العراقيين بشأن التعلم الذاتي. تتضمن الدراسة عينة عشوائية من 100 طالب من طلاب الصف الخامس الإعدادي خلال العام الدراسي 2023-2024. لتقييم آرائهم، استخدمت الدراسة استبيانًا معدلاً من دراسة شن وآخرين.(2014)
تشير النتائج إلى أن هؤلاء الطلاب يظهرون تحفيزًا عالياً ومرونة، مع ميل قوي لاكتساب المعرفة. يظهرون القدرة على ربط المفاهيم الجديدة بتجاربهم الشخصية، وتقييم نتائج تعلمهم، والتعرف على احتياجاتهم التعليمية. علاوة على ذلك، يظهرون وعيًا بنقاط قوتهم وضعفهم، ويطبقون استراتيجيات فعالة، ويراقبون تقدمهم. كما يظهر الطلاب براعة في الوصول إلى المواد التعليمية، مما يبرز الدور الحاسم للتعلم الذاتي في اكتساب اللغة وقدرتهم على التطور كمتعلمين أكفاء.