

Self-Regulated Learning, Goal-Oriented Learning, and Academic Writing Performance of Undergraduate Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study is grounded in three theories of self-regulation, goal-orientation, and the act of writing. The authors collected the data from 48 Iranian EFL B.A. level students majoring in English in different universities in Iran. The instruments consisted of two questionnaires: a goal-oriented questionnaire developed and employed by the authors, and the *Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)* developed by Pintrich (1991), along with three writing tasks. The findings revealed no significant relationship between self-regulated learning and writing performance. However, a negative relationship was found between students' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and their writing performance. The relationship between students' resource management strategies and their writing performance was not significant. Finally, there was no significant relationship between goal-oriented learning and writing performance. The findings of the current study are discussed in relation to the previous literature and some implications of the study are suggested.

Key words: self-regulated learning; achievement goal-orientation; writing performance; Iranian Learners; EFL

Introduction

Self-regulated and goal-oriented learning have become important topics in educational psychology because of their influence on learners' achievement. Language educators have asked why some students progress more in the same class with the same instruction than other students. One variable that may play a role in

learners' achievement is personality types, which have been already investigated. On the other hand, researchers have come to accept that learners' different engagements in learning activities might lead to different academic performance in a given context (Lemose, 1999). Writing is a task that requires individuals to activate several skills simultaneously. As Chastain (1988) noted, writing lends itself most naturally to individual practice. In other words, no two learners are the same and their different learning backgrounds and personalities will influence how they approach writing tasks in a second language. It appears that second language writers have great difficulties in expressing themselves in English (see Hyland, 2003). The question raised is why language learners experience so many difficulties in writing. One answer might lie in the area of individual differences encompassing linguistic, social, and psychological factors, all of which play a role in a learner's approach to writing. As Ehrman and Oxford (1995) suggest, research aiming at probing psychological factors are promising in that they offer "an accessible conceptual framework for language trainers and learners.... greater self-regulation and better learning performance" (p. 324).

Accordingly, self-regulated learning and goal-orientation have the potential to consider individual differences in a foreign language context (see Mirhassani, Akbari & Dehghan, 2007). Of specific concern to this study is the investigation of these two new major psychological concepts that may result in better achievement in second language writing: firstly, the relationship between learners' goal-oriented learning and their writing achievement, and secondly, the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-regulated learning and their writing achievement, and finally the relationship between goal-orientated and self-regulated learning.

Self-regulated Learning

The term self-regulation, as Paris and Paris (2001) put it, refers to "the autonomy and control through which individuals monitor, direct and regulate actions toward goals of information acquisition, expanding expertise and self-improvement" (p. 87). Many models for self-regulated learning have been developed (Winne & Hadwin, 1998; Zeidner, Boekaerts & Pintrich, 2000). Most of these assume that self-regulating one's learning activities is performed in cycles of three or four stages. Zimmerman (1998 a), for instance, proposed a four-stage model of self-regulation:

1. self-evaluation and monitoring
2. goal setting and strategic planning
3. strategy implementation and monitoring
4. strategic outcome monitoring

Zimmerman (2000) also put forward a social cognitive model, which is richer in process, based on which self-regulation is achieved in cycles consisting of:

1. forethought
2. performance or volitional control
3. self-reflection

Self-regulated learners are cognizant of their academic strengths, weaknesses, and strategies they employ to help them master the material. They set mastery-oriented goals, believe that ability is changeable, that is, incremental, focused on learning a task, improvement, and increased understanding (Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Midgley & Urdan, 2001). According to Pintrich (2000), students who assumed more mastery goal orientation have the highest levels of self-efficacy, effort, and persistence. Du Bois and Staley (1997) asserted that self-regulated learners need more than learning a set of strategies; hence, they change their beliefs about the nature of learning.

Achievement Goal orientation

One variable that may play a role in a student's use of self-regulated learning strategies is goal orientation. Goal orientation as a multifaceted, individual-specific variable is defined as "an integrated pattern of beliefs, attributions, and affect that produces the intentions of behavior...represented by different ways of approaching, engaging in, and responding to achievement-type activities" (Ames, 1992, p. 261). It might be interpreted that achievement goals are tantamount to the individuals' perceptions about the purposes of their achievement behaviors. They indicate the meaning that individuals assign to an achievement situation, providing a cognitive structure for organizing how individuals define success and failure, their affective reactions, and their subsequent behaviors (Urdan, 1997). Therefore, understanding students' achievement goals opens a horizon into the psychological processes through which achievement behavior is created, and it can motivate educators to develop suitable classroom practices to facilitate learning.

Many frameworks for achievement goal orientation have been developed (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984; Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Vande Walle, 1997). The current and most widely accepted conceptualization of goal orientation is offered by Elliot and McGregor (2001), who discussed it in terms of competence goals and competence evaluation. They suggested a four-dimensional approach to goal orientation in which mastery goal orientation is further differentiated into two dimensions: mastery approach and mastery avoidance. Furthermore, Elliot and Thrash (2001) have proposed a 2 × 2 conceptualization comprising mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals as follows:

1. *Mastery-approach goal orientation* refers to making efforts to improve one's skills and abilities, to advance one's learning, to understand material, or to master a task. Individuals with mastery goal orientation believe that ability is changeable (i.e., incremental theory of ability), perceive difficult tasks as challenging not threatening, set high performance goals, and demonstrate high levels of intrinsic motivation.
2. *Mastery-avoidance goal orientation* comprises the efforts individuals exert to avoid losing one's skills and abilities, forgetting what one has learned, misunderstanding material, or leaving a task incomplete or unmastered.
3. *Performance-approach goal orientation* is concerned with being judgeable and one shows evidence of ability by being successful, by outperforming

others, or by achieving success with little effort. Individuals with performance goal orientation believe that ability is fixed (i.e., entity theory of ability), learning is viewed as a way to achieve goals, to engage in feedback-seeking behavior, and failure is seen as an indication of low ability.

4. *Performance-avoidance goal orientation* occurs when individuals endeavor to avoid unfavorable judgments from others. Individuals with avoidance goal orientation perceive difficult tasks as threatening, not challenging, set low performance goals, engage in low levels of metacognitive activity, and report high levels of anxiety.

Researchers originally hypothesized that mastery and performance goal orientations exist at opposite ends of a continuum (Jagacinski, 1998). They asserted that it was logically impossible for an individual to simultaneously adopt both beliefs. Research has found that the effectiveness of adopting either a learning or a performance goal orientation may depend on factors related to the individual's level of cognitive ability (Bell & Kozlowski, 2000), as well as task characteristics, such as complexity (Steele-Johnson, Beauregard, Hoover & Schmidt, 2000). Despite traditional perspectives, some researchers have argued that mastery and performance goals can work together to facilitate motivation and performance (Church, Elliot & Gable, 2001; Harachiewicz et al., 1998; Harackiewicz & Linnenbrink, 2005; Pintrich, 2000).

Related Studies

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the areas of goal orientation and self-regulation among language learners and their relationships to learners' achievement. From a general perspective, self-regulated and goal-oriented learning have a major influence on learners' academic achievement. For example, Radosovich, Vaidyanathan, Yeo, and Radosovich (2004) examined the relationship between goal orientation and self-regulatory processes in an achievement context. The results indicated that mastery goal orientation was positively related to how many resources participants allocated to their goals and to the degree to which they engaged in cognitive self-regulation. They also found that performance-avoidance goal orientation was negatively related to cognitive self-regulation. Likewise, Dehghani (2010) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' goal-oriented and self-regulated learning and their reading comprehension. The results showed that there was a positive relationship among goal orientation, self-regulated learning, and reading comprehension. In another study, Mirhassani, Akbari, and Dehghan investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' goal-oriented and self-regulated learning and their language proficiency. The findings revealed a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and language proficiency. Also, all four subscales of self-regulated learning (planning, self-checking, effort, and self-efficacy) were positively related to language proficiency. Therefore, according to achievement goal research, students influence their own learning by adopting achievement goals that optimize self-regulatory processes (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994).

Recently, a vast body of information is available about the strategies (for example, cognitive and affective strategies) that self-regulated learners use to acquire new knowledge and skills and about the environments in which self-regulated learning can be most successfully acquired (Pintrich, 2000, Zimmerman, 2000). To become self-regulated learners, students should learn to regulate the use of information-processing modes, the learning process, and the self (Boekaerts, 1999).

Despite the abundance of research on self-regulated learning and its association with other constructs such as reading, goal-oriented learning, language proficiency, and academic performance, there has been a dearth of research on self-regulated learning and achievement goal orientation that may guide EFL writers' composing processes. For example, regarding the relationship between learners' goal-orientation and writing achievement, He (2002) stated that learners' goal-orientations influenced their strategy use. The findings revealed that the mastery group also produced better essays than the performance-orientation group. Finally, mastery orientation served as a significant predictor of successful writing.

In a comprehensive training program, Englert and her associates (1991) trained learning disabled and regular fourth and fifth grade children to apply metacognitive knowledge about self-regulating the writing process and the appropriateness of particular text structures, given their audience and objectives. Results demonstrated that less proficient writers benefited from both kinds of instructions and were able to generalize improvements in writing to tasks involving similar text structures. They also gained greater metacognitive knowledge about writing and were better able to talk about writing, planning and revising even months after completing the training. Therefore, it might be argued that self-regulated learning scaffolding enhances writing achievement, and that students who are developing perceptions and skills in the writing process can be assisted to become confident, independent, goal-oriented, and fluent writers by being taught self-regulation strategies in tandem with identified writing skills (Harris, Graham, Mason & Saddler, 2002).

Inspired by these studies on these two psychological constructs and their significance on second language skills, the researchers tried to provide reasonable answers to the following questions:

Q1: Is there any significant relationship between goal-oriented learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners?

Q2: Is there any significant relationship between self-regulated learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners?

Q3: Is there any significant relationship between self-regulated learning and goal-oriented learning of Iranian EFL learners?

The Study

Participants

The participants were 48 undergraduate university students (22 males and 26 females), aged between 22 and 27 years. They were selected from three universities with more or less equal reputation in Tehran. The instructors in these universities agreed to cooperate and get the consent of their students to participate in the study. The students pursuing English language translation studies and English literature were selected because these are the most popular undergraduate fields of study offered by Iranian universities across the country. Nonetheless, given that the participants were not selected randomly from all of the English departments across the country, the researchers may not be able to make strong claims about the generalizability of the findings.

Instruments

In order to measure the degree of participants' engagement in the process of self-regulated learning, the researchers used the Persian version of "Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire" (MSLQ) developed by Pintrich (1991). The questionnaire consisted of 47 items, among which 17 measured cognitive ability (e.g., rehearsal, elaboration, organization strategies, and critical thinking); 10 measured metacognitive ability (e.g., planning, monitoring, and regulating); and 20 measured resource-management ability (e.g., regulating one's effort, help seeking). Furthermore, a goal-oriented questionnaire was developed in Persian with reference to Elliot and McGregor's (2001) classification of goal-orientation subcategories. This model is viewed as a comprehensive and well-tested goal-orientation classification (McCollum & Kajs, 2007). The first section of the questionnaire gave information about the purpose of the questionnaire and elicited background information on the participants' age, gender, educational level, and GPA. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 37 items to tap the mastery approach, mastery avoidance, and performance approach of participants; 16 items measured mastery approach, 8 measured mastery avoidance, and 13 measured performance approach. Since the goal-oriented questionnaire was used in Iran for the first time, it had to be standardized; thus, it was piloted on a sample of 50 MA students. The reliability of "Goal Orientation Scale" and "Self-regulation Questionnaire" tested through using Cronbach alpha was proven .85 and .91, respectively, which are acceptable indices of reliability. In addition, factor analysis was utilized to investigate the construct validity of the goal-orientation and self-regulation scale. The results of factor analysis revealed that the components of self and goal loaded on a single factor. That is to say, they measured the same underlying construct.

Procedure

In the beginning phase of the study, all participants were given both questionnaires during regular class periods by their teachers who had been carefully briefed on the administration procedures. Participants completed the two questionnaires by indicating their agreement with each of the items on a 5-point Likert-scale response

format ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). After all the completed questionnaires were collected by the teachers and returned to the researchers, the participants were asked to write on the assigned topics ('My Three Wishes', 'My First Day at College', and 'The Effects of Air Pollution') in three consecutive weeks (see Appendix). The genres of the writing tasks were descriptive, expository, and argumentative respectively. It is noteworthy that students were reassured that all the data collected were confidential and used for research purposes only. Having collected the data, the researchers let the writing tasks be rated by four raters through a holistic scoring scale (*Test of Written English (TWE)*) and two analytic scoring scales (Bailey & Brown, 1984; Weir, 1990). A distinct advantage of holistic assessment is that compositions can be judged rapidly and are hence more economical to mark. According to Weigle (2002), this kind of assessment is problematic for writers since different aspects of writing ability develop at different rates for different writers. Therefore, in order to overcome this limitation of holistic scoring, the researchers used analytic scoring as well. Analytic scales are more appropriate for writers as different features of writing develop in different phases. As a result, the reliability of scores will be improved. In the last phase of the study, various statistical analyses were done using SPSS software (version 15).

Results

The results of descriptive statistics of the data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Writing	Self-regulation	Goal-orientation
N	48	48	48
Mean	94.5863	3.7079	3.9916
Std. Deviation	9.85616	.44398	.60161
Variance	97.144	.197	.362

The mean scores for the participants' writing score; self-regulated and goal-orientated learning are 94.58, 3.70, and 3.99, respectively. Moreover, the standard deviation for writing is 9.85, for self-regulation 0.44, and for goal-orientation 0.60. Given the fact that the statistical procedures used in this study required the normal distribution of the gathered data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run to confirm the normality of distribution.

Table 2. K. S. test of normality of the data distribution

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Mastery-approach	.152	48	.007
Mastery-avoidance	.069	48	.200*
Performance-approach	.096	48	.200*
Cognitive	.093	48	.200*
Metacognitive	.083	48	.200*
Resource-management	.103	48	.200*
Total writing	.099	48	.200*
Holistic	.057	48	.200*
Analytic1	.093	48	.200*
Analytic2	.102	48	.200*
Total goal-orientation	.103	48	.200*
Total self-regulation	.072	48	.200*

As can be seen, except for the mastery-approach, whose p-value is 0.007, which is lower than 0.05, the other p-values are higher than 0.05, indicating that they all enjoy normal distribution. In addition, the p-values for goal-orientation and self-regulation scales are 0.20 and 0.20 respectively. This signifies that the sample was drawn from a normal distribution.

Table 3. Rotated Component Matrix ^a

	Component	
	1	2
Resource-management	.860	
Cognitive	.854	
Metacognitive	.848	
Performance-approach	.833	

	Component	
	1	2
Mastery-avoidance	.830	
Mastery-approach	.726	
Total writing		.984
Analytic 2		.974
Analytic 1		.953
Holistic		.924

Performing Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation, the researchers identified two components that account for 79.64 percent of the total variance. As is shown in Table 3, the components of self-regulation and goal-orientation learning loaded on a single factor. That is to say that they gauge the same underlying construct. The writing tests are heavily loaded on component 2. Therefore, these results indicate that the writing tests form a different construct. This fact is supported by the negative relationships between the components of the two factors as displayed in the Pearson Correlation table.

Analysis of the first research question

Is there any significant relationship between goal-oriented learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners?

Table 4. Correlation between goal-oriented learning and writing scores

		Total Writing
Goal-orientation	Pearson Correlation	-.208
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.157
	N	48

In order to provide a logical answer to the first research question, Pearson Correlation was run. As it can be seen from Table 4, the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.157, which is not significant at the 0.05 level. This signifies that there is no significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' goal-oriented learning and their writing achievement.

The goal-orientation scale used in the study to measure the achievement goal-orientation of Iranian EFL learners consisted of three subscales; namely, mastery-

approach goal-orientation, mastery-avoidance goal-orientation, and performance-avoidance goal-orientation.

Table 5. Correlation between subscales of goal-oriented learning and writing scores

		Total Writing
Mastery-approach	Pearson Correlation	-.166
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.258
	N	48
Mastery-avoidance	Pearson Correlation	-.189
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.197
	N	48
Performance-avoidance	Pearson Correlation	-.211
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.150
	N	48

The correlation coefficients between the three subscales of goal-orientation scale and writing scores are shown in Table 5. As can be seen, no significant correlation was found between three subscales of goal-oriented learning and writing scores of the participants.

Analysis of the second research question

Is there any significant relationship between self-regulated learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners?

Table 6. Correlation between self-regulated learning and writing scores

		Total Writing
Self-regulation	Pearson Correlation	-.294*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.043
	N	48
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)		

In order to find out if there was any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-regulated learning and their writing scores, the researchers utilized Pearson correlation. As it is shown in Table 6, the correlation coefficient was -0.294, which is significant at 0.05. Thus, this means that there is a negative and weak relationship between self-regulated learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners.

The self-regulation scale used in the study to measure the self-regulated learning of Iranian EFL learners consisted of three subscales; namely, cognitive, metacognitive, and resource-management strategies. Since the overall correlation between self-regulated learning and writing achievement was significant, the researchers tried to find out where this significant difference resides.

Table 7. Correlation between subscales of self-regulated learning and writing scores

		Total Writing
Cognitive	Pearson Correlation	-.292*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.044
	N	48
Metacognitive	Pearson Correlation	-.337*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.019
	N	48
Resource-management	Pearson Correlation	-.245
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.093
	N	48
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)		

The correlation coefficients between the three subscales of self-regulation scale and writing scores are shown in Table 7. As can be seen in the table, no significant correlation was found between resource-management and writing scores of the participants. However, a significant relationship was found between students' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and their writing performance.

Analysis of the third research question

Is there any significant relationship between self-regulated learning and goal-oriented learning of Iranian EFL learners?

Table 8. Correlation between self-regulated learning and goal-oriented learning

		Cognitive	Metacognitive	Resource-management
Mastery-approach	Pearson Correlation	.496**	.491**	.468**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001
	N	48	48	48
Mastery-avoidance	Pearson Correlation	.628**	.709**	.704**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	48	48	48
Performance-avoidance	Pearson Correlation	.674**	.570**	.631**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	48	48	48
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)				

As Table 8 shows, there is a significant relationship between the subscales of goal-oriented and self-regulated scales. Mastery-approach goal-orientation showed a significant relationship with cognitive, metacognitive, and resource-management. Moreover, mastery-avoidance indicated a high significant relationship with three subscales of self-regulation learning. Performance-approach further displayed a relationship with three subscales of self-regulation learning. This fact is supported by the factor loadings of the subscales of goal-orientation and self-regulation questionnaires, shown in Table 3.

Discussion and conclusion

With regard to the first research question, the results demonstrate no significant relationship between goal-oriented learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners. This finding is in contrast with the research in the literature, which claims the existence of a relationship between learners' goal-orientation and their writing achievement (He, 2002). The lack of any significant relationship between goal-orientation and writing achievement may indicate that those language learners who are goal-oriented in the language classroom will not necessarily do better in second language writing classroom as goal orientated indices do not operate uniformly for all learners. A likely interpretation might be that goal-orientation, as Button, Mathieu, and Zajac (1996) stated, is a relatively stable individual-specific variable

subject to situational influence. That is, the reason may be related to the nature of Iranian academic work, which is regarded as an individualistic and self-learned endeavor (Dehghan & Razmjoo, 2012).

However, the findings did show a significant relationship between self-regulated learning and writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners. This result is in line with Flower and Hayes (1980) and Harris, Graham, Mason, and Saddler (2002), who identified the contribution of self-regulated strategies in writing performance of students. This implies that teaching self-regulated strategies in a foreign language context such as Iran can help writers be equipped with strategies designed to instill positive attitudes to writing and positive views of themselves as writers. When students are equipped with self-regulated strategies in tandem with writing strategies, they become confident, independent, autonomous, and fluent writers as self-regulated learners are metacognitively, behaviorally, and motivationally active participants in their own learning (Zimmerman, 2000).

As for the correlation found between goal-oriented learning and self-regulated learning, the coefficient among the three subscales of these two psychological variables is significant at 0.05. These findings are in line with the studies done by Radosevich, Vaidyanathan, Yeo, and Radosevich (2004) as well as Dehghani (2010), who found a positive relationship between goal orientation and self-regulation in an achievement contexts and learners' reading achievement respectively. This may indicate that students influence their own learning by adopting achievement goals that optimize self-regulatory processes.

The findings of this study are important for language learners and teachers. Teachers should make learners aware of the role of self-regulation and goal orientation on their writing achievement, which they can employ during writing and explain to the students the effects these strategies will have on their progress. Therefore, one of the major goals in educational settings is to help learners to become more self-regulated and goal-oriented learners. They need to be informed of these strategies by their teachers and also need to become aware of their current level of performance by comparing their own strategies with relevant strategies. It is worth mentioning that the support from language teachers must be instrumental. They should carefully orchestrate instruction to arm learners with the strategies they require to operate autonomously, to help them make appropriate choices and to encourage them to expand their capabilities by giving them responsibility for their own learning.

Interpretations of the findings of this study also lead to several recommendations for further research. It is suggested that a replication of this study be done wherein:

1. The participants in this study are to be compared with other EFL learners
2. The data gathering technique of the present study is triangulated with other data collection tools
3. Other language skills (listening, speaking, and reading) are related to both goal-oriented and self-regulated learning

Another line of research may focus on the influence of self-efficacy on the use of self-regulation strategies. Further studies are suggested also to be carried out to examine the effects of self-regulated and goal-oriented learning on students' academic achievement, cognitive processing, and motivation in academic contexts.

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Appendix

Sample essay writing test

Directions: The following topics are ones for which you would have sufficient background knowledge and also be interested in writing about. For each week you are supposed to write an essay on a given topic.

Name:

Gender:

Nationality:

Level of education:

	Topics	week 1	week 2	week 3
1	My Three Wishes	****		
2	My First Day at College		*****	
3	The Effects of Air Pollution			*****

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