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## **A Shift into Autonomous Education\***

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### **Abstract**

Fostering autonomous learning has become one of the key concerns of course designers and curriculum planners in the last 20 years which has been validated on both ideological and psychological grounds. However, estimating learners' readiness to accept autonomous education is an important step prior to moving toward autonomous education. Thus, the current research investigated the patterns of autonomous behavior among Iranian EFL learners before the implementation of principles of autonomous education in language classroom. Students' responses to autonomy questionnaire went through a factor analysis process which revealed the existence of three factors underlying participants' autonomous learning behaviors. The paper discusses each factor in turn and concludes by reiterating the importance of implementing the underlying factors in designing courses that aim at fostering learner autonomy.

**Keywords:** learner autonomy; autonomous education; English Language teaching; autonomy questionnaire.

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### Introduction

Autonomous learners are characterized as more efficient learners that can take the responsibility of their own learning. This implies that there exist some attributes within autonomous learners which act as an inner force leading them towards setting their own learning goals, monitoring their learning process and reflecting on the outcome. However, such loose definitions cannot create a picture of the concept of autonomy in mind as autonomous learner is not limited to these inner attributes.

Benson (2001) suggests a differentiation of the three concepts of autonomy, autonomous learning and educational practices designed to foster autonomy. The concept of autonomy entails a capacity belonging to the learner rather than the learning situation. Benson believes that most researchers are skeptical about the learnability or the teachability of the concept of autonomy and thus he uses the term "fostering autonomy" to refer to the autonomous learning situations in which learner's capacity for autonomy is exercised and displayed. Autonomous learning situations are more or less self-directed and they usually involve educational practices for fostering autonomy. Educational practices include learner training, strategy training and learning conversations or classroom discourse based on a model of language learning (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1990). Benson (2001) asserts that the psychology of learning is highly supported by constructivist approaches for the contention that "effective learning begins from the learner's active participation in the processes of learning" (p. 36). Thus, fully involved learners in the process of learning, will have the most effective learning. At the core of this involvement are *ability* and *willingness* which according to Holec (1981), are not necessarily innate and can be promoted by formal education.

However, prior to any attempts in the implementation of the principles of learner autonomy, there should be an investigation of learner's readiness to take the initial steps for becoming autonomous. This is a completely culture-bound issue as autonomy has its roots in cultural conventions and political aspirations of a society (Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2000). For both Benson (1996, 1997) and Pennycook (1997), autonomy is a concept that is appropriated by the West, rooted in the ideologies of libertarian and democratic

individualists. However, some researchers are against attributing autonomy to the West. For instance, Chan (2001) argues against the definition by Benson (1996, 1997) and asserts that such perspective provides a "narrow interpretation of autonomy" (p. 505). Chan (2001) believes that because of the multidimensionality of the concept, "complete autonomy is an achievable but an idealistic goal which will produce different outcomes in different contexts" (p.506). However, divergent cultures share the fundamental ideas of autonomy (Benson, 2001).

With regard to language planning and policy in Iran, the recent years have witnessed a significant progress in teaching and researching English language in governmental and private sectors throughout the nation (Riazi, 2005). Researchers have published a majority of articles on different disciplines, yet research on autonomy has been limited in number and scope. The literature on language learners' autonomy in Iranian EFL context shows that the concept has not been studied holistically and has been usually narrowed down to one of its aspects. (Nematipour, 2012; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2013; Ahmadi & Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, 2013). The examination-oriented and teacher-centered nature of the education system of the country, which is in contrast with the principles of learner autonomy, could be one of the many reasons that has hindered any attempt to the implementation of the principles of learner autonomy in English language teaching curriculum. The current research is an initial step toward autonomous education, namely, assessing Iranian learners' readiness for autonomous learning by analyzing the patterns of autonomous behavior among language learners.

Patterns of behavior are governed by beliefs and experience (Cotterall, 1995) and beliefs are set out in the form of factors in order to make the research doable. To borrow Cotterall's (1995) definition of a factor, a factor could be defined as "an issue about which one might expect any student to hold a more or less coherent set of beliefs" (p. 196). The factors extracted from autonomy questionnaire, relate to learner autonomy by providing a "useful focus in assessing learners' readiness for autonomy and in directing classroom dialogue about learning" (Cotterall, 1995, p.196). The paper focuses on three factors

extracted from the autonomy questionnaire and discusses each factor in turn by answering the following research questions.

1. What factors account for Iranian intermediate level EFL Iranian learners' autonomous behaviors?
2. To what extent Iranian intermediate level EFL learners are ready for autonomous learning?

### **Literature Review**

#### ***The history of learner autonomy***

Although the concept of autonomy is considered to be fairly recent, referring to its etymology, it goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe which involved institutions and states free from external control (Benson, 2011). Later on, by the influence of the ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) based on the importance of free will as the basis of a working society, autonomy gradually shifted into its modern meaning. Soon the concept of autonomy and fields of learning become connected by the works of philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), John Dewey (1859-1952) and more recently, Paulo Freire (1921-1997).

Going through the literature on language learner autonomy with the advent of self-access centers in early 1980s, the concept of learner autonomy evolved out of adult education; meaning the ability of learners to do things on their own. However, toward the end of the decade and under the influence of learner-centered approaches, learner autonomy took a new shade of meaning which seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). In the same vein, many different definitions of the concept came into existence which were trying to cover multiple dimensions of the concept of autonomy. In the words of Little (2007), "if a single common thread runs through the increasingly diverse literature, it is that the essence of learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 15).

#### ***Language Learner Autonomy***

Fostering learner autonomy has been one of the important educational goals in language teaching profession during the last decades. Though defining autonomy is not an easy task, all definitions throughout the literature share a common belief about autonomy which is the capacity

for being independent and in charge of one's own learning and for being able to choose what would be suitable for one's learning needs from a variety of learning facilities and resources (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987, 1995; Holec, 1981; Little, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Thanasoulas, 2000; White, 1995, 1999).

According to Littlewood (1996), two major components, namely, "ability" and "willingness" exist in the core of the concept of autonomy. Ability includes both "knowledge" about the various choices offered to the learner and the "skills" for implementing such choices, whereas "willingness" involves "motivation and the confidence to take responsibility" for one's decisions (p. 428). The two elements are also stressed by Dam (2010), who considers them as the key to success.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

A total of 106 adult English language learners took part in the data collection phase of the current study. The participants were intermediate-level language learners (male and female), with an age range of 18-24 enrolled in English courses in language institutions in three major cities of Iran (Tehran, Tabriz and Isfahan). The reason for choosing the mentioned cities was their large population and ease of access to language institutions for administering the survey. Intermediate language learners were chosen based on the placement test given by the language institutions for placing the learners in different proficiency levels. Moreover, among a vast number of language learners enrolled in language institution 106 were chosen using stratified sampling technique.

### ***Instrumentation***

#### *Learner autonomy questionnaire*

In order to collect data on learners' readiness for autonomous education, a Chinese to English translated version of Zhang and Li's (2004) questionnaire was adapted for the purpose of the current study. As the current study is part of a bigger research project, the current questionnaire was chosen because of its consistency with the definition of language learner autonomy used through the study. The questionnaire contains two sections and involves 21 items, 11 of which are Likert-type rating scales ranging from never to always with each

statement. The Likert-type questions are general questions based on the principles of learner autonomy in actual language learning settings. However, the second section contains 10 forced-choice format items which investigates students' perceptions toward principles of learner autonomy in depth. The questionnaire has proved to have a high content validity based on the judgment of experts and also has a satisfactory estimate of reliability, namely, an internal consistency of 0.7.

### ***Procedure***

The data for the current study was gathered through an autonomy questionnaire which was distributed among intermediate-level Iranian EFL learners in three major cities of Iran. The questionnaire was distributed randomly among language learners enrolled in English courses in language institutions. The completed questionnaires were carefully analyzed and the obtained data was entered into statistical package for social science software (SPSS, version 20) for Windows in order to identify the underlying construct that could account for the covariation among responses, through factor analysis and a frequency estimate for the second part of the questionnaire.

### **Result**

The first research question of the study sought to find the underlying factors of Iranian EFL learners' autonomous behaviors. To find out about English language learners' autonomous behaviors, an exploratory factor analysis was applied to students' questionnaires. However, prior to the analysis of factors found in the questionnaire was meeting the preconditions for factor analysis. The primary analysis of the items approved the possibility of factor analysis based on Bartlett's test of sphericity and KMO measure of sampling adequacy.

Table 1

*KMO and Bartlett's Test for the Autonomy Questionnaire*

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Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.788
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Approx. Chi Square	227.134
Df	55
Sig.	.000

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Applying factor analysis to the first part of the questionnaire resulted in the emergence of three factors listed below:

1. Approach to studying
2. Learner confidence in study ability
3. Experience of language learning

The order by which factors are listed is based on the amount of variance they create on the data. Thus, the first factor which is named *approach to studying* accounts for 33% of the total variance. The second factor dealing with students' *confidence in study ability* accounts for 12% of the variance and the third factor, namely, *the experience of language learning* accounts for 10% of the total variance respectively. In order to elaborate on each factor, factor loadings are listed below according to their order in the autonomy questionnaire.

***Factor 1: Approach to studying***

2. I make good use of my free time for studying English.
4. while planning, I believe I can finish my task on time.
5. I keep a record of my studies, such as keeping a diary, review, etc.
6. I self-exam myself by the exam papers that I choose personally.

***Factor 2: Learner confidence in study ability***

9. During the class, I try to catch the opportunity to express myself by taking part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role play, etc.
10. I notice my strength and weaknesses in learning English.

***Factor 3: Experience of language learning***

1. I think I have the ability to learn English language well (based on the previous experiences).
8. I attend out-class activities to practice and learn English language.

Factor analysis revealed three factors accounting for autonomous behaviors among Iranian intermediate English language learners. Among the three, the first factor, namely, approaches to studying accounted for 33% of covariation among responses. The loadings for the first factor were all around learning management done personally. The second factor, named learner confidence in study ability, revolved around learners' ability and confidence to express their selves in the class and understand their strength and weaknesses in learning English language. Factor three which was based on students' prior language learning experience revealed intermediate English language learners'

abilities to learn autonomously based on their prior learning experiences.

The second research question of the study aimed at finding the extent to which Iranian EFL learners were able to learn autonomously in actual learning settings. To answer the second research question, the second half of the respondents' questionnaires went through a detailed analysis of frequency. The second part of the questionnaire was aimed at investigating the learner's belief system toward the autonomous decisions they make in relation to their language learning. The 10 questions had five possible choices which revolved around principles of learner autonomy namely, setting goals, planning, monitoring and evaluating. Table 2 reports the frequency of responses to the 10 forced-choice format questions. Items are shown in the table but the five choices for each item are brought in the form of numerical values due to the limited space in the table.

Table 2

*Frequency of the Responses to the Forced-Choice Items of Autonomy Questionnaire*

Item	Value				
	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)
12. I study English due to	1.90	1	12.37	15.23	69.52
13. I think the learner teacher relationship is that of:	19.23	6	3.84	19.23	51.92
14. I think my success or failure in English is mainly due to:	2.85	11	9.52	8.57	68.57
15. Whether students should design teaching plans with teachers or not:	25.47	46	21.69	18.86	0.94
16. When the teacher asks questions for us to answer, I would most likely to:	16	56	3.77	2.83	21.69
17. When I meet an unfamiliar word, I mainly:	3	2.94	21.56	47.05	21.59
18. When I make mistakes I'd usually like the following ones to correct them:	0.98	32.69	17.30	2.88	46.15
19. When I am asked to use the technologies that I haven't used before:	64	16.98	14.15	2.83	1.88
20. I think the following way is the most useful way of learning English:	22.64	6.60	44.33	6.60	18.86
21. I usually use materials selected by:	4	22.64	66.26	9.43	1.88

*Note. The choices for each question*

*Q 12: 1. my parents' demand 2. Curiosity 3. getting a good job, help to my major 4. interest of English culture, such as film, sports, music, etc. 5. 3 and 4;*

*Q 13: 1. receiver and giver 2. raw material and maker 3. customer and shopkeeper 4. children and partners 5. explorer and director;*

*Q14: 1. luck or fate 2. English studying environment 3. studying facilities(aids) 4. Teachers 5. Myself;*

*Q15: 1. strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Neutral 4. Oppose 5. strongly oppose*

*Q16: 1. wait for others' answers 2. think and ready to answer 3. look up books, dictionaries 4. clarify questions with teachers 5. join a pair/group discussion:*

*Q17: 1. let it go 2. ask others 3. guess the meaning 4. 2 and 5, 5. look up the dictionary*

*Q18: 1. let them be 2. Teachers, 3. Classmates, 4. Others, 5. books or dictionaries;*

*Q19. 1. usually try to learn new skills, 2. I learn them following others, 3. I feel worried, but anyway, 4. I put it off or try to avoid it, 5. I resist using them;*

*Q20. 1. taking notes, 2. mechanic memory, 3. doing exercises of grammar, translation, words etc., 4. classifying or grouping or comparing, 5. group discussion;*

*Q21. 1. only by teachers, 2. mostly by teachers, 3. by teachers and by myself, 4. mostly by myself, 5. only by myself.*

Students' responses to the second part of the questionnaire went through a detailed analysis which revealed a tendency to act autonomously in English language learning situations. When students were asked about their goal in learning English language, the majority of responses (69.52%) revealed that interest in English culture and learners' future needs were the two important reasons which pushed Iranian EFL learners toward learning English language. Regarding the role of teachers, a huge pile of responses (51.92%) revealed that respondents considered learner teacher relationship like that of an explorer and director. In the next question (question 14), 68.57% of Iranian EFL learners attributed their success or failure in learning English language to themselves rather than external factors such as luck and environment. According to 46% of responses to the question dealing with students' possible roles in designing course plans,

there was an agreement with learners' intervention in planning the course. Question number 16, was about students' reaction when they were targeted to answer teachers' questions. 56% of the respondents' answers were thinking and getting ready to answer rather than waiting for others or joining a pair/group discussion.

For question number 16 which was around dealing with unfamiliar words, 47.05% of the respondents showed a preference to ask others or look it up in their dictionaries rather than letting the word go. The next question in language learner autonomy questionnaire, asked respondents about their preferred type of correction after making a mistake throughout their learning. It was revealed that 46.15% of the respondents favored books and dictionaries as a way of correction. Reacting upon the technologies which students haven't used before was the concern with question number 19. The analysis of learners' responses revealed that 64% of the participants tried to learn new skills in their first encounters. Question number 20 aimed at finding the most useful way of learning English. according to the analysis of respondents' answers, 44% believed that grammar exercises, translation and learning words was the best way for learning English language. Regarding the learning material, in question number 21, 66.3% of learners preferred material selected by teachers and themselves cooperatively.

### **Discussion**

It was argued that autonomous learners are more efficient learners who can take the responsibility of their own learning. Although, Benson (2001) believes that many learners are capable of developing autonomy independently and without any educational efforts, the current study estimated learners' readiness for autonomy training in educational setting. Learners' readiness was studied by extracting factors that account for Iranian EFL learners' autonomous behaviors.

#### ***Factor 1: Approach to study***

Taken all together, learners manifested a tendency toward autonomy. The first factors extracted from the questionnaire was named *Approach to studying*. The respondents who agreed strongly with the first factor, were applying autonomous approach to studying English throughout their learning. According to Cotterall (1995), approach to studying involves the behaviors learners reveal as they go about their learning.

A closer look at the fundamental principles of autonomous learning reveals that the main responsibility in learning English language lies in the hands of individual learner (Pierson, 1996). This includes setting the personal agenda which involves setting goals, planning, monitoring and evaluating (Little, 1994). A careful study of the items that load under the first factor reveals an ability for setting personal agenda by planning learning, monitoring the process and self-evaluating the outcomes.

The first item that loaded under the first factor entitled as- *I make good use of my free time for learning English*- approved learners' ability to plan their free times for extra classroom studies. The second item -*I believe I can finish my task on time*- showed learners' ability to set their learning goals and meet the goal by the deadline they choose. The third item -*I keep record of my studies, such as keeping a diary, review, etc.*, - also refers to planning learning and choosing appropriate tools for optimal learning. Finally, the last item -*I self-exam myself by the exam papers that I choose personally*- proved learners' use of evaluation methods for evaluating their learnings. Being able to monitor and self-evaluate is an important attribute which discriminates autonomous learners from non-autonomous ones. In order to encourage monitoring and reflection among non-autonomous learners, Cotterall (2000) advises teachers and course designers to include a journal for gathering learners' feedbacks at the end of each session. Learners in the survey manifested a complete personal agenda which not only managed the uptakes but also helped them with planning, monitoring and evaluation. While, Benson (2001) talks about to the existence of a personal agenda within all learners subjected to direct instruction which is only limited to uptakes or what learners claim to learn at the end of a lesson. It is important to note that approach to studying as a general term includes learners' cognitive and learning styles which could vary from person to person.

***Factor 2: Learner confidence in study ability***

The first item in factor two - *During the class, I try to catch the opportunity to express myself by taking part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role play, etc.*, - shows learners ability to express themselves in the foreign language. To be able to express one's self is an important factor related to learners' confidence in learning process.

Expressing one's self is an important attribute of language learner autonomy. According to Little (1995) "All autonomy projects involve circumstances in which learners are engaged in activities that require them to use target language for genuinely communicative purposes and thus allow them an equal share of discourse initiatives"(p. 179). Learner confidence also plays a vital role in autonomous language learning as an important part of learning responsibility lies with individual learners. Wenden (1991) has claimed that without confidence in their ability to learn successfully, learners cannot develop autonomous approach to learning.

To highlight the importance of confidence in autonomous learning, Cotterall (1995) cites Curran (1976) in counselling-learning in second language. Curran affirms the importance of learner confidence in autonomous language settings in which teachers take the roles of counsellors rather than the transmitters of knowledge. Confidence in general involves one's evaluation about one's own value and worth. However, in language classroom, learner's self-confidence can be positively correlated with oral performance and evaluation of strength and weaknesses (Heyde, 1979). In the same vein, the second item under factor two- *Learner confidence in study ability*- proved that Iranian EFL learners were able to understand their strength and weaknesses in learning English language.

### ***Factor 3: Experience of language learning***

Item 1- *I think I have the ability to learn English language well*- and item 2- *I attend out-class activities to practice English language*- can be interpreted as reflecting one's prior success in learning a language. The positive evaluation of the outcome of prior language learning experience could result in a degree of awareness about the nature of language, possible outcomes, approaches to the study of language and strategies used in learning a new language. According to Benson (2001), learner's belief about the language learning process influences their learning behaviors and attitudes; however, not necessarily conditioned by them (Benson & Lor, 1998).

When learners' talk about their abilities to learn a language well based on their prior experience, they may have a good command of the strategies that are helpful in learning English language. An important characteristic of the autonomous language learners that discriminates

them from non-autonomous ones is their familiarity with learning strategies. Generally speaking, strategies are divided into *cognitive* (e.g. using imagery for memorization), *metacognitive* (e.g. monitoring your own progress) and *social-affective* (e.g. being able to motivate oneself) strategies which manifest themselves in the shape of different actions, behaviors, techniques and steps (Oxford, 1990b). Studying learners' strategic knowledge has revealed instances of how different language learners approach language learning (Wenden, 1991). According to Cotterall (1995), autonomous learners use their experience of approaching different tasks, employing learning strategies and solving problems to improve their understanding of the nature of language.

### ***Learner's Autonomous Decisions***

The second part of the questionnaire was aimed at investigating the learner's belief system toward the autonomous decisions they make in relation to their language learning. The 10 questions had five possible choices which revolved around principles of learner autonomy, namely, setting goals, planning, monitoring and evaluating. The analysis of responses gathered from the 10 forced-choice format questions revealed a tendency toward autonomy among Iranian language learners.

Interest and motivation as the core elements of learner autonomy framework (Littlewood, 1996) were the fundamental motives leading Iranian language learners toward learning English as a foreign language. The analysis of the frequency of responses to the first question which sought to find out the reason Iranian EFL learners studied English revealed that for 69.52 percent of respondents, internal and external motivation in learning English was the primary leading force toward the goal of learning English language. Internal motivation in the current study was interest in English culture and external motivation was getting a job or helping one's major. According to Deci (1978), there is a reciprocal relationship between motivation and self-direction, which implies that learners develop motivational patterns by taking control over their learnings. In the same vein, Nunan (1999), believes that "learners who have reached a point where they are able to define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities have, by definition, become autonomous" (145).

The teacher-learner relationship, according to the student's responses to question 13, was that of an explorer- director which

characterizes autonomous learning environments. Autonomous learners hardly consider teachers as givers and themselves as receivers, rather they tend to explore the untouched realms of knowledge. According to Little (1995), if promotion of autonomy is the goal in language classroom, the teacher's task is then to bring learners to the point where they accept equal responsibility for the co-production in the class.

Autonomous learners are also responsible learners. They accept the responsibility of their success or failure rather than attributing it to external powers such as luck or fate or teachers, facilities or environment. Similarly, in the current study a total of 68.6% of the respondents attributed their success or failure in learning English language to themselves demonstrating responsibility of learning.

Question 15 of the current study investigated learners' attitudes about participating in planning teaching. The Analysis of answers revealed respondents' strong agreement with the language learners cooperating in designing the teaching plan with their course instructors. With 46% agreement, Iranian EFL learners showed a positive attitude about participating in planning teaching.

Questions 16, 17 and 20 of the questionnaire dealt with Knowledge about learning or metacognitive knowledge which discriminates autonomous learners from non- autonomous ones. Responses to these questions revealed a considerable level of metacognitive knowledge- 55.7% for question 16 and 47.1 for question 17- among Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, in question 20, 44% of the respondents chose practice and translation activities as the best way to learn English language. Generally, in learning English language, regardless of the mode of learning, learners practice an amount of metacognitive strategies. Benson (2001) notes that meta-cognitive, social and affective strategies are more related to the concept of autonomy than cognitive strategies, since they involve direct operations on the language to be learned. According to White (1995), however, "distance learners make greater use of metacognitive strategies than classroom learners, most notably with regard to the strategy of self-management" (p. 211).

Question 18 was aimed at gathering students' attitudes toward error correction and their responsibility about it. Only 46.2% of students preferred to be corrected by using books and dictionaries and others preferred their teachers to correct them (32%). Regarding learning

techniques and material the last three questions yield results in line with learner autonomy. In case of using new educational technologies, 64% of the respondents reported an interest in learning new skills.

Control over the learning material involves learners in social interaction with a right to determine and implement their own learning goals (Benson, 2001) Control over the content of learning is a discriminating feature of autonomous learners. Kenny (1993) considers autonomy broader than choice in language classroom and as a holistic learning that transcends the subject disciplines. A total of 66.26% of the respondents preferred negotiation between learner and teacher over the selection of material as the best way of content selection.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has reported on a study which attempted to determine the applicability of learner autonomy among Iranian language learners. Because autonomy is a culture-bound issue, it is necessary to be studied in various cultural settings. Generally, language learners hold a set of beliefs about the nature of language, the learning process and the role of teacher and learners which could pave the way for their future success when consistent with classroom methodology. This necessitates an exploration of learners' belief system before implementing any change in classroom.

The finding of the current study revealed an initial awareness of autonomy among Iranian language learners which manifested itself in the existence of three general factors. Further implementation of principles of learner autonomy in language classroom could be based on the achieved factors. Benson (2001) calls for action research grounded in the practices of teacher-researchers which could help to fully understand the nature of language learner autonomy and the best practices that could foster it in classroom situations. However, studying a multidimensional concept as autonomy always poses some limitations. The current study was also limited because measuring autonomy is a controversial issue on which there is not a clear consensus yet.

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