

# Self-Regulation and Speaking Proficiency in Iranian EFL Learners

Elham Mahjoob\*

English Department, Ilam University, Ilam, Iran

## Abstract

This study is to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners self regulation and their speaking proficiency. 60 advanced female and male students studying in the adult section of the ILI, Shiraz, Iran participated in the study. Correlational analysis carried out to determine the relationship between variables. Two t-tests run to compare the students from the high with those of the low group regarding the two variables. Findings revealed there is a weak relationship between self-regulation and Iranian EFL learners' speaking proficiency. Participants' speaking proficiency was evaluated using IELTS speaking test. Generally, the high achievers, comparing with the low achievers were more proficient in performing the speaking test. Regarding the result of t-test for speaking, high achievers are found as self-regulated as the low achievers in speaking a foreign language. There are just minor differences between the students from the two groups in the order they used the self-regulation strategies.

## Keywords

Self-Regulation, Speaking Proficiency, High-Achievers, Low-Achievers

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of self-regulatory strategy is to improve students' self-regulation of their personal functioning, academic behavioral performance and learning environment. Hence, by assisting students to learn how to use various strategies for optimizing self-processes and control their social/physical environment and behavior, educators can help them improve their degree of self regulation. Research on academic self-regulated learning began as an outgrowth of psychological investigations on self-control among adults and its development in children (Zimmerman, 2001). Much early work on self-regulation was therapeutic in nature: researchers taught participants to alter dysfunctional behaviors such as aggression, addictions and behavioral problems. Researchers now apply self-regulatory principles to academic settings and other forms of learning like social and motor skills (Boekaerts, Pintrich & Zeidner, 2000). Self-

regulation is considered an active constructive process whereby one sets goals for his or her learning, work, life and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behavior guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features of the environment (Pintrich, 2000). Hence, researchers in the fields of self-regulation should broaden its scope by applying it to other areas (Schunk, 2005).

Since speaking is a vital component of each language and provides the base for growth in the other skills, the classroom should be a place where the use of spoken language is highly supported and valued and where students feel relaxed to ask and answer meaningful questions and express their thought easily. Students' speaking skill develops best in classroom situations where there is a mutual trust between them and their teachers and where there exists an equal interaction and also where they can receive support. Having confidence and enthusiasm are critical factors in developing speaking. The

\* Corresponding author

E-mail address: mahjub.e@gmail.com (E. Mahjoob)

students should be taught to use specific strategies in this regard to be able to take risks while speaking. Strategies that make them more involved in the learning process and strategies that make them take responsibility for their learning so that they can regulate their own learning.

According to Zimmerman (2001) self-regulated learning is the proactive way in which learners demonstrate, resolve, modify and plan for learning. It is the blending of cognitive, meta-cognitive and motivational research that focus on the self of the learner. Self-regulation learning was aligned with the new model of teaching recognized individual differences in learning. To him Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill, but rather, the self-directive process by which learners transform mental abilities into academic skills, a self-directive process by which learners monitor personal, behavioral and environmental situations to establish effective learning strategies, set goals, observe, reflect and alter mental aptitude into academic aptitude (p. 65).

Research in self-regulation will enhance our understanding of the learners and will help us increase students' understanding of their own capabilities and how to make learning to speak another language more enjoyable and fruitful to them. So in this study the relationship between self-regulation and speaking proficiency of the students and how self-regulation affects the students' speaking proficiency have been sought.

## 2. Literature Review

An intensive body of research has been conducted on the relationship between the Self-regulation construct and the other language learning skills especially on the reading and writing skills. But there is limited number of research on the relationship between Self-regulation and speaking skill which is the reason this paper is devoted to investigate the relationship between Self-regulation and the EFL learners' speaking skill.

Cheng (2011) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between students' self regulation ability and their learning performance. In his study, self-regulation ability was conceptualized by four dimensions: learning motivation, goal setting, action control and learning strategies. The results of his study on 6524 students from 20 aided secondary schools in Hong Kong showed that all these four dimensions played a significant role in students' learning performance.

Turan & Demirel (2010) performed a study in order to describe the medical students' self-regulated learning skills and to examine differences between self regulated learning skills and achievement. The researchers found in general that

when the achievement level increased, self-regulated learning skills level was also increased. The successful students were observed to maintain more self-regulated learning skills in all stages of learning in the qualitative study. The findings of this study show the relationship between self-regulated learning skills and achievement. It is reported that if learners' Self-regulation learning skills are developed, their understanding of subject area and efficiency of learning will improve and their self efficacy will increase.

Gaythwaite (2006) conducted a study during fall semester at Valencia Community College (VCC) to investigate whether meta cognitive self-regulation, self-efficacy for learning and performance, and critical thinking could be identified as predictors of students' academic success and course retention among community college students enrolled in online, telecourses, and traditional Fundamentals of Speech (public speaking) courses. To investigate the impact of meta cognitive Self-regulation, self-efficacy for learning and performance, and critical thinking on academic success and course completion in the three delivery modes he used Quantitative statistical analysis. After analyzing the data, it became clear that self-efficacy was a significant predictor of final course grade. There was a significant relationship between critical thinking and SR but not final grade. Self-efficacy was a predictor of informative speech grade however; self-regulation and critical thinking were not. No variable was a significant predictor of course completion which may be due to the small sample size among students who took the survey and did not complete the course. There was no statistically significant difference found with self-efficacy, self-regulation, critical thinking and course type (online, telecourse, traditional).

Speaking is undoubtedly one of the most important skills among the four language learning skills in second or foreign language settings. The students should have the required mastery over it to be able to communicate effectively in the second or foreign language community. Speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998, p. 13). And as Bailey and Savage (1994) put it "speaking in a second or foreign language as often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills". Most people have problem speaking effectively in a second language. In this case scholars described the situation of English learning in China as "dumb English" during the 1980s and 1990s (as cited in Wang and Motteram, 2006). "Dumb English" refers to the situation when students want or need to communicate in English but they can not perform the task successfully due to such possible reasons as tension, shyness and/or lack of effective communication skills in English. Even though China has the largest population of

English language learners in the world, most students still finished their college English courses as good test-takers, but poor communicators.

Pintrich (2000) has introduced a conceptual framework for understanding self-regulation which is presented in this study to account for the self-regulation construct. This model consists of four phases i.e. a) forethought, planning and activation cognition b) monitoring motivation c) control behavior d) reaction and regulation context. There is an assumption in this model that each phase may occur at any time during task engagement. The phases are also interactive in that individuals may get involved in more than one.

Self-regulation is an important factor in the process of effective learning of a second or foreign language. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the degree of correlation between the construct of self-regulation of the EFL learners studying at Iran Language Institute and their speaking proficiency. In other words this study is carried out to see whether self-regulation can be an important factor regarding the students' proficiency in speaking or not.

#### *Significance of the Study and Research Questions:*

Both researchers and practitioners state that the students should learn to regulate their own learning for at least two reasons. First, it is argued that Self-regulation has a positive influence on the learning outcomes (Pintrich, 2000). Secondly, Self-regulation is regarded as an influential construct to turn into independent learners. Further, the learners' perceptions of their own psychological aspects and their awareness of such perceptions are crucial to enable them to take responsibility for their own learning. The questions to be dealt with in the present study are as follows:

1. Is there any relationship between self-regulation and students' speaking proficiency?
2. Do high-achievers use more self-regulation strategies than low-achievers in the process of speaking another language?
3. What self-regulation strategies do high and low achievers use in different speaking tests like IELTS?
4. What self-regulation strategies do the students use as a whole?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants

The participants of this study comprised 60 students from the Iran Language Institute (ILI). Convenient sampling is used to select the participants. They are selected from among the students at adult section studying in advanced levels in Shiraz Branch. They are males and females and ranged in age

from 17 to 25 but their sex was not controlled during the research.

### 3.2. Instruments

Language learners' motivation and self-regulating questionnaire (LLMSC) as well as IELTS speaking test are employed in this study. The questionnaire is the one used in a doctoral dissertation by Shen (2002) and is adopted from a dissertation by Zarei (2008). Therefore the validity of the questionnaire is accepted but the reliability is calculated again. The obtained value 0.808 shows that the reliability is high.

The LLMSQ is primarily consists of 12 subscales with a total of 36 items. To ensure that the measures enjoy sufficient construct validity, the items used in this study were selected from the sources indicated below corresponding with the constructs, respectively that have reported both moderate to high reliability and sufficient validity: a) task mastery goals (coefficient alpha= 0.88, hear after represented by the construct and variable learning goals; see Dwek, 1986), ego/social goals (alpha = 0.85; performance goals; see Dwek, 1986, Grant and Dwek, 2001), work avoidant goals (alpha = 0.77) (Meece et al., 1988, with fifth and sixth grade students); b) self-efficacy (alpha = 0.89), intrinsic value (alpha = 0.87), test anxiety (alpha = 0.75), cognitive strategy use (alpha = 0.83), meta cognitive strategy use an effort management (alpha = 0.74) (Pintrich and DeGroot, 1990, with seventh grade students); c) goal setting and planning (reliability coefficient not provided; discriminant function coefficient = 0.41) (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986; interviews with high school students of tenth grade); and d) effort management (alpha = 0.60) (Wentzel, 1996, with sixth grade students) (Shen, as cited in Zarei, 2008, p. 50).

According to Zarei (2008) the items in the study were selected and adapted according to the following considerations and criteria: first, to use words that the participants are familiar with; second, to make the phrases understood by the participants when answering; third, to fit the participants' cultural background and fourth, to avoid redundant wording. Revised items are designed to avoid response defects, including acquaintance, social desirability and conformity. In addition, an important fact in the study area is that most people would not be willing to get involved in answering long questionnaires or surveys. Question wording, in fact, has been found to affect self-reporting results. Therefore, another criterion for selecting and adapting the items is to decrease redundant words or description.

To ensure sufficient internal reliability of the adapted

questionnaire items for the present sample, a pilot study of the items in the questionnaire for the present study was conducted in the procedure of test construction (Walsh & Betz, as cited in Zarei, 2008, p. 52) on 44 junior- high school students who were not included in the study sample. The internal reliability of each construct derived from 185 participants is indicated below, correspondingly.

In the current study following the model in Pintrich and DeGroot (1990), motivational components consist of goal orientation, attribution for a failure, self- efficacy, intrinsic value, and test anxiety. Self-regulated learning variables are composed of cognitive strategy use, and regulatory strategy use, which constitute the self-regulated learning components. The items for motivational components were established around these constructs: learning goals (items 1, 23, 29;  $\alpha = 0.88$ ), performance goals (items 11, 22, 36;  $\alpha = 0.80$ ) work avoidant goals (items 6, 26, 33;  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), self-efficacy (items 2, 13, 20;  $\alpha = 0.84$ ) intrinsic value (items 19, 24; item 35 as a reversed one;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ) and test anxiety (items 7, 21, 31;  $\alpha = 0.77$ ).

Items for learning strategy use measured these constructs: a) rehearsal strategy use (items 4, 15, 27;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ), elaboration strategy use (items 5, 17, 32;  $\alpha = 0.78$ ) and organizational strategy use (items 8, 14, 25;  $\alpha = 0.74$ ), revealing cognitive strategy use; b) comprehension monitoring (items 3, 9, 30;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ), and goal setting and planning (items 12, 18, 34;  $\alpha = 0.87$ ) demonstrating meta cognitive strategy use; and c) effort management (items 10, 16, 28;  $\alpha = 0.79$ ) representing regulatory strategy use. All items were rated on a scale of 4 to 1.

IELTS Speaking Test as a standard test of speaking was used in the interviews with the participants in order to test their speaking proficiency. The interviews were scored using IELTS speaking coding system. There are four grading criteria: a) fluency and coherence, b) pronunciation, c) lexical source, d) grammatical range and accuracy.

### 3.3. Procedure

First, the participants were asked to respond to the 36-item LLMSQ. Next they were interviewed through the IELTS speaking test. Each interview lasted for at least 10-13 minutes. The interviews were recorded so that the researcher could listen to the interviews twice (in order to measure intra-rater reliability) and grade them from 1 to 9, according to the IELTS speaking scoring system. Then another rater who was specialized in this regard listened to the interviews (in order to measure inter-rater reliability) and scored them following the exact procedure as the first rater did. Finally the scores assigned by the two raters, were

checked by an expert in the field.

Correlational analysis was run to find the relationship between the first rater's scores and those of the second rater. The obtained value (0.81) indicated that there existed a significant correlation between the two raters' scores. The value obtained for the inter rater reliability was 0.9 which shows that the reliability was high. Then based on the average score for each student, the students were divided into two groups of high-achievers and low-achievers.

The variables in the present study were self-regulation and speaking proficiency. As this study deals with the relationship that may exist between the variables, the data collected through the IELTS speaking test (the interviews) and the LLMSQ were subjected to correlational analysis to answer the first research question of the study. In order to determine whether there are significant differences between the students in the high and the low group in the use of the self-regulation strategies regarding their speaking, data were statistically analyzed using 2 t-tests (independent sample t-test).

## 4. Results and Findings

One of the aims of the current study was to investigate the possible relationship between the variables, self-regulation and speaking proficiency. The relationship between self-regulation and speaking proficiency was explored. Table 4.1 shows the relationship between self-regulation and speaking proficiency. Correlational analysis was done and the results are summed up in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1.** Correlation between self-regulation and speaking proficiency.

		Self-regulation
speaking	Pearson Correlation	.307*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017
	N	60

As the table illustrates, the correlational analysis reveals that the significant level is less than .05. which is then level of significance, concluding that the difference is significant. Regarding the relationship between speaking proficiency and self-regulation the obtained value is .017 ( $P = .017$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the correlation being significant, it can be said that there exists a relationship between the variables, but it is a weak one.

The other objective of the present study was to discover whether high-achievers use more self-regulation strategies than low-achievers in the process of speaking another language. A t-test was run to find the answer. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 depict the differences in self-regulation between the students in the high group and the students in the low group.

Table 4.2. Group statistics.

	level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self-regulation	Low-achievers	29	1.0341E2	11.68490	2.16983
	High-achievers	27	1.0852E2	9.55297	1.83847

Table 4.3. Independent Samples Tests.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
self-regulation	Equal variances assumed	.771	.384	-1.782	54	.080	-5.10473	2.86460
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.795	53.139	.078	-5.10473	2.84397

As Table 4.2 shows, with regard to students' self-regulation, the mean of the scores for the students in the high group is 1.0852E2 and for the students in the low group is 1.0341E2 indicating that the mean of high-achievers is more than that of low-achievers.

After studying Table 4.3 it was found that the difference was not significant in the students' self-regulation ( $P = .080$ ) so it can be concluded that there is no difference between the students in the two groups regarding self-regulation.

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 depict the differences in speaking between the students in the high group and the students in the low group.

Table 4.4. Group Statistics.

	level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
speaking	low	29	4.4828	.34024	.06318
	high	27	5.4074	.43934	.08455

Table 4.5. Independent Samples Tests.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
speaking	Equal variances assumed	1.658	.203	-8.840	54	.000	-.92465	.10459
	Equal variances not assumed			-8.760	48.966	.000	-.92465	.10555

As Table 4.4 shows with regard to students' speaking, the mean of the scores for the students in the high group is 5.4074 and the mean of the scores for the students in the low group is 4.4828 indicating that the mean of high-achievers is more than that of low-achievers.

By studying Table 4.5 it became clear that the difference was significant in the students' self-regulation ( $P = .000, p < 0.05$ ) so it can be concluded that there exists a significant difference in speaking between the the students in the two groups.

Table 4.6. Descriptive statistics, Low achievers.

	N	Mean
elaboration	29	8.9310345
rehearsal	29	8.862069
comp	29	8.6896552
Goal-setting	29	8.5172414
organizational	29	8.1724138
effort	29	7.1034483

In the previous sections it was found that regarding the self-regulation strategies the students used in the low and in the high group, the difference was not significant ( $P = .80$ ) and it was concluded that there was no difference in self-regulation between the students in the two groups. This time Table 4.6 shows the descriptive statistics of the self-regulation

strategies the low-achievers use and Table 4.7 shows the descriptive statistics of the strategies that the high-achievers used in this regard.

Table 4.7. Descriptive statistics, High achievers.

	N	Mean
elaboration	27	9.7407407
comp	27	9.5185185
organizational	27	9.1481481
Goal-setting	27	8.8888889
rehearsal	27	8.8518519
effort	27	7.3703704

Table 4.8. Total strategies used by the high-achievers and the low achievers.

	N	Mean
elaboration	60	9.3666667
comp	60	9.1
rehearsal	60	8.8666667
organizational	60	8.7
goal-setting	60	8.6833333
effort	60	7.2166667

In the previous section the strategies the high and the low-achievers used were investigated in two separate tables and as it became clear the difference was not significant with regard to self-regulation. This time the descriptive statistics of the strategies that the students used as a whole, in both the

high and the low groups, were shown in table 4.8.

## 5. Discussion

In this section, the findings of the study which have been reported above are discussed. The discussion is organized under four main sections; each section discusses the results for answering each research question. Specifically, this section discusses the answers to four specific questions about the relationship between the students' self-regulation and their speaking proficiency.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between self-regulation and speaking proficiency using the information provided from 60 male and female students from the Iran Language Institute, and this study provided the evidence concerning the relationship between the two variables.

One of the inquiries of this research concerned the relationship between the variables self-regulation and speaking proficiency. A questionnaire which was used in a doctoral thesis by Shen (2002) adopted from Zarei (2008), was used in the current study. After applying correlational analysis, it was found that the degree of difference was less than .05, which is then the level of significance, concluding that the difference was significant.

Regarding the relationship between speaking proficiency and self-regulation, the obtained value was .017 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the correlation being significant, it was found that there existed a relationship between the variables, but the relationship was not strong, it was a weak one.

Recently, it has become clear that one of the central issues of self-regulation is students' ability to select, combine, and coordinate strategies. Without them, self-regulated learning independent of external regulation and guidance is highly unlikely. Only with knowledge about strategies are learners in the position to regulate their own learning. It is therefore assumed that students who regulate their own learning know how to use strategies to modify their environment. (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, as cited in Zarei, 2008, p.67).

According to an assumption by Brown (Brown et al., 1983) less able, competent or self-regulated students either have no access to effective strategies or fail to select the appropriate strategy for a given task. Therefore, it can be said that if a learner is a self-regulated learner, he may choose specific strategies and also a certain number of them, in the process of learning a certain task. In other words, different situations affect his choice directly.

The other aim of the current study was to find whether high-achievers use more self-regulation strategies than low-

achievers in the process of speaking a second or foreign language. To achieve this goal, 2 t-tests were run to compare the students of the two groups of high-achievers and low-achievers regarding their speaking proficiency and their self-regulation state, and to see whether there was any significant difference between the students of the two groups. The result of the t-test for self-regulation showed that there was no significant difference between the students of the two groups ( $P = .080$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) in the use of self-regulation strategies. The students from the two groups used the same number of strategies but in different orders.

The result of the t-test for the students' speaking showed that there was a significant difference between the students of the two groups ( $P = .000$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) regarding their speaking proficiency. The speaking proficiency of the participants of this study was evaluated using IELTS speaking test. The high-achievers in general, in comparison with the low-achievers were more proficient in performing the four criteria of fluency & coherence, lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy and pronunciation which are considered as the basis of assessment in the IELTS speaking test, so regarding the result of the t-test for speaking it can be concluded that high-achievers were more proficient in speaking than low achievers, however, with regard to the result of the t-test for self-regulation it can be concluded that the high-achievers were as self-regulated as the low-achievers in the process of speaking a second or foreign language although there were just minor differences between them in the order they used the self-regulation strategies.

After understanding that there were no significant differences between the students from the two groups ( $P = .080$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) in the use of self-regulation strategies, and finding that the students from the two groups used the same number of strategies but in different orders, the next step was to see what self-regulation strategies the high and the low achievers used in different speaking tests, as in IELTS speaking test. After analysing the results the strategies the students used in the two groups were specified in the following order. The students in both groups first used the elaboration strategy, but the second strategy that the low achievers used was rehearsal and as the third strategy they used comprehension, while the second strategy the high achievers used was comprehension, and the third strategy they used was the organizational one, then they used goal-setting as the fourth strategy and after that rehearsal as the fifth strategy. But the fourth strategy the low-achievers used was goal-setting and as the fifth strategy they used the organizational strategy. Finally, the students in the two groups both used effort as the last strategy.

The final important goal of the current study was to examine the self-regulation strategies the students used as a whole.

The students in both groups used the following strategies in the IELTS speaking test: (a) rehearsal strategy use, elaboration strategy use and organizational strategy use, revealing cognitive strategy use; (b) comprehension monitoring and goal setting and planning, demonstrating meta-cognitive strategy use; and (c) effort management representing regulatory strategy use.

**Table 4.9.** Strategies used by the high-achievers and the low achievers.

Strategies used by high-achievers	Strategies used by low-achievers
Elaboration	Elaboration
Comprehension	Rehearsal
Organizational	Comprehension
Goal-setting	Goal-setting
Rehearsal	Organizational
Effort Management	Effort Management

#### *Pedagogical Implications:*

Since two decades ago the picture of asymmetrical classrooms has changed to a great extent into symmetrical ones as a result of which the role of the students and teachers has changed a lot. Now it is not the teachers who decide for the students in the classrooms but the students take responsibility for their own learning and even they try to devise curriculum for themselves. They use self-regulation strategies in mastering different skills and are moving in a road of becoming self-regulated learners. Of course teachers can be very helpful by teaching the students how to use self-regulation strategies and how to use them in the environment. There is an extensive body of literature which shows that those students who are more self-regulated learners are more successful learners in different educational scenes and especially in mastering a second or foreign language.

First to be in line with the latest findings of the studies conducted in the fields of education, and second in order to have more self-regulated learners the learners who can decide for their own successful learning and the learners who incorporate the self-regulation strategies into their learning process in order to be better learners of a second language, it is very important that new methods of teaching self-regulation to the students be the focus of attention in all educational areas.

## 6. Conclusion

It was found in the study that those students who are called high-achievers in the process of speaking a second language made more effective use of self-regulation strategies, so it can be said that there existed a relationship, although weak, between the students' self-regulation and their speaking proficiency.

Finally it is hoped that these findings would serve as a guide

for not only researchers, but also for the teachers and EFL learners to gear their goals towards a more effective approach in teaching and learning a second language.

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