The Role of Iranian EFL Learners' Motivation and Beliefs in Their Reading Comprehension Scores

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Abstract
Learners owe their success to various factors that may lead to individual differences. Among those contributing factors, motivation and learners' belief as two distinct features have been investigated in this research. To this end, 120 intermediate EFL learners in the 15-30 age range, studying in different English language institutes in Tehran participated in this study. They were asked to complete the Motivation Questionnaire (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009) as well as the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1988). The results of the regression analyses revealed that there was a significant relationship between learners' motivation, learners' belief, and their reading comprehension scores. The results also indicated that 42% of variability in the Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension scores was predicted by their motivation, and 27% of variability in their scores was predicted by their beliefs toward EFL learning. In fact, both motivation and learners' beliefs were significant predictors of the participants' reading comprehension scores. These findings showed that motivation and learners' beliefs can be used to predict students' reading comprehension scores to some degree. The implications and suggestions for further studies were also highlighted.

Keywords: motivation, learners' beliefs, reading comprehension scores, EFL learners, BALLI

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Introduction

Motivation has been proved to have a significant impact on students' behavior and learning (Mayer et al., 2005). Different researchers have analyzed motivation patterns in various contexts over the past couple of decades (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei, 2001). The significant role of learners' beliefs in academic achievements has been also stated in several studies (Abisamra, 2000; Brackett & Salovey, 2006; Mayer et al., 2004; Pishghadam, 2009). Teachers and learners are always engaged in teaching and learning challenges and experience many difficulties during the learning process (Tomlinson, 2014). Learners' belief might originate from life experiences as confirmed by Liando et al. (2012). It can produce an encouraging situation for learning and teaching.

In other perspective, reading comprehension can be mentioned as a skill which can be achieved through students' efforts. It denotes that students should have active roles in improvement of their reading skill. Reading in L2 is a productive and collaborative system as confirmed by Aebersold and Field (1997), in which students use a variety of skills and strategies along with the background information, first language knowledge, and real-life knowledge in order to get the perception of the written texts. The current study tried to explore the impact of Iranian EFL learners' beliefs and motivation on their reading comprehension scores.

Literature Review
Motivation

Factors contributing to the learners' academic achievements including age, gender, aptitudes, motivation, and learning approaches have already been emphasized in different studies (Liando et al., 2005; Ghenghesh, 2010). Dörnyei (2001) states that motivation has a key role in learning a foreign language. Gonzales (2010) referred to integrative vs. instrumental dichotomy in motivation based on pioneering works of Gardener in 1985. Integrative motivation refers to the use of language for the purpose of communication, and instrumental motivation embraces practical goals. In spite of the fact that Gardner's work was quite significant in L2 motivation, it was criticized by some scholars. They believed such a dichotomy was unable to manifest the complexity of motivation construct.

Learners' Beliefs

Many researchers have carried out studies on learners' beliefs within the few past decades (Simin & Ketabi, 2009). Brown (1994) suggests that "beliefs, like any other aspects of cognitive and affective dimensions, are often developed in childhood. Beliefs are formed through the parents' and peers' attitudes, various ways of communication, different affective features, etc." (p. 168).

The concept of learners' beliefs can be viewed from three dimensions (Bernaus et al., 2004). These could be behavioral, cognitive, and affective features that are closely related to behaviorism, cognitivism, and humanism. Behaviorism refers to individuals' behaviors and reactions in different situations. As Kara (2009) put forward, learners' positive beliefs give rise to the

positive behavior on their part. Cognitivism deals with the learners' beliefs about the input they receive and the way they understand the learning materials. According to Feng and Chen (2009), cognitivism has four stages: making connection between the previous knowledge and the new one, developing new knowledge, analyzing new knowledge, and using the new knowledge in different settings.

Reading Comprehension

Kintsch and Rawson (2005) believed, in order to understand a text, different variables are to be taken into account. This view implies that readers need to build a system of beliefs based on semantic features. They should apply language and visual skills to construct meaning out of the text. The situation model comes into being as readers integrate background knowledge with the information provided by the text. In essence, various strategies and implicit and explicit parameters are at work to construct the meaning.

The current investigation has attempted to examine EFL learners' beliefs and motivation as two affective factors having decisive roles in language learning and examined their impacts on the learners' reading comprehension scores. To the end, the following research questions were raised:

RQ1. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' motivation and their reading comprehension scores?

RQ2. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs and their reading comprehension scores?

RQ3. Does Iranian EFL learners' motivation predict their reading comprehension scores?

RQ4. Do Iranian EFL learners' beliefs predict their reading comprehension scores?

Methodology

Participants

This study included 120 male and female intermediate participants. The age range of these students was between 15 to 30. They were studying English language in different language institutes including Mehrpooyan, Shayestegan, and Nami in Tehran. They were selected based on their results on the Michigan English Test, the results of which confirmed that these learners were truly homogenous with respect to their English proficiency levels.

Instruments

Drawing on research priorities, the researchers employed the following instruments:

Michigan English Test. Participants were chosen according to their scores on the Michigan English exam and were proved to be homogeneous. After obtaining the scores of the proficiency test, only examinees with one standard deviation above and below the average were chosen for the study. The test included 100 multiple choice items and took one hour and fifteen minutes. It had different sections as below:

1. Grammar - 40 questions.
2. Vocabulary - 40 questions.
3. Reading Comprehension - 20 questions.

Motivation Questionnaire. After homogenizing the participants, they completed the English version of Motivation Questionnaire developed by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009). This questionnaire contains 40 statements to be responded to on a Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), provided in three sections with fully described instructions. It took 45 minutes to answer. This questionnaire measures the following factors in-depth:

- Ideal L2 Self
- Ought-To L2 Self
- Instrumentality (promotion or prevention)
- Parental Encouragement (Family Influence)
- Attitudes toward Learning English
- Travel Orientation
- Linguistic Self-confidence
- Fear of Assimilation
- Ethnocentrism
- Interest in the English Language
- English Anxiety
- Integrativeness
- Cultural Interest Attitudes toward L2 Community.

Learners' Belief Questionnaire. In this study, the English version of Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1988) was also used to assess the learners' beliefs about learning a foreign language. The 34-statement BALLI employs a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" for the answers. The participants had 30 minutes to respond to the items. This questionnaire measures the following factors in detail:

- Learners' beliefs about learning strategies
- Learners' beliefs about learning English
- The difficulty of learning English
- Attitudes towards learning English
- The importance of the learning Environment
- Motivation and Confidence in learning English

Reading Comprehension Exam. A reading comprehension exam was developed by the researchers in order to assess the learner's reading skill. It was taken from English Grade 9 Tests. These tests were designed for students who are at grade 9 (or at the same level) to practice reading comprehension. It comprised 27 items, and had 40 points. The time allocated to do this exam was 90 minutes.

Design and Context of the Study

The present research was of a descriptive correlational design, as the researcher sought to understand the relationships among the variables. In other words, correlational research seeks to figure out if two or more variables are related and if so, in what way. The correlational phase of the study showed the probable relationships among variables. It should be noted that motivation and learners' beliefs were considered as the independent variables and the participants' reading comprehension grades were regarded as the dependent variable of the research.

Data Collection Procedures

The data needed for the current work was gathered through several steps. Firstly, homogeneity procedures were applied in order to evaluate learners' general English knowledge. The participants were totally 150 female and male students. The Michigan English Test was administered to all students in order to select the ones with an appropriate English proficiency for the purpose of the study. It has to be noted that only students whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen as the suitable proficiency level (intermediate); therefore, the number of students decreased to 135 students. After doing the first part, they were asked to complete the relevant questionnaires of the study. Fifteen learners refused to complete the questionnaires. They were thus removed from the study and the number of participants decreased to 120 learners. After administering the Michigan English Test and homogenizing the learners, two questionnaires, i.e., the Learners' Belief Questionnaire and the Motivation questionnaire were given to the participants. Moreover, the researchers provided further explanation for any ambiguous questions before and during the questionnaires' administration. Then, a test of reading comprehension was taken by the participants. Persian and English description about the questions and scales used for collecting the required information were given to the participants in order to prevent possible misunderstandings of the questions in the context of Iran. Participants were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential and would only be used for research and not for any other purposes.

Data Analysis Procedures

In the next stage, the collected data were transformed to codes and then entered into SPSS program. Then the correlational analyses were applied to examine the relationships among the variables under investigation. The amount and degree of the relationships were also presented. Regression analyses were also conducted to indicate whether the independent variables of the study can be used to predict any changes in the dependent variable or not. The results were discussed and reported accordingly.

Results
The Results of the Proposed Research Questions

To answer the four research questions, one multiple regression was run. More specifically, learners' motivation and learners' beliefs were entered into a model as predictors to predict reading comprehension scores, which served as the criterion variable. As recommended by Plonsky and Ghanbar (2018), before conducting the regression analysis, the statistical assumptions of it, including normality, linearity, homoscedactity, and the independence of error terms (Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation of residuals) were investigated and no violations were identified. Moreover, no outlier was found after data screening.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of all the predictors and the criterion variable in the regression model. It should be noted that no sign of multicollinearity was identified as all the VIF values were less than the recommended value of 10 (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018), and the matrix of

correlations (Table 2) depicts the optimum correlations between the predictors and the criterion variable. It should be mentioned that motivation and learners' beliefs were considered as latent composites, so the means of students' responses to questions of the two scales were estimated and used in the regression analysis.

Table 1
The Descriptive Statistics of Predictor and Criterion Variables in Regression Equation

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
RSC	33.78	4.73	120
MQS	16.48	2.26	120
BQS	16.49	2.09	120

Note: RSC = Reading Scores, MQS = Motivation Scores, AQS = Learners' Belief Scores

Table 2
Matrix of Correlations between Criterion and Predictor Variables

	RSC	MQS	BQS
Pearson Correlation	1.00	0.60	0.50
	0.60	1.00	0.44
	0.50	0.44	1.00
Sig.		0.00	0.00
	0.00		0.00
	0.00	0.00	

The unstandardized regression coefficients (B), standardized regression coefficients (β), R, R2, and adjusted R2 are shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5. According to Table 3, students' motivation (B = .98, S. E = .16, β = .47, t = 6.04, p = .00, predicting 42% of reading comprehension scores) and learners' beliefs (B = .67, S.E = .18, β = .29, t = 3.78, p = .00, predicting 27% of reading cmprhension scores) were statistically significant predictors of reading comprehnsion scores.

As can be seen in Table 4 and Table 5, R for regression was significantly different form zero, F (2, 117) = 44.02, p = .00, with R2 at .43 , suggesting the significance of this regression model. The value of the adjusted R2 was .42, showing that 42% of variability in reading comprehension scores can be predicted by motivation and learners' belief as a whole (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018).

Consequentely, the reading comprhension scores had a significant correlation with both motivation and learners' beliefs, so the answers to the first two resaerch questions were positive. Concerning reseacrh questions 3 and 4, as it was shown before, both motivation and learners' beliefs were found to be significant predictors of students' reading comprehension scores; hence, the answers to these questions were both positive as well.

Table 3
Regression Coefficients of Regression Analysis

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	6.61	2.98		2.22	0.03		
MQS	0.98	0.16	0.47	6.04	0.00	0.81	1.24
BQS	0.67	0.18	0.29	3.78	0.00	0.81	1.24

Table 4
Test of Significance of Regression Equation

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1143.16	2.00	571.58	44.02	.000
Residual	1519.20	117.00	12.98		
Total	2662.37	119.00			

Table 5
R, R2, Adjusted R2, and Test of Independence of Residuals of Simple Regression Analysis

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
0.65	0.43	0.42	0.36	1.80

Discussion

The current study investigated the possible effects of motivation and learners' beliefs on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension scores. The results of the study regarding the first and second research questions revealed that there were significant relationships between learners' motivation and beliefs with their reading comprehension scores. Motivating activities and materials along with positive beliefs towards the learning context and the teacher seem to strongly affect learners' reading comprehension scores. Thus, our findings be consistent with those reported by Csizer and Kormos (2009). In this respect, Dörnyei (2001) emphasizes the key role teachers play in motivating learners.

In addition, the findings regarding the third and fourth research questions showed that, in fact, motivation and learners' beliefs *do* predict differences in learners' reading comprehension scores. In particular, motivation, in line with other studies (e.g., Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012; Marsh et al., 2019; McGrew & Wendling, 2010) proved to be a significant predictor of learning outcomes as it had a relatively substantial and statistically significant effect on learners' reading comprehension scores and cleared up 42% of the variance in it. Learners perceived to be the most motivated were reported to have gained higher reading comprehension scores whereas learners perceived to be less motivated got comparatively lower scores. As learners' motivation is a vital variable that is frequently noticed and challenges practitioners in language classrooms (Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998), outcomes of the research indicated that motivation can be closely related to reading

comprehension skill. Moreover, learners' belief as an impartial and objective disposition is said to influence language learning considerably (Al-Magid & Al-Mamun, 2009). In this regard, the results of the present study indicated that learners' belief was a good predictor of their reading scores to some degree and accounted for 27% of the variance in it. In line with the mentioned results, individuals with higher beliefs are more likely to be open to new and different experiences because of their positive beliefs toward unique or different situations. The studies conducted by Steinmayr et al. (2018) and Shang (2010), just like the present research, also found a moderate correlation between learners' beliefs and reading comprehension scores. However, the findings are not in line with Choi's (2005) study, where he found no significant correlation between learners' beliefs and students' scores. In sum, both motivation and learners' beliefs were significant predictors of learners' reading comprehension scores, yet the effect of motivation somehow overshadowed the effect of learners' beliefs.

Conclusion

This investigation showed that reading comprhension scores had a significant correlation with both motivation and learners' beliefs, so the answers to the first two research questions were positive. Concerning reseacrh questions 3 and 4, as it was shown, both motivation and learners' beliefs were found to be significant predictors of the students' reading comprehension scores. Thus, the answers to these questions were both positive as well. Furthermore, the results of the study imply that those EFL participants who are associated with high levels of motivation can have a better performance in reading comprehension; therefore, it can be claimed that ESP or EFL teachers can benefit from these results. The outcomes of the research also revealed that learners who have high beliefs are much eager to depend on themselves and can improve their abilities without the help of teachers and instructors; thus, learners' beliefs can facilitate learners' performance on acquiring a foreign language with special purposes.

In all research studies, there are certain limitations that may affect the results of the research and may lead to problems with its extension to other contexts. These conditions may also affect the analyses and descriptions of the results and influence them. This study also had several drawbacks that are to be regarded while making generalizations about the findings. The first one is that the researchers had only access to Iranian EFL learners studying English in Tehran's language institutes. The numbers of male and female participants were not equal in the study. This unbalanced design might have cause gender to act as a moderator variable. Moreover, age of the learners can be considered as another limitation because of its effect on learners' background knowledge.

The implication of this study is that, even if the learners are not very proficient, their reading comprehension skill can substantially be improved by their motivation and belief toward the foreign language. One of the recommendations of this research is to carry out more studies on other variables such as the learners' pragmatic competence strategies, self-regulation, and personality traits, etc. and their relationship with English skills (e.g. reading, writing, listening, and speaking). More studies can be done with

learners in different age groups who tend to be more eager and use specific strategies to have an acceptable performance. This investigation can be replicated with participants of different ages and different levels of English knowledge. It would be more interesting to complement this study with more psychological objectives. Future research may benefit from identifying the students and parents' internal and external motivation and desire instead of traditional classrooms or the levels of autonomy, aggression and resilience, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy. Practical recommendation would be to conduct this research with EFL teachers in other contexts such as schools, universities, and other pedagogical settings. This would provide an understanding of the generalizability of the results of the study. Another suggestion for future research would be considering background variables such as age, experience levels, number of students, subjects taught, and teachers' gender, etc. Different scenarios in English for Foreign Language Learners (EFL) settings can be practically used and would be interesting for enhancing language learning among the EFL learners.

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