

## Controlled Extensive Reading and Vocabulary Knowledge: Let's Move Towards Autonomous Learning in EFL Contexts

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**Abstract:** *The present study aimed to investigate whether controlled extensive reading could be as effective as intensive reading in expanding vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 70 learners were selected based on convenience sampling. The administration of the proficiency test enabled the researchers to select 60 homogeneous students. Subsequently, the two groups were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. The experimental group learned vocabulary with the aid of extensive reading and subsequent in-class activities; while the control group learned vocabulary through intensive reading in the classroom context. A word list before the treatment ensured the researchers that the target words were unfamiliar for the learners. After the treatment, a vocabulary posttest was administered to check vocabulary knowledge of the participants. Moreover, a questionnaire (Cohen & Dörnyei, 2001) was administered to compare students' motivation in the groups. Finally, a MANOVA was run to analyze the data. The results led to the conclusion that controlled extensive reading had a statistically significant impact on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and motivation.*

**Key Words:** *extensive reading, intensive reading, vocabulary learning, in-class activities, autonomous learning*

### Introduction

Autonomy in language learning adds a meaningful dimension to the complicated process of learning since it gives students the opportunity to feel responsible towards their own learning and to become more active during the learning process. The concept of learner autonomy first made its appearance in the field of language teaching with Holec (as cited in Benson, 2001) who defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take the responsibility for one's own learning including setting the goals, selecting the appropriate methods and techniques, and deciding upon one's degree of success in learning” (Holec, 1981, p.3). The present study focused on extensive reading as an autonomous activity and intensive reading as a teacher-centered activity and aimed

to compare learners' vocabulary knowledge on the two types of reading techniques on the basis of the assumption that vocabulary plays an active role in developing learners' language proficiency and enhances achievement in EFL contexts. However, to make vocabulary learning more fruitful, learners' needs and interests should be taken into consideration. When vocabulary items are derived from content learning materials, learners are better equipped to deal with them; as "the context facilitates active engagement of the learners in learning tasks and helps them feel vocabulary learning is effective"(Hedge 1985, p. 77).

Classroom-based, teacher-directed language learning has been important in language teaching and learning for decades; however, the notion of autonomous learning is also not new to language teachers. The role of researchers and educators is to look for fruitful learning strategies and teaching techniques which help learners become motivated and self-determined enough to take control of their own learning. Giving the opportunity to learners to free themselves from traditional classes and find the opportunity to decide upon the strategies they adopt for language learning seems to be a necessity in increasing learner motivation. In learner-centered autonomous situations, students are more sophisticated and equipped; thus teachers "who want to empower students to make decisions and resolve their own problems will give students opportunities to think, act, and take responsibility"(Charles, 1999, p. 221).Autonomous language learning techniques aids learners to develop their personal learning strategies and become more interested in the act of learning.

In this study, extensive reading, as compared to intensive reading, was used as a technique to examine the development of vocabulary learning and capacity for autonomous learning. The learners were given the opportunity to select the reading materials which, in turn, was assumed to enhance their motivation and help them set their learning objectives. To sum up, this study intended to examine whether extensive reading could promote autonomous vocabulary learning in the Iranian foreign language learning situation.

### **Review of Literature**

Extensive reading or reading for pleasure outside the classroom or as Hill and Holden (1990, p. 91) called it, "free voluntary reading" helps learners become better readers and have more advanced vocabulary since it serves a source of comprehensible input and occurs in a low anxiety situation as students never feel pressured while reading outside the classroom. Hedge (1985) focused on the importance of extensive reading, arguing that "this kind of individual and self-directed process of learning leads students to independence in learning, which is a crucial factor in success" (p. 77).If students are prepared for reading and are given the chance to interact with a text, as Hedge argued, they can learn to read for general meaning without frequent stops to look words up in a dictionary. In fact, by extensive reading, learners can develop the ability to catch the meanings of unknown words and phrases from clues of the context. In fact, students who spend some time reading for pleasure outside the classroom can

learn by being actively involved in language, and can increase their comprehension of the texts as well as vocabulary knowledge.

Several studies in the literature suggested effectiveness of incidental vocabulary learning. Nation (2001, p. 394) maintained that children learn a large amount of their L1 vocabulary incidentally rather than intentionally. In their study, Pitts, White, and Krashen (1989) showed that reading novels for meaning by ESL learners can affect their vocabulary knowledge. The findings of Bensoussan and Laufer (2001) from a similar study showed that learners perform better in incidental vocabulary than intentional vocabulary learning. In a similar study conducted by Ahmad (2011) the distinction between intentional and incidental vocabulary learning and their effects on Saudi ESL learners' ability was explored. In another study Webb (2005) approved that frequency of exposure to unknown words in different contexts enhances learners' vocabulary knowledge. Yet, the National Reading Panel (2000) found that vocabulary can be learned both indirectly and directly, and that dependence on only one instructional method does not lead to optimal vocabulary growth.

Nonetheless, extensive reading as an autonomous technique provides learners with the chance to meet words in their context of use (Thornbury, 2002), Also, it increases sight vocabulary (Coady, 1997; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Nation & Coady, 1988), and could result in substantial vocabulary learning, which seems difficult to achieve with explicit teaching during the limited time that foreign language learners spend in the language classroom. Moreover, this technique helps EFL learners to find settings outside school where the target language is used like the Internet. In fact, for EFL learners it is critical to take advantage of as many chances as they can to learn and use the target language.

The main objective of the present study was to examine whether learning autonomously through extensive reading could foster vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners. Also, the study intended to investigate the impact of autonomous vocabulary learning on the participants' motivation. Consequently the following research questions were put forward:

RQ1. *To what extent can extensive reading followed by in-class activities as compared to intensive reading be beneficial in promoting Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?*

RQ2. *Which of the reading types (extensive or intensive) can enhance Iranian EFL learners' motivation and vocabulary knowledge?*

## Methodology

### Participants

A group of 15 year old students in two classes were selected to participate in this study. The participants were 60 secondary level high school girls living in Ardebil, Iran. The two classes, with 30 students in each, were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The classes met once a week and lasted 90 minutes during a six-month treatment. Both classes were taught by the same teacher.

### Instrumentation

The first instrument used in this study was a general proficiency multiple choice test consisting of 25 vocabulary items, 50 reading items, and 25 grammar items was developed by the researchers in order to check the homogeneity of the participants. This test was piloted with a group similar to the sample population of the study. Subsequently, item analysis was carried out and items with IFs between 0.25 and 0.70 and  $ID_s$  above 0.20 were included in the test. After discarding the mal-functioning items, the number of items was reduced to 50. In order to check the content validity of the test, two experienced teachers reviewed the test and confirmed the content validity of the test. The reliability of the test estimated through Cronbach's alpha showed a relatively high reliability index ( $r = .79$ ). Afterwards, the test was administered to a group of learners and 60 students whose scores fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the participants of the study.

The next instrument was a vocabulary list, the items of which were selected from the story books the students were going to read during the treatment. The participants were asked to write the Persian (students' native language) meanings of the words. After checking the answers, it was clarified that 85% of the words were unfamiliar for the students.

The third instrument was a questionnaire adopted from Cohen and Dörnyei (2001) and translated into Persian to examine learners' motivation, attitude toward language learning, and learning styles (see Appendix for English version), It had 36 five-point Likert type questions each followed by alternatives: Never (0), Rarely (1), Sometimes (2), Often (3) and Always (4) and was used after the treatment to measure participants' motivation level and specify their learning styles. The internal consistency of the questionnaire calculated through Cronbach's alpha ( $r = 0.74$ ) indicated an acceptable internal consistency.

The last instrument was a 50-item test administered to determine participants' vocabulary knowledge after the treatment. The test contained 25 vocabulary tests in multiple-choice format and five reading cloze passages in random ratio format. The words were mostly selected from among the words that the participants had learned from the story books. The content validity of

the test was approved by two experienced teachers and its reliability estimated through Cronbach's alpha ( $r= 0.75$ ) showed an acceptable reliability index.

### **Materials**

Seven story books were cooperatively selected by the students and the teacher as the reading materials which included: *The missing Monkey* (Crowther, 2005), *Sunny's Adventure* (Crowther, 2005), *Nine Stories About People* (Howe, 1986), *Peter and His Book* (Howe, 1983), *Season* (McIlvain, 2001), *The Sandcastle Competition* (Penny, 2009), and *Annie and the Map* (Toyama, 2001).

### **Procedure**

#### **Pretest**

After administration of the general proficiency test which aimed to examine the participants' homogeneity, the vocabulary list was given to learners to ensure that the target words were not known by the learners prior to the treatment.

#### **Treatment**

#### **Experimental Group**

The participants in the experimental group selected one of the seven story books for extensive reading and kept a portfolio which contained the products of several activities related to their reading task. These activities included finding and highlighting the new words in storybooks, writing every word's meaning in Persian by using a dictionary, and writing a sentence for every newly learned word. Also, students were asked to keep a diary journal about their reading progress for each book (how many pages they read, how much time they spent on reading, their problems during reading, and the like). Each session, students compared their new words and sentences with those of other classmates. When reading a book was completed, each learner was asked to briefly talk about the story and present a summary of the events. At the end of the course, each student had a 300 word list in her portfolio. The teacher was responsible for introducing the topic of the stories, helping learners to complete the required activities, and answering questions. A very useful activity was helping the students make flash cards for the new words, show it to their classmates, and ask their meaning.

#### **Control Group**

In this group, the same story books were used as the reading materials. However, reading activity was limited to the classroom; that is, the learners experienced intensive reading for the improvement of their vocabulary knowledge. Learners started with a ten-minute silent reading. Then the teacher divided the class into five groups each group consisting of six students who

read together and checked the meaning of the new words from a dictionary. Similar to the control group, students in this group highlighted the new words and wrote their meanings. The new words were then written on the board and defined to make sure that all students had clearly understood them. Then, students wrote a sentence for every new word and spoke about the topic of stories. After reading a story book was completed (each book took about three to four sessions), students took a reading comprehension and vocabulary test based on the content of the book. The students in this group also kept a portfolio which contained the newly learned words.

### Posttest

After one semester, the vocabulary posttest was administered to both groups to examine whether there was any statistically significant difference between the vocabulary knowledge of the groups. The test, as mentioned earlier, contained most of the words participants acquired during the study.

### Questionnaire

As stated earlier, a questionnaire was administered to both groups after the treatment to check students' degree of willingness to acquire new words, the level of their motivation in vocabulary learning, and their preferences in language learning styles.

### Findings

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the general proficiency test administered at the onset of the study. The results of skewness analysis obtained by dividing the statistic of skewness by the standard error revealed that the assumption of normality was observed in the distribution of scores (with the skewness ratios both falling between the acceptable range of  $\pm 1.96$ ; 1.37 for the experimental group and  $- .77$  for the control group). The comparison of the mean scores showed no significant difference before the treatment,  $t(58) = .0927$ ,  $sig > 0.05$ .

**Table: 1**

#### Descriptive Statistics, Proficiency Test

Groups	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Variance	SD	Skewness	
								Statistics	Std.Error
Experimental	30	28	12	40	20.66	63.74	7.98	.225	.309
Control	30	20	13	33	20.83	34.83	5.90	-.401	.309

**Table: 2**

#### Independent Samples t-Test, Proficiency Test

	Levene's test for	t-test for Equality of Means
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	Equality of variances		t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
	F	Sig.				
Pre-test Equal variances assumed	1.910	.131	.092	58	.927	.16667

After the treatment, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare the mean scores of the two groups on the vocabulary test. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the two groups. As Table 4 indicates, the comparison of the mean values of the two groups on the posttest was statistically significant  $t(58) = 2.23$ ,  $\text{sig}.03 < 0.05$  (two-tailed) and thus the null hypothesis was rejected.

**Table: 3****Descriptive Statistics, Posttest**

Mean	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	skewness	
					Statistics	Std.Error
Experimental	30	28.2000	8.42165	1.53758	-.106	.309
Control	30	23.7000	7.15903	1.30705	-.722	.309

	Levene's test for Equality of variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Posttest Equal variances assumed	1.73	.194	2.23	58	.03	4.5

**Table: 4****Independent Samples t-Test, Posttest**

In order to be able to answer the second research question of the study, the researchers had to compare the control and experimental groups' mean scores on the vocabulary posttest and the questionnaire. For this purpose, a test of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was run. Table 5 shows the within-subjects factors which include the dependent variables; that is, the learners' vocabulary learning and degree of their preferences and motivation.

**Table: 5****Within- Subject Factors**

Factors	Dependent Variable
1	<b>A</b>
2	<b>B</b>
3	<b>C</b>
4	<b>D</b>
5	<b>E</b>
6	<b>F</b>

Furthermore, the between-subjects factors are shown in Table 6.

**Table: 6****Between-Subjects Factors**

	Value Label	N
Groups 1.00 2.00	Control Experimental	30 30

Table 7 illustrates the descriptive statistics:

**Table: 7****Descriptive Statistics of Groups, Questionnaire (Appendix)**

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>A</b> experimental	16.2000	2.32527	30
control	15.6333	3.10154	30
Total	15.9167	2.73268	60
<b>B</b> experimental	13.0000	6.43803	30
control	12.9000	4.32594	30
Total	12.9500	5.43817	60
<b>C</b> experimental	17.8000	2.69610	30
control	14.7667	3.58813	30
Total	16.2833	3.49863	60
<b>D</b> experimental	15.5667	3.16972	30
control	14.3333	3.18762	30
Total	14.9500	3.21240	60
<b>E</b> experimental	19.1667	2.69205	30
control	16.7000	3.04166	30
Total	17.9333	3.10749	60
<b>F</b> experimental	16.3000	3.23931	30
control	18.0667	2.76597	30
Total	17.1833	3.11634	60

Factors A, B, C, D, E, and F in Table 7 are related to parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 in the questionnaire respectively (See Appendix).

As Table 7 shows, all factors in the experimental group had a higher mean as compared to the control group. The experimental group showed a higher mean in Factor E (integrative motivation); however, in Factor E (instrumental motivation) the control group had higher mean as compared to the experimental group. Both groups had a low mean in Factor B.

The results of multivariate tests, presented in Table 8 indicated that there was a change in the participants' vocabulary knowledge and a difference in the motivation level for reading (extensive/intensive).

**Table: 8**  
**Multivariate Test**

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Factor 1 Pillai's Trace	.688	23.840 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.688
Wilks' Lambda	.312	23.840 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.688
Hotelling's Trace	2.207	23.840 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.688
Roy's Largest Root	2.207	23.840 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.688
Factor 1 groups Pillai's Trace	.455	9.001 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.455
Wilks' Lambda	.545	9.001 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.455
Hotelling's Trace	.833	9.001 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.455
Roy's LargestRoot	.833	9.001 <sup>a</sup>	5.000	54.000	.000	.455

As shown in Table 8, the value for Wilks' Lambda for extensive reading is  $F=9.001$ ,  $p<0.01$ ; it could thus be concluded that within subject factors had significant effect on the degree of intercept of the two groups meaning that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the effects of factors (A, B, C, D).

**Table: 9**

#### Tests of Within & Between Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum Of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Factor 1 Sphericity Assumed	931.681	5	186.336	18.252	.000	.239
Greenhouse-Geiser	931.681	2.888	322.577	18.252	.000	.239
Huynh-Feldt	931.681	3.108	299.756	18.252	.000	.239
Lower-Bound	931.681	1.000	931.681	18.252	.000	.239
Factor 1 Group Sphericity Assumed	224.547	5	44.909	4.399	.001	.070
Greenhouse-Geiser	224.547	2.888	77.745	4.399	.006	.070
Huynh-Feldt	224.547	3.108	72.245	4.399	.005	.070
Lower-bound	224.547	1.000	224.547	4.399	.040	.070

<u>Error(factor1)</u> Sphericity	2960.506	290	10.209			
Assumed	2960.506	167.518	17.673			
Greenhouse-Geiser	2960.506	180.271	16.423			
Huynh-Feldt	2960.506	58.000	51.045			
Lower-bound						

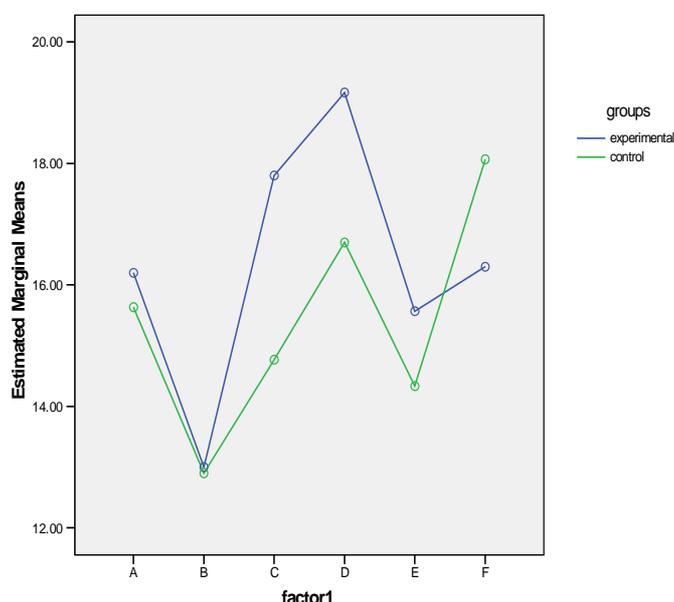
The results of interaction between groups and factors [ $F=2.88, p=0.00<0.05$ ] shows that there was a significant difference between the effects of factors and observed difference resulted from the treatment.

**Table: 10**

**Tests of Between Subjects Effects**

Source	Type III Sum Of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	90662.136	1	90662.136	3770.291	.000	.985
Groups	79.336	1	79.336	3.299	.047	.054
Error	1394.694	58	24.046			

Furthermore, Table 10 specifies that there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups;  $F= 3.299; p<0.05$  shows that there is a statistically significant effect for extensive reading. This suggests that there was a change in the vocabulary knowledge and degree of participants` motivation after the treatment. The effect size using Eta squared was .054 which means that extensive reading by itself accounted for 5.4% of the overall variance.



**Figure 4.2: Profile Plots for Mean Comparisons of the Groups**

As Figure 4.2 displays, there was no significant difference between the means of the two groups in the pretest scores; however, the mean of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group in the posttest.

### Conclusion

Positive answer to the first research question provides further evidence for the benefits of extensive reading in promoting high school students' autonomous vocabulary learning. However, the small effect size for the impact of extensive reading underscores the various factors which were involved inside and outside the classroom during the treatment. Extensive reading, as implied by its name, is an individual activity highly under a person's control; individual characteristics, time spent on the reading material, strategies used, and motivation of the reader are only a few factors to mention that can affect the process of reading. Nevertheless, presence of such factors should not prevent teachers from implementing it in their classrooms as it could help learners move towards autonomy. However, what this study attempted to show is that teachers' control over extensive reading can make it a useful technique for improving learners' vocabulary knowledge. The responsibility of teachers is to devise tasks and activities which could assist them in providing such control. The participants of the study seemed to be motivated for reading the story books and the classroom activities seemed to have a supportive role in boosting learners' plea for learning new vocabulary. Also, the learners appeared to develop positive attitude toward their English language course. The finding of the present study affirms Murphy (2008) who stated that "a growing body of research indicates that when students are working on goals they themselves have set, they are more motivated and efficient, and achieve more than they do when they are working on goals that have been set by the teacher" (p.104). Additionally, the results of the present study show that learner autonomy plays an important role in developing and enhancing learners' vocabulary knowledge. Putting the responsibility of learning on the students' shoulders helps them "understand the idea that their own efforts are crucial for their improvement in language learning" (Grolnick, 1991, p.3).

The positive answer to the second research question is in line with Cotterall's (1995) study who showed that learners' motivation had vital influence on developing autonomous learning though his work was done in a course-based program for advanced learners. The present study, also, is in line with Elley (1991) who focused on the role of extensive reading and found it a useful activity for the improvement of reading proficiency and developing positive attitude toward language learning. The fact that the participants were free to do the reading task on their own pace and learn new words to act successfully in the in-class tasks and activities was the motor of their initiation.

By and large, in this study, controlled extensive reading provided the opportunity for the participants to read and learn new words. As Nation (2001, p, 155) argued, "the use of reading and other input sources may be the only practical options for out of class language development for

some learners"; especially when we are dealing with EFL contexts in which learners do not have adequate exposure to language.

### Suggestions and Recommendations

This study aimed at examining whether extensive reading as an autonomous technique followed by teacher's in-class control could enhance learners' vocabulary knowledge. It was an attempt to empirically show that providing opportunities for extensive reading can fasten the trend of the vocabulary learning and can increase learners' motivation in language learning. The fundamental role of extensive reading in vocabulary learning as a teaching strategy was more noticeable when students in the experimental group worked on the classroom tasks. Their teacher's help gave them the incentive to follow their individual reading. The findings of the present study suggests teachers, practitioners, and curriculum developers to consider extensive reading as a useful task for EFL learners, design the required materials, and develop useful in-class tasks for providing partial control over students' individual tasks. In order to foster autonomous learning, it is necessary to follow students' learning process step by step.

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## Appendix

Learning Style Survey (Cohen & Dörnyei,2001)

Read each sentences carefully.

For each item, circle your immediate response:

• 0 = Never      • 1 = Rarely      • 2 = Sometimes      • 3 = Often      • 4 = Always

Part 1: How I Use My Physical Senses

I remember something better if I write it down. 0 1 2 3 4

I understand lectures better when they write on the board.0 1 2 3 4

Charts, diagrams and maps help me understand what someone says. 0 1 2 3 4

**Visual- Total ...**

I remember things better if I discuss them with someone. 0 1 2 3 4

I prefer to learn by listening to a lecture rather than reading. 0 1 2 3 4

I like to listen to music when I study. 0 1 2 3 4

**Auditory- Total ...**

I need frequent breaks when I work or study.0 1 2 3 4

If I have a choice between sitting and standing, I'd rather stand .0 1 2 3 4

I think well when I move around (for example, pacing or tapping my feet)

**Tactile- Total ...** 0 1 2 3 4

Part 2: How I Expose Myself to Learning Situations

I learn better when I work or study with others than by myself. 0 1 2 3 4

I meet new people easily by jumping into the conversation. 0 1 2 3 4

It is easy for me to approach strangers.0 1 2 3 4

**Extroverted- Total ...**

I am energized by the inner world (what I'm thinking inside). 0 1 2 3 4

I prefer individual or one-on-one games and activities. 0 1 2 3 4

When I am in a large group, I tend to keep silent and just listen. 0 1 2 3 4

Part 3: How I Handle Possibilities**Introverted- Total**

I have a creative imagination. 0 1 2 3 4

I add many original ideas during class discussions. 0 1 2 3 4

I am open-minded to new suggestions from my peers. 0 1 2 3 4

**Random-Intuitive- Total ...-**

I read instruction manuals before using the device. 0 1 2 3 4

I trust concrete facts instead of new, untested ideas. 0 1 2 3 4

I prefer things presented in a step-by-step way. 0 1 2 3 4

Part 4: How I Approach Tasks

My notes and my school materials are carefully organized. 0 1 2 3 4

I write lists of everything I need to do each day. 0 1 2 3 4

I enjoy a sense of structure in the classroom. 0 1 2 3 4

**Closure-Oriented- Total ...**

I gather lots of information, and then I make last-minute decisions.0 1 2 3 4

I prefer fun or open activities rather than structured activities. 0 1 2 3 4

My schedule is flexible for changes.

0 1 2 3 4

**In this part please read the items and select the one which best describes your idea.**

SD=strongly disagree

D= disagree

N= not decided

A= agree

SA= strongly agree

**Part 5: Integrative Motivation**

Items: I study English words....

Q1: to be more at ease with other people who speak English

Q2: to meet and converse with more and varied people

Q3: to better understand and appreciate English art and literature

Q4: to participate more freely in the activities of other cultural groups

Q5: to know the life of the English-speaking nations

Q6: to understand English pop music

**Part 6: Instrumental Motivation**

I study English because....

Q13: I'll need it for my future career.

Q14: it will make me a more knowledgeable person.

Q15: it will someday be useful in getting a good job.

Q16: other people will respect me more if I know English.

Q17: I will be able to search for information and materials in English on the Internet.

Q18: I will learn more about what's happening in the world.