Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions regarding Language Learners' Procrastination

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ABSTRACT
Delaying in doing responsibilities and tasks assigned in language classes is a phenomenon that most of teachers have observed. Language learners' tendency to put off doing things can take place in different situations and for various reasons. The present study investigated the reasons for such deferments, called procrastination, through interviewing EFL teachers. During a semi-structured interview process, 23 teachers expressed their opinions regarding the causes of language learners' procrastination. The analysis of the data based on grounded theory methodology and their coding in three phases of open, selective, and theoretical coding led to the emergence of Dilatory Behavior as the core category which covered the situations in which language learners mostly procrastinate such as studying for examination, delivery of assignments, and acquisition of correct spelling. Further data collection and analysis revealed that language learners' procrastination could be attributed to internal factors such as affective and cognitive characteristics, competence-based issues, and mental and physical conditions as well as external factors such as task quality and context features. The results of this study can be useful for EFL teachers and curriculum developers in raising their awareness regarding the potential causes of language learners' procrastination and supplying them with the necessary information needed for devising appropriate strategies to reduce language learners' undue procrastination.

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1. Introduction

The value of time is acknowledged not only by elites but also by ordinary people as a precious asset and differentiating factor between success and failure. One group of people whose functioning relies heavily on time and the capacity to manage available time to their benefits is English learners, particularly those who start learning the new language after the age of puberty. In addition to the multiplicity of the factors involved in learning a second or foreign language, what may complicate and slow down the learning process is the learners' propensity to postpone performing required tasks. This is called procrastination and refers to the postponing of the beginning or accomplishment of a pre-determined activity or deferring making decisions (Steel, 2007). Although procrastination can happen in different contexts, it is mostly related to work and educational affairs (Klingsieck, 2013). The specific type of procrastination which happens in educational activities is called academic procrastination (Ozer, Demir, & Ferrari, 2009). It commonly refers to the students' intentional delays on pre-planned course of *study-related* actions (Steel & Klingsieck, 2016) and chiefly occurs in activities like doing exercises, submitting projects, studying for exam, etc. (Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 2000).

Previous studies have considered different cognitive (e.g., Burka & Yuen, 2008) or affective (e.g., Steel, 2007) underpinnings and did not pay attention to external factors (i.e., those related to the content and context of learning) whereas in Funder's (2008) view, they play a determining role in learners' academic procrastination. Learning a foreign language, as an academic field, is also prone to the occurrence of procrastination although a limited number of studies have been done in this regard. For example, Bekleyen (2017), in a correlational study, found that Turkish male EFL learners had a higher tendency to procrastinate than the females. In another study in Turkey, Babadogan (2010) did not found any significant relationship between academic procrastination and academic achievement of language learners. Despite these studies, the concept of procrastination in terms of its contributors in the area of foreign language learning is remained untouched. Any delay in acquiring what is needed for learners and performing what they are expected to do can slow down the rate of learning and minimize the outcomes. Thus, investigating the factors affecting language learners' procrastination (LLP) is of special importance.

To broaden the literature regarding procrastination in the field of foreign language learning, the researchers in this study decided to interview EFL teachers to elicit their ideas about the reasons for LLP. The reason was that they can have an external view on learners' characteristics and their context and express their views without any bias and prejudice. Doing such research can give a new dimension to the studies regarding procrastination, because it takes into account the ideas of third parties about language learners and applies the grounded theory method for language learners, which has not received much attention to date. Accordingly, the following research question was formulated:

What are EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the causes of LLP?

2. Review of the Literature

Procrastination is generally perceived as a shortcoming of will and includes behaving contrary to what one would usually prefer by neglecting to follow an arranged schedule (Pychyl, 2011). A specific type of procrastination, called academic procrastination, has been explained by the field experts as a "should-want" mismatch in which students act based on their preferences rather than pre-established plans (Bazerman, Tenbrunsel, & Wade-Benzoni, 1998). Rather than dealing with their academic tasks, students prefer to eat, rest, or mess around (Klassen, Ang, Chong, Krawchuk, Huan, Wong, & Yeo, 2010).

Therefore, students who are unfortunately influenced by procrastination devote a lot of time to undue tasks which are more interesting and less valuable and defer the proper undertakings that are useful and productive (Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008).

Literature indicates that procrastination has effects on both everyday lives and academic processes of students (Khooei-Oskooei, Ahangari, & Seifoori, 2021). Although some scholars claim that procrastination has not always negative effects on students' performance (Abramowski, 2018), others believe that psychological and physical costs associated with it such as high anxiety and poor performance outweigh its positive effects (Tice & Baumeister, 1997). To treat students' procrastination with the purpose of avoiding its destructive effects, it seems necessary to identify the causes of procrastination.

Regarding the probable causes of procrastination in academic tasks, there are different reports from students. They ascribe it to both personal and contextual factors. In a literature review by Sims (2014), four broad factors of low task satisfaction, perceived negative consequences, task performance inabilities detected by instinct, and distractions resulted from by other appealing tasks were mentioned as the causes of academic procrastination. Chang (2014) found anxiety and depression as the major causes of procrastination whereas Kandemir (2014) considered dissatisfaction as the source of procrastination. Van Eerde and Venus (2018) observed a negative association between sleep quality and procrastination and Fernie, Kopar, Fisher, and Spada (2018) determined procrastination related to poor mental health. On the other hand, Smith, Sherry, Saklofske, and Mushqaush (2017) revealed a positive correlation between procrastination and perfectionism.

Contextual factors affecting procrastination in the previous studies also include restrictions in personal or social life such as lack of access to the Internet and institute-related contributors like teachers' characteristics, and students' working conditions (Klingsieck, 2013, Steel, 2007). Nordby (2020) argued that syllabus choice, exam format, content knowledge, and teaching style of the teacher are among the contextual contributing factors of procrastination. Zhang and Feng (2020) found that stronger task aversiveness is a reason for more procrastination in task performance. However, the literature is not comprehensive regarding the causes of academic procrastination and probably there are potential causes that have not yet been considered by the researchers. Moreover, LLP remains untouched and it is not clear that language learners commit procrastination due to the same reasons mentioned for academic procrastination or there are other potential reasons.

3. Method

The present study was conducted based on grounded theory methodology (GTM). GTM is a qualitative research design that attempts to inductively build a theory that is grounded in the data itself (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It means that the theory originates from the participants' views rather than previously developed theoretical frameworks (Meston & Ng, 2012). Like some other exploratory studies conducted in Iran (e.g., Heshmatifar, Amirian, Zareian, & Davoudi, 2018; Sari, Khoshsaligheh, & Hashemi, 2013), the present study followed the principles of the classical grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Participants

The recruitment process was started by a formal notice in social media. In the studies conducted in the grounded theory design, the attendance of participants who have previous experience about the subject of inquiry (i.e., purposeful sampling) is

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necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inclusion criterion for the present study was the teachers' self-expression regarding their previous experience of dealing with procrastinating language learners during their professional background. Moreover, after initial development of the theory, the sampling continues in a theoretical basis. It means that those participants would be added to the study that can cultivate the relevant developing categories and bring about theoretical saturation (Chamaz, 2014). Therefore, the purposeful and theoretical sampling was continued up to reaching theoretical saturation by when 23 EFL teachers (10 males and 13 females) were interviewed. The participants were teaching English in different settings such as public and private high schools, universities, and language institutes in Tabriz, Iran. They were in the age range of 25 to 53 and their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 30 years.

Instruments

The researchers used intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2014) to collect data for the study. According to Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, and McKinney (2012), in grounded theory studies, during the back and forth movements between data collection and analysis, the interview questions would be adapted for several times to fit the different aspects of the emerging theory. Thus, the interviews were held in semi-structured design. As a result of these interviews, about 500 minutes of information was recorded and transcribed within a month (alternately and after each interview), which resulted in about 350 pages of raw written information.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Having a purposefully selected sample, the researchers began interview sessions. The interviews were held face-to-face and each lasted from 20 to 30 minutes. During the interviews, the participants were asked some fixed questions which included (a) their perceptions regarding the characteristics of a procrastinating language learner, (b) the situations and task types that language learners procrastinate in performing them, and (c) the reasons for which language learners mostly procrastinate, and based on their responses other complementary questions were also asked.

The central process in the analysis of the grounded theory data is coding. Glaser (1998) defines coding as affixing conceptual labels to different parts of data (i.e., incidents). In the process of open coding, the researchers coded the collected data and made them as incidents related to the LLP. Applying constant comparative method (Kelle, 2019), the researchers analyzed each incident and compared it to previously found incidents, and explored the similarities and differences between them. In the process of back and forth movement during data analysis the core category (i.e., Dilatory Behavior) emerged. After the emergence of the core category, the data collection and analysis were confined for selective coding to achieve theoretical saturation of the previously emerged categories.

The next step was theoretical coding of the data. According to Glaser (1978), in this step, the researcher attempts to make explicit and implicit links and relationships between the core category and recently emerging categories to explain the theoretical bases lying in the data. Thus, the researchers made the necessary connections between the core category and other emerging categories to develop the theory of LLP.

Although constant comparison of incidents to incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to categories is a self-correcting process and decreases the bias and error in coding collected data, an independent peer was recruited to review the open, selective, and theoretical codes as the researchers proceeded each phase of coding. This was done to strengthen the dependability and trustworthiness of the

results. The researchers and the independent peer had several face-to-face meetings and discussed the similarities and differences between emerged codes and treated the existing inconsistencies.

4. Results

During the constant comparative process, a core category was determined and the resultant selective codes were categorized under the two themes of internal and external causes. Concurrent with data collection and analysis, the theoretical codes were formulated to develop the emergent theory of LLP based on the teachers' perceptions.

The Core Category

The core category is the central phenomenon for the grounded theory (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021) which is selected on the basis of its frequency of occurrence and relationship to other categories. Dilatory Behavior (DB) was selected as the core category of the grounded theory in the present study and covered the areas in which language learners mostly procrastinate. For instance, an interviewee believed that studying for examination has been one of the main areas of procrastination. He mentioned that

> Most of the students do not study during the semester and defer it to the last days. They actually cram at the exam night and this is not effective for language learning which demands gradual progress. Such studies even if bring about temporal success at the exam, would not have permanent or long lasting effects on their progress. (Int#17)

Another type of intentional delay was late delivery of assignments. One of the participants asserted that "Learners do their assignments within the last minutes of the set deadline" (Int#6). Another respondent pointed to a worse condition and stated that "I've seen many language learners were doing their assignments in the class and

during the few minutes to the beginning of the session" (Int#9).

The last type of delay was the timely acquisition of the correct spelling of English words. Language learners do not practice word spelling up to the dictation exam night. A teacher told that "Spelling has turned to be a disaster. Language learners almost never pay attention to spelling and this can be due to the current focus on communicative skills, especially listening and speaking, in language classes. It's the dictation exam that forces them to learn spelling" (Int#15).

Causes of LLP

In the selective coding stage, two major categories emerged as the causes of LLP. The first major category was given the name of Internal Causes and included the factors related to language learners' individual characteristics. The second major category was called External Causes and referred to outside factors or those that are not in the control of the learners themselves.

Internal Causes

The major category of internal causes covered four subcategories of Affective Characteristics, Cognitive Characteristics, Competence-based Issues, and Physical and Mental Conditions.

Affective Characteristics included the internal causes of LLP which were relevant to language learners' emotions and moods and covered the concepts of *motivation*, *anxiety*, and *dissatisfaction*. According to Dornyei and Ryan (2015), motivation is the source of primary incentive to commence foreign language learning process as well as the main stimulus to carry on this prolonged and wearisome process. Regarding the role of motivation in procrastination, one of the respondents mentioned that

> The inadequacy of motivation is the outstanding source of procrastination in performing

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language tasks. Language learners' demotivation can be due to their lack of energy, lack of confidence, indefinite goals, and low levels of value devoted to the task under question. (Int#5)

Another teacher believed that extrinsic motivation can also be the source of LLP. He argued that "The learners who were motivated by extrinsic sources such as parents, teachers, or society requirements to learn English reported higher levels of procrastination experience" (Int#13).

Through putting off the language tasks, language learners can calm down their anxiety-provoking condition and at least reach temporal comfort. One of the respondents stated that "When language learners are anxious regarding an activity, they draw away their attention from the task and prefer to put it off to the last possible time in the future (Int#2).

Dissatisfaction was the last concept in this subcategory. Dissatisfied language learners can hardly convince themselves to take the responsibility of their learning and this sense may inspire them to give up the language tasks at least temporarily and commit procrastination.

Cognitive Characteristics was the name given to the language learners' conscious attributes that contribute to their procrastination and included three concepts of *perfectionism*, *lack of self-confidence*, and *locus of control*. Perfectionism has been defined by Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) as having exceedingly high norms for performance and imaginary goals together with critical evaluation of self. Most teachers assumed that perfectionism, despite its idealistic nature, reinforces language learners' delays in performing tasks. A teacher asserted

Perfectionist learners try to do everything in the best possible way and this cause to retard the work to the time that they feel they acquired

the necessary satisfaction in their performance. It means that they tend to get behind their tasks since they check the results repeatedly. (Int#14)

The second concept under Cognitive Characteristics was lack of self-confidence. The language teachers argued that when learners are not confident about their abilities and knowledge, they are not eager to do their works well-timed. In other words, the lack of self-confidence fortifies the sense of procrastination in language learners.

The last concept of this subcategory was locus of control. Locus of control refers to a person's beliefs about control over what happens to him or her and can be internal (i.e., reinforcement that comes from their own characteristics or traits) or external (i.e., reinforcement that is due to factors beyond their control) (Kormanik & Rocco, 2009). The participants contended that language learners with external locus of control commit higher amounts of procrastination in comparison with those who have internal locus of control. The justification of one respondent for her idea was that "Language learners with external locus of control may feel uncertain about their own skills and capabilities to accomplish their responsibilities and at last they may blame the conditions outside themselves for their delays" (Int#3).

Competence-based Issues included the concepts of *defective self-regulation*, *impaired decision-making*, and *inappropriate study skills*. Self-regulation is defined by Zimmerman (2000) as the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that guide individuals to set personal goals. In the participants' ideas, self-regulatory failure not only negatively influences the language learners' whole life, but it also increases their procrastination in performing language tasks. A teacher said that "the students who are not able to set goals for themselves are usually confused and don't have necessary incentive to initiate their tasks" (Int#16).

Impaired decision-making was the second concept in this subcategory. Decision-making, according to Dittrich and Johansen (2013), refers to the action or process of making decisions, and entangles executive functioning and the power of evaluating environmental information. The interviewees believed that in the process of language learning, learners make a series of decisions regarding different issues such as the aspects of language which needs focus, the preferred institute for study, the favorite teacher, the considered material, etc. Hence, according to the interviewees, making inappropriate decisions may be the cause of breakdowns in language learners' distinctive dimensions of life among which is committing procrastination in the language learning process.

The participants in the present study attributed LLP to their deficient study skills. One respondent asserted that "Some of my students are not aware of the proper ways of completing certain language tasks such as writing an essay or comprehending a written text which has unknown words" (Int#1). Another interviewee mentioned that a number of his students were not able to structure the essay assigned to them as their homework which finally led to the postponement and late submission of their assignments (Int#10).

Physical and Mental Conditions of the learners was the last subcategory of the internal causes of LLP that included three concepts of *illness*, *exhaustion*, and *sleeplessness*. Illnesses of the language learners were perceived by several teachers as a cause of LLP. Illness not only referred to the physical sicknesses but also covered mental disorders. One of the teachers argued that "When the students are physically or mentally out of mood, they are not interested to do their assignments and mostly postpone them to another time in the future" (Int#14).

Similar to illness, the concept of exhaustion covered both physical and mental aspects. Based on the participants' ideas, exhaustion can be both cause and outcome of procrastination. Thus, overcoming the sense of exhaustion can reduce their procrastination in language learning.

Sleeplessness was considered as another internal cause of LLP. The teachers believed that language learners' sleep quality has a significant role in their procrastination. Lack of enough sleep or having bad sleep habits reduces language learners' energy and, in this way, results in dilatory task performance. One respondent asserted "… learners sleep late; so, they don't have the necessary energy to perform their assignments within the due time" (Int#18).

External Causes

The second major category of LLP causes involved two subcategories of Task Quality and Context Features. *Task Quality* subcategory covered three concepts of *task amount*, *task aversiveness*, and *task complexity*. Regarding the role of task amount in LLP, the participants had some contradictory ideas. From 15 respondents who pointed out to task amount as a source of LLP, nine believed that higher amount of tasks assigned to language learners results in more intensive procrastination whereas others had an opposite idea. This controversy inspired the researchers to ask a complementary question about the logic behind the participants' ideas. One of the interviewees answered that

When the learners are supposed to do varieties of tasks, they are not certain about which one should receive priority. Therefore, they spend lots of their time on deciding the appropriate order of task performance. They even may start a task and then give it up to start another task and this process may be repeated for several times. (Int#12)

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In contrast, another interviewee who considered task amount as a source of her LLP mentioned that "Language learners who have small amount of assignments postpone them to future times since they think that they have lots of time to do them. Hence, this time abundance itself can be a source of procrastination among them" (Int#21).

The second concept was task aversiveness which has been defined by [Milgram, Marshevsky, and Sadeh (1995)](#) as the degree to which a task is unpleasant or unenjoyable to accomplish. The respondents believed that language learners are inclined to defer task completion and procrastinate more frequently on tasks which are considered to be more dislikable or less favored than others.

Regarding task complexity, one of the interviewees said that "Complex and difficult tasks increase language learners' anxiety, hence, cause more procrastination in accomplishing their assignments" (Int#4). Another respondent argued that "Difficult tasks demand much knowledge. Thus, when language learners do not have the necessary knowledge, they slow down performance of the tasks and in this way their procrastination increases" (Int#11).

Context Features as the second subcategory of External Causes covered three concepts of *teacher behavior, institute expectations,* and *environmental distractors*. About teachers' behavior, one of them believed that "Teachers can motivate their students to do their tasks within the due time through supporting and guaranteeing the gratification of language learners' autonomy and needs for perceived competence" (Int#7). Another teacher argued that

"Controlling behavior and intimidation of language learners can generate a sense of hate toward the course and may provoke their procrastination in task performance" (Int#19).

Regarding the role of institute expectation, some participants believed that the expectations of language institutes from their students can be effective in the degree of their procrastination. They added that such effects can be both positive (i.e., reducing procrastination) and negative (i.e., increasing procrastination).

The last concept of this subcategory was called environmental distractors. One teacher argued that a messy desk in learners' room, for example, can easily become a distractor for them and result in procrastination (Int#11). Another teacher believed that language learners may be distracted by an outdoor view with a large amount of motion (Int#18).

The Grounded Theory of LLP

In the present study, the results of the data analysis gave rise to a grounded theory which explains the causes of LLP from the standpoint of EFL teachers. The theory was developed through synthesizing internal and external factors affecting LLP. The analysis of the data revealed that internal causes embraced affective and cognitive characteristics, competence-based issues, and mental and physical conditions of language learners whereas external causes involved task quality and context features (Figure 1). On the basis of the grounded theory of LLP, it can be hypothesized that controlling the internal and external causes can reduce LLP and its unfavorable outcomes on their performance.
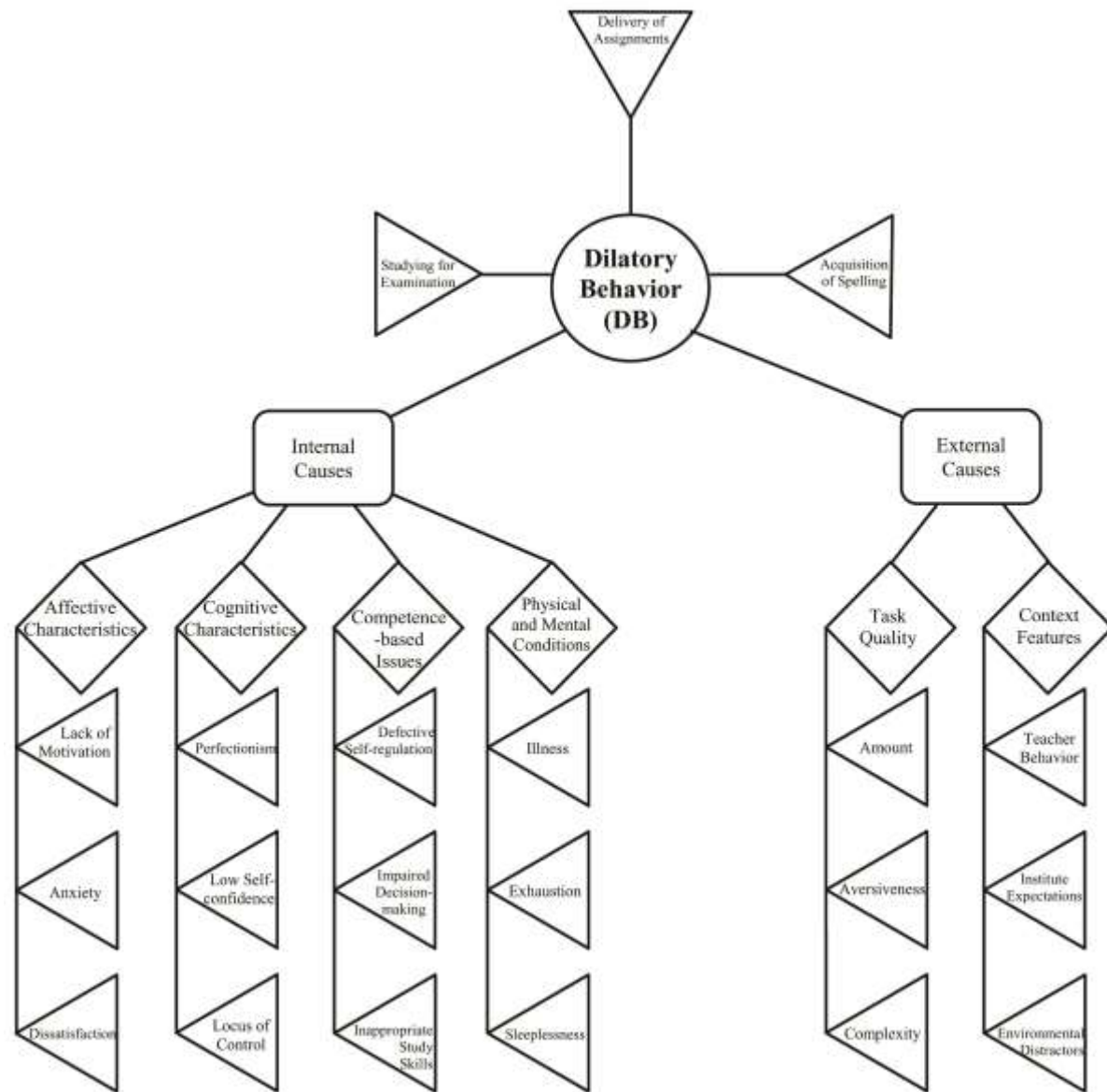
Figure 1. Schematic representation of the grounded theory of LLP

5. Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the EFL teachers' ideas about the causes of LLP. Regarding the situations in which, in teachers' ideas, mostly procrastinate, including studying for examination, delivery of assignments, and acquisition of correct spelling, all the findings can be considered novel since studies on the LLP is rare in the literature. These situations demand higher levels of consciousness and attention to ongoing tasks. Thus, delays in the accomplishment of such tasks can be attributed to some reasons that diminish language learners' attention.

Causes such as low self-confidence, exhaustion, sleeplessness, institute expectations, and some features of tasks like their amount and complexity were touched for the first time in the present study. In spite of the novelties in the findings of this study, some parts of the theory are supported by the previous studies. For example, the results of the present study are in line with the findings of Sims (2014). Chang (2014) contended that personal dispositional factors related to fear of failure, like anxiety and depressions, intensify procrastination and Kandemir (2014) revealed that those who are satisfied in their lives commit lower levels of

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procrastination whose results are consistent with the findings of the present study. Smith et al. (2017) found a significant positive correlation between procrastination and perfectionism. Although correlation between two variables does not show any cause and effect relationship between them, their interdependence supports our findings.

In terms of the role of self-regulation in LLP, our findings are also justifiable both theoreticaly and empirically since lack of self-regulation leads to the lack of control on behavior and unwanted deferments occur. Senecal, Koestner, and Vallerand (1995) are of the idea that lack of self-regulation prevents individuals from making decisions to perform their responsibilities and leads to postponement in their accomplishment. Grunschel, Patrzek, Klingsieck, and Fries (2018) also assert that fostering self-regulated learning can reduce students' academic procrastination. On the other hand, the roles of impaired decision-making and inappropriate study skills in LLP can have roots in their incapability to recognize what is useful and what is not, which may result in subsequent wrong choices.

As stated in the literature review, Fernie et al. (2018) associated procrastination with poor mental health, which could confirm the results of the present study about the determining role of illness (mental and physical) in LLP. Van Eerde and Venus (2018) also claimed a negative relationship between sleep quality and procrastination, which acknowledges the role of sleeplessness in LLP, in this study.

Concerning the causal effect of task features on LLP, it can be argued that when learners perceive their tasks difficult or too much, they lose their concentration and decide to postpone them. This finding is consistent with Zhang and Feng's (2020) idea about the role of task aversiveness in procrastination. In terms of the role of teacher on LLP, the findings are defensible based on self-determination theory which considers teachers' power to direct the learners' performance as the negative side of motivation (Haerens, Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Van Petegem, 2015). In this regard, Nordby (2020) also emphasized the role of the teacher in the procrastination of students. Distractors also foster LLP since they deviate learners' attention from what they are supposed to do and direct them toward other unnecessary activities. Hence, the LLP may be increased with a raise in the frequency of distractors around them.

6. Conclusion

The results of the study broadened and systematized the awareness about situations in which language learners procrastinate (i.e., the core category) as well as the causes of LLP. The advantage of this study was acquiring data from EFL teachers (i.e., not learners themselves) who had extensive experience of dealing with and observing language learners with different levels of procrastination. This is advantageous since data collection from language learners had the risk of bias in expressing ideas due to internal attributions such as inclination for impression control and socially acceptable responding or external factors like saving self-esteem.

The present study can pave the way for developing interventions to reduce the phenomenon of procrastination. Strategies for developing language learners' self-regulation, time management, internal motivation, and reducing distractions as well as revising tasks assigned to language learners' in terms of their amount, aversiveness, and complexity can be taken by EFL teachers and curriculum developers.

Although the study had some innovations and added to the existing literature regarding the antecedents of LLP, it developed a grounded theory of LLP which needs validation by quantitative methods. This aim can be met by developing a questionnaire based on the causes emerging in the present study. In that case,

the current qualitative results can be considered the exploratory phase of an *exploratory sequential mixed method* design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). In addition, future studies may explore EFL teachers' opinions about consequences of LLP on their performance and their suggested strategies to overcome possible negative consequences of procrastination.

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