

# Learners' Readiness for Self- Direction and Views on Selecting the Learning Contents in Autonomous Classroom Settings

Sebnem Kucuk Gentry

MA Student, Istanbul Aydin University, Institute of Social Sciences, English Language Teaching  
sebnemgentryjr[at]stu.aydin.edu.tr

**Abstract:** *Self-directed learning is a language learning context where individuals are encouraged to take full responsibility for their own learning and it is also a desirable goal for both parties that is the teacher and the learner. This paper aims to investigate learners' readiness for autonomy and their views on selecting their language learning contents at the university level in English language lessons. The participants were 52 fresh men who are studying at a foundation university in Istanbul, Turkey in 2019-2020 academic year. In this study, the data were gathered through a Likert type Learner Autonomy Questionnaire which was developed by Egel (2003). Descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data. The results showed that the participants have plans to continue learning English independently without their teacher after their formal education is over. It also became clear that learners consciously connect the previously learned knowledge to the new ones. Finally, we found out that while the learners prefer to choose their study materials, they seem to hesitate in determining the subject to be learned.*

**Keywords:** Learners' perspectives, learner autonomy, selecting learning objectives, English language learning.

This study was produced from a part of researcher Şebnem Küçük's "Learners' perspectives on autonomy in EFL Turkish context" master's thesis.

## 1. Introduction

The quest to find the best teaching method kept many educators busy over the years. Since the shift from teacher-centered teaching and learning to learner-centered language teaching and learning autonomy gained more importance in language learning. Learner autonomy was first used in educational settings in 1979; it officially appeared in second language learning (ESL) in the Council of Europe Modern Languages Project (ECML). Many researchers (e. g., Holec, 1981; Boud, 1988; Little, 1991; Cotterall and Murray, 1999; Benson, 2001) took the lead in investigating and developing the concept of learning autonomy and language learning in education. Different researchers approached learning autonomy differently, which resulted in various definitions. For instance, Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). The previous definition has been widely cited in similar research papers and studies since it has proved to be remarkably robust. Holec (1981) argues that the critical element in autonomy is the learners' attribution rather than the learning settings (Dickinson, 1989). Nga (2014) defined learner autonomy as learners' "willingness and ability to take responsibility, to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning with tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teachers" (p.4). According to Boud (1988, p.23): The main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction (as cited in Cotterall, p.219). Cotterall (1999) defines autonomy as "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning." The specification of this "set of tactics" constitutes part of the research agenda for autonomous language learning. The tactics include setting

goals, choosing materials and tasks, planning practice opportunities, and monitoring and evaluating progress. Learners employ these tactics to varying degrees.

Learning, commonly used and understood, is an active process identified by acquiring knowledge, skills, and gaining experience through study or instruction given by professionals. According to Kolb (1984), learning is directly tied to how experiences contribute to learning, not where or when it occurs. Kolb's four-stage learning cycle model is based on prior research by Dewey, who advocated for "learning by doing" rather than "passively gaining," and Piaget, who advocated for "cognitive growth." According to Kolb (1984), the first stage is the "concrete experience," which occurs when the learners connect with their surroundings. Kolb (1984) refers to this process as "reflective observation," in which the information received from this experience is merged and compared with previous knowledge and information (p.38)

On what makes learner autonomy a significant and desirable goal in language learning settings, Little (1991) describes it in three main areas. Learners are involved in the decision-making of their own learning; therefore, their learning environment should be "focused and purposeful" (Little, 1991, p.8). Second, teachers should focus more on building a learner-centered classroom rather than the traditional teacher-centered classroom (Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1997). Finally, as learners take responsibility for their own learning, the knowledge they gain should make them influential members of society (Little, 1991).

Despite the great attention that learner autonomy has gained through the years and researchers' interest in exploring this area of study. Little (1991) categorized three misconceptions

that is related to learner autonomy. The first misconception is related to “self-instruction,” which is widely thought to be a synonym of autonomy. The second misconception as identified by Little (1991) is related to learners’ behavior which can take various forms. Little (1991) referred to the many stages and degrees of learner autonomy that learners need to be autonomous. Another misconception that Little (1991) introduces is directly linked to teachers’ teaching methods in their classrooms. In other words, whether the teacher takes complete control over the classroom or not. Along the same line, other researchers (e. g., Esch, 2014; Benson, 2001) have introduced other misconceptions in language learning settings. For example, Benson (2001) identified two issues that cause confusion and misconceptions in learning autonomy. These two issues are linked to a) the term itself and b) the belief that an autonomous learner environment relinquishes the teacher control over the classroom.

### Aim of the study and research questions

This article aims to present learners’ views on readiness for self-directed learning and their choices for content selection in the language learning process.

- 1) To one extent, do the learners feel they are ready for self-directed learning?
- 2) What are the learners’ views relating to the selection of language learning content?

## 2. Literature Review

Researchers tend to have a different perspective when defining attitudes, and they argue that the latter is not a synonym for motivation. For example, Wenden (1991) defined attitudes as learner motivation, beliefs, or evaluation of a language aspect. However, there is a general agreement that attitudes and motivation have a positive correlation (Aldosari, 2014; Palomar et al., 2020). In this context, other researchers (e. g., Gardner, 2001; Oxford, 1999; Dornyei, 1998) said that learners’ motivation, their attitudes towards learning, and the environment in which they practice their language and other affective variables are significant factors to inspire their choices towards an autonomous learning environment.

Why is it significant to study and explore learners’ beliefs in language learning? Researchers agree on many reasons. First, it is believed that learners’ attitudes towards learning influence behaviors such as selecting certain books to read or speaking a foreign language (Kaballa and Crowley, 1985). Second, a relationship between attitudes and success or achievement in language learning has been shown to exist. Schibeci and Riley (1986), as cited in Weinburgh (2000), reported that there is evidence that attitudes influence achievement and not the other way around. However, there is an interaction between language learning and the learners’ environment in which the learning takes place—in other words, having an attitude towards language learning plays a significant role in learners’ success or not. Third, identifying and acknowledging learners’ attitudes about language learning will significantly benefit both learners and educators (Getie, 2020). Saracaloglu (1992) stated that specific characteristics (e. g., interest, values, tendency) shape learners’ attitudes. Gardner (1985) shared

four aspects of the second language learning (L2) context. They are:

- 1) Cognitive and affective (i. e., emotions and feelings are attached),
- 2) Dimensional rather than bipolar,
- 3) Attitudes are learned and not inherited, and
- 4) Attitudes can be modified, although they tend to persist.

Nevertheless, researchers believe we need to reconsider how we approach attitudes if we are keen to understand them better. For example, in the context of the language learning process, scholars believe that motivation is linked to the attitude that influences the former for successful language learning (Gardner, 1985; Getie, 2020).

On another note, it is believed that a well-planned and thoughtfully designed curriculum is significant for effective learning. Kerr (2002) suggested that all learning objectives have two main qualities: a) the teacher’s intent and b) the learning outcome for the learner. Different researchers classified learning objectives into different categories. For instance, Kerr (2002) classified learning objectives into three main domains:

- 1) Knowledge (What does the teacher want his/her students to know that they did not know before?).
- 2) Skill (i. e., what does the teacher want the students to be able to do that they could not do before?).
- 3) Understanding (What does the teacher want his/her students to understand at the end of the lesson that they did not understand before?).

Hay-Mcber (2000) called for applying two domains: a) attitudinal domain and b) affective domain. Nevertheless, most research done on learning objectives is viewed from the perspective of teachers and educators, not learners.

On the other hand, having clear learning objectives is significant for a successful learning environment. Learning objectives are ideally described as a direction for learning to help them acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Weil Cornell Medicine, n. d.). The importance of having clear learning objectives can be stated as

- 1) It helps learners set their expectations,
- 2) It guides their learning processes,
- 3) It helps them organize their learning,
- 4) It provides learners with opportunities for a more prosperous and challenging learning experience, and
- 5) It helps learners promote a more autonomous learning environment.

The framework of the taxonomy of educational objectives led by Benjamin Bloom addresses how this taxonomy serves as a great management tool in language learning. More specifically, he believed it could serve as a “means for determining the congruence of educational objectives, activities, and assessments in a unit, course, or curriculum” (Krathwohl, 2002). However, as previously stated, learners’ objectives in language learning settings are significant for their absence.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The study participants were 52 first-year students from the faculty of health and science and the faculty of engineering architecture at a foundation university in Istanbul. A significant number of participants were females (67.3%) while 32.7% were males. All of the participants reported that they were beginner level in the English language.

#### 3.2 Instrument

The data were collected through a questionnaire that was developed by Egel (2003). The questionnaire aimed at assessing students' level of control and their views towards their learning. The questionnaire included nine dimensions and 44 items that Egel (2003) identified under the term learner autonomy. Each dimension has several items that it addresses. The first dimension addresses learners' readiness for self-direction in language learning; the second dimension deals with learners' independent work in language learning; the third dimension aims to investigate the importance of the classroom and the teacher for learners in language learning, whereas dimension four aims to understand the role of the teacher's explanation and supervision in language learning from the perspective of the learners. Dimension five addresses learners' preferences of language learning activities; dimension six aims to explore learners' attitudes

towards the selection of content in language learning; the seventh dimension aims at learners' confidence about choosing learning objectives, dimension eight attempts to investigate learners' preferences for teacher assessment in language learning, whereas the last dimension investigates the learners' attitudes concerning target culture. This article presents findings gathered through the first and the sixth dimensions only.

#### 3.3 Procedures

The current study used a quantitative approach to explore the research questions and to understand the learners' perceptions about their language learning. Descriptive statistics (SPSS software) was used to analyze the data. The findings are presented using frequencies and percentages.

### 4. Findings

The findings of the study are presented under two dimensions of learner autonomy. The first dimension is the learners' readiness for self-direction and sixth dimension reveals the learners' views relating to the selection of language learning content.

The learners' readiness for self-direction in language learning process as identified through an analysis of their responses given to the seven statements are revealed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Learners Readiness for Self-direction

Items	AT F %	MT F %	ST F %	RT F %	NT F %
1: When I am learning English, I try to relate the new things I have learned to my former knowledge.	22 42.3	17 32.7	11 21.2	2 3.8	0 0
3. When I hear someone talking in English, I listen very carefully.	16 30.8	16 30.8	12 23.1	6 11.5	2 3.8
4. I want to talk in English with my family or friends.	17 32.7	9 17.3	15 28.8	7 13.5	4 7.7
16. In the future, I would like to continue learning English on my own/ without a teacher.	26 50.0	11 21.2	9 17.3	3 5.8	3 5.8
28. If I haven't learnt something in my English lesson, I am responsible for it.	21 40.4	9 17.3	18 34.6	3 5.8	1 1.9
32. I hesitate on the matter of compensating what I have missed in English lessons.	10 19.2	15 28.8	11 21.2	10 19.2	6 11.5

The responses for Item 1 showed us that 22 learners (42.3%) always related to their former knowledge when they learn English, whereas 17 learners (32.7%) stated they mostly try to relate the new things they have learned in the English language to their former knowledge. However, 11 learners (21.2%) sometimes supported their new knowledge with the former one in the context of language learning, and two learners (3.8%) rarely do so. The findings from this item suggest that a significant number of the participants (75%) incorporate their former knowledge with the new things they have learned in their English lessons; in a way to bridge their understanding of language learning. This is to say, learners connect their previous experiences to the new ones.

The findings from Item 3 showed that 16 learners (30.8%) always carefully listen if they hear someone speaking English, and the same number of the 16 participants (30.8%) mostly agreed on the latter. Another 12 learners (23.1%)

stated that they sometimes listen carefully if they hear someone speaking in English, while half of the latter 6 learners (11.5%) rarely listen if they hear other people speak in English around them. However, only two learners (3.8%) said they never listen attentively had they hear someone speaking in English around them. The findings from this item exhibited that more than half of the participants (61.6%) are aware of the importance of the listening skill in enhancing their abilities to be better communicators.

The responses given to Item 4 exhibited that 17 learners (32.7%) always want to communicate in English with their social environment (i. e., family, friends), whereas almost half of the latter 9 participants (17.3%) mostly want to talk in English with their family and friends. However, 15 learners (28.8%) sometimes want to communicate in English with their family and friends, seven learners (13.5%) rarely want to talk in English with their family and friends, and

four learners (7.7%) never want to do so. The findings from this item showed that half of the participants (50%) prefer to communicate in English with their social context.

The findings from Item 16 yielded that 26 learners (50%) always want to continue learning English independently from their teacher, whereas 11 learners (21.2%) mostly want to do so in the future. However, nine learners (17.3%) stated that they sometimes consider resuming their English language learning in the future without having a teacher guideline, three learners (5.8%) stated that they rarely and never, each, respectively, consider continuing their English language learning in the future autonomously. The findings from this item yielded that more than half of the study participants (71.2%) expressed their interest in learning the English language depending on themselves without relying on a teacher to direct or guide them.

To Item 28, about (40.4%) of the 21 participants stated that they always feel responsible for what they have not learned in their English lessons, whereas nine learners (17.3%) said they mostly feel responsible for what they have not learned in their English lessons. However, 18 learners (34.6%) declared that they sometimes feel that they were responsible for what they have not learned in their classes, three learners (5.8%) said they rarely feel responsible for what they have not learned in their English lessons, and only one learner (1.9%) thinks s/he feels no responsibility for what s/he does not learn in the classroom. The findings from this item suggest that more than half of the participants (57.7%) take responsibility for their learning, which is one of the core points of being autonomous learning.

However, for Item 32, ten learners (19.2%) shared they always hesitate to compensate for what they have missed in their English lessons, whereas 15 learners (28.8%) mostly hesitate to compensate for what they have missed in their English lessons. However, 11 learners (21.2%) said they sometimes hesitate regarding compensating the missed things from their English lessons, ten learners (19.2%) rarely hesitate, and six learners (11.5%) never hesitate to compensate for what they have missed in their English lessons. The study findings suggest that almost half of the study participants (48%) showed hesitation towards compensation for what they have missed during their English lessons.

**Table 2:** Learners' views relating to the selection of language learning content

Items	AT F %	MT F %	ST F %	RT F %	NT F %
25. I would like to select the materials for my foreign language lessons.	11 21.2	13 25	14 26.9	8 15.4	6 11.5
26. I would like to share the responsibility of deciding what to do in the English lesson.	15 28.8	10 19.2	17 32.7	5 9.6	5 9.6
29. I would like to choose the content of what is to be taught in the English lesson.	4 7.7	7 13.5	12 23.1	15 28.8	14 26.9

In Table 2, learners shared their perspectives on their choices when setting their learning objectives. In Item 25, 11 learners (21.2%) stated that they always liked to choose the

materials to be used in their foreign language lessons, 13 learners (25%) mostly liked to choose the materials of the lesson, and 14 learners (26.9%) sometimes liked to choose the foreign language materials to be used in their lessons. However, almost half of the latter (15.4%) rarely liked choosing their lessons materials, and six learners (11.5%) never did.

To Item 26, about 28.8% of the 15 learners said they would like to share the responsibility of deciding what to do in their English lessons, ten learners (19.2%) stated that they like to share the responsibility most of the time, and 17 learners (26.9%) declared that they sometimes like to take responsibility for deciding what to do in their English lessons. However, five learners (9.6%) rarely and neverlike to share the responsibility of deciding what to do in their English lessons.

Nevertheless, the findings from Item 29 exhibited that four learners (7.7%) always want to select their English lessons content, which is to be taught in the class, whereas almost the double number of seven participants (13.5%) most of the time want to choose the content of their lessons. Also, 12 learners (23.1%) declared that they sometimes want to choose the lesson content, 15 learners (28.8%) said they rarely want to choose the content of their English lessons to be taught in the classroom, and 14 learners (26.9%) never want to choose the content of their English lessons.

## 5. Conclusion

Many researchers, educators, and teachers agree that learner-centered teaching and learning helps and fosters learner autonomy. In the context of EFL/ESL, especially after the transformation from a teacher-centered classroom to a learner-centered classroom, the latter argue that learners need to be engaged in their study choices to have an authentic learning experience and learn the language more meaningfully and effectively.

In this study, learners are aware of the importance of learner autonomy in their educational settings, advocating for the learner-centered classroom (e. g., using audio-visual tools on their own). However, they lack the necessary attitude to attain their learning objectives and be part of a meaningful educational experience.

Participants take responsibility for their learning, especially if they missed a lesson, and have the habit of connecting their previous knowledge to new lessons and experiences. Most of the participants showed some independence, but when it comes to selecting learning objectives, learners hesitate to be part of the process and want their teachers to choose the contents that will be taught in the classroom. Learners are also willing to carry their independent learning out of the classroom.

## 6. Limitations and Further Research

The study has limitations that can be addressed to investigate the research problem better. First of all, the size of the participants in the study is relatively small; therefore, future studies should consider having a larger sample size.

The current paper only investigated the research problem from the learners' perspective, leaving their teachers out; however, for a more quality research environment, a future research paper should take into account the perspectives of their educators. Lastly, a mixed-methods research study can be conducted to understand the learners' attitudes and objectives in language learning more deeply.

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