

# An Investigation into Learners' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy at Tertiary Level

Osman Sabuncuoglu<sup>1</sup>, Tamer Halayqeh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Dr. Istanbul Aydın University

<sup>2</sup>Master's Student, Istanbul Aydın University, Institute of Social Sciences

**Abstract:** *Over the last three decades, the term learner autonomy has gained a great deal of attention in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Recently, the independency in learning as well as the students active participation of becoming autonomous learners, not only in but also outside the classroom, has been highly concerned among researchers. It has been acknowledged that all traditional teaching styles are useless and do not give students adequate opportunities to reflect on their own learning process. In order to solve the conflict of whether or not students are able to undertake responsibility to become autonomous learners, it is indispensable to investigate the learners' perceptions of learner autonomy at a tertiary level, and so to find out any chances to promote learner autonomy in and outside the classroom. Hence, this study investigated the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' perceptions of learner autonomy and to what degree their perception of their responsibilities, abilities, motivation as well as the activities and behaviours they undertake in and outside the classroom is actually applied. To achieve this, 110 EFL students, who are studying at Istanbul Aydın University in different grades, were selected to participate in this study. Utilizing a quantitative data collection method, the data were collected through a questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed the fact that the majority of EFL students are autonomous English learners. However, the minority of them rely more on their teacher to instruct their learning process.*

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy, English language teaching, English language learners, Tertiary level, Autonomous learners.

## 1. Introduction

Recently, within the scope ELT, many studies, researchers, and academic papers, in relation to the learner autonomy field, have already been carried out. Although researchers like (e.g. Little, 1991, Chitashvili, 2007, Summer, 2010, Tütünlü, 2011, Dang, 2012, Kamberi, 2013, etc.) have spoken about the definitions, the importance, the development, the features, and the characteristics of learner autonomy, the term “spoon-feeding” that is related to the teacher-led approach, which means that learners only receive information from their teacher while learners are not appropriately engrossed in the learning practicability, is still widespread in education in many contexts worldwide. In short, in almost all schools, learners are just passive recipients from their teacher whose basic role is to transfer knowledge to pupils (Trinh, 2005). On the other hand, (Nga, 2014) stimulates the enhancement of learner autonomy. Therefore, the goal to achieve in the current study is to investigate learners' perceptions of learner autonomy whose results will doubtlessly assist teachers in improving their way of planning, teaching, evaluating the learning process and reflecting on their teaching.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Learner autonomy has existed in the field of English language teaching for approximately four decades. The emergence of learner autonomy starts with the publication of *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* published by Holec (1980), who defines learner autonomy as the ability to be responsible for the learning process.

When exploring the historical background of learner autonomy, Gremo and Riley (1995) are both good pioneers who have made a lot of contributions to learner autonomy in

foreign language learning. Many significant factors have been identified and a number of effective reasons for learner autonomy have been created:

- 1) The growing number of schools and universities and easy access to educational resources
- 2) Respect for minority rights
- 3) New insights into teaching and learning languages as a reaction to old-fashioned learning theories like behaviourism
- 4) Improvements made in adult education
- 5) Fast-growing demand for learning a foreign language
- 6) People's views of language learning
- 7) Advancements in Technology (p. 152)

Cotteral (1995) argues that there are three different reasons for learner autonomy in foreign language learning. Firstly, the philosophical justification is the belief that learners have the right to choose what to study in the learning process. Secondly, the pedagogical justification claims that adults are more self-confident and safer in their own learning process. They can learn a foreign language more and more effectively when they are actively involved in making decisions about the different stages of their learning process: pace, sequence, mode, and the content of instruction. Finally, the practical argument argues that teachers may not always be present or available in order to support and help students learn by themselves.

We can find a highly strong relation within both autonomy the learners' and the teachers' in the field of second language learning. The shift in control from teacher to learner is crucial to an autonomous approach regardless of the particular organisational structure. It involves a change in role, and can bring feelings of anxiety, uncertainty or discomfort (Little, 1995). Teachers in all educational contexts are the human interface between learners and resources. They can only help their learners to develop a

capacity for critical reflection if they have this capacity themselves. It is strongly argued in the field of second/foreign language education that learner autonomy is dependent on teacher autonomy.

Learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant in the learning process. Teachers change their role from source of information to counsellor and manager of learning resources. New roles for teachers also include (Yang, 1998) helpers, facilitators, advisors, guides, active participants, and consultants.

Autonomy represents reshaping of teacher and learner roles and shift of responsibility from teachers to learners due to a change in the distribution of power and authority. Since autonomy involves a transfer of the control over learning decisions from the teacher to the learners, Huang (2006) perceives learner autonomy as a process concerned with the negotiation between teacher and learner in an atmosphere of genuine dialogue and collegiality.

### 1.2 The Purpose of the Study

This research aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of learner autonomy. Firstly, this thesis will explore who will be responsible for a large number of factors which can influence student achievement like student progress in a lesson and self-study, student motivation, objectives of the course, content of the next lesson, activities for the next lesson and evaluation of the course. Secondly, students' ability to make decisions will be determined. i.e. how good students are at making decisions about the learning process. Thirdly, students' motivation level will be examined to determine how motivated students are. The relationship between motivation and learner autonomy will be discussed in great detail. Finally, the effects of in-class and out-of-class activities on learners will be examined. What do students do on their own and how often have they done outside-class -activities and inside-class activities?

### 1.3 Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do EFL learners of different proficiency levels view the responsibilities of learners and teachers in learning English?
- 2) How do they view their ability to learn English autonomously?
- 3) How high is EFL students' motivation level?
- 4) What different learning activities and behaviours have they utilized and at what frequency?
- 5) Which grade students are the most autonomous of all-first, second or third-year students?

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

Learner autonomy has recently become one of the most crucial issues in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) for probably four decades. Since the 1980s there has been a lot of research into learner autonomy as educators emphasize the role of being autonomous learners who can apply autonomy in language learning.

Learners can succeed in learning a foreign language if only they can take on responsibility for their learning process. Those who make decisions about what to learn, how to learn and how to be assessed can be more successful than others. Active learner involvement is an important factor which can impact foreign language learning. Learners should be actively involved in the learning process so that they can be aware of how to develop their language skills.

Learners usually need to learn how they learn. Teachers can train their learners to learn how to learn. This can allow them to study English independently of their teachers. Otherwise, learners will rely on their teacher and will do well. This reason is due to their failure in promoting autonomous learners.

Learners' view of language learning plays an important role in student achievement. When learners have control over the learning process, this can help them to become more successful in language learning. They need to become autonomous learners who can be encouraged to view themselves as very important participants. This insight into language learning can assist them in learning English successfully. Language learning is individually constructed, so all learners need to be autonomous to reach the required outcomes.

This will be a very important study for educationalists and teachers. Teachers should learn to put learners responsible for their language learning, so this research will help them develop learner autonomy and guide their students to learn to study independently. When learners are responsible for the improvement of the language, they will make a lot of progress.

Self-directed learning is a very important issue teachers and educationalists need to deal with. Learners need to be self-directed rather than spoon-fed. For this reason, they only need to be guided and trained by teachers. When teachers train learners to learn how to learn, they can be more successful than those who are not aware of study skills and strategies.

## 2. Methodology

The current study seeks to investigate the learners' perceptions of learner autonomy at tertiary level. The main objective of the study aims to achieve, which was done by utilizing a questionnaire to the target sample, a better understanding with respect to learners' perceptions of learner autonomy based on four parts: responsibility, ability, motivation, and activities and behaviors. There are a variety of methods used in research like quantitative, qualitative and mixed method. This study used the quantitative data collection method.

The participants of the study were ELT students. The study has included a sample of 110 subjects. Our target group of students was divided almost equally into three subgroups: first year students with a total number of 34, second year students with a total number of 45, and third year students with a total number of 31, who are studying English language teaching at Istanbul Aydin University. The target

group of the study consisted of both males and females who came from different nationalities including only non-native speakers of English in which they were studied through questionnaires.

The required data for the current study was collected by the means of only one key instrument. A questionnaire which was developed by Chan, Spratt, and Humphreys (2002) with the title: Developing Learner Autonomy: The Perceptions and Needs of Japanese EFL Learners.

In the current study, the questionnaire developed by Chan, Spratt, and Humphreys (2002), is made up of five parts. The first part of the questionnaire was planned to collect demographic information about the participants (Table 3.1) whereas the other categories of the questionnaire are presented in the following table.

**Table 3.2:** Summary of the Questionnaire Categories

Content	No of Items
Responsibilities	13
Abilities	11
Motivation	1
Activities and Behaviours (outside class)	17
Activities and Behaviours (inside class)	5

After administrating, distributing and collecting the data through utilizing the questionnaire, the data was analysed via Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22. To find out the differences between the first, second and third-year students with respect to their responsibilities, abilities, motivation and activities and behaviours in and outside the classroom, the collected data were examined by using the one way ANOVA test.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Among the first, second and third-year students, the group which has the highest tendency to hold responsibility in learning English independently from their teacher is the third-year students due to the fact they have positively responded to the questions related to the responsibilities. Meaning that students who are in advanced level of their studies are willing to hold responsibilities more than students who are in a lower level due to their awareness of how important it is to work on their own in order to be successful.

In terms of students' abilities, it has been found that the second-year students have got the highest level of being able to learn English autonomously. Throughout the questionnaire, second-year students have proven that they are highly able to handle the learning process independently more than any other grade. It is highly recommended for further studies to investigate the reason behind that, among all grades the second-year students have the highest ability to learn English autonomously.

It has been found that the first-year students have the highest level of motivation towards learning English autonomously. Worth noting that although they have the highest level of motivation, it is obvious that they start losing their motivation gradually as they further in their education.

An interesting finding indicates that all the participated students have positive attitudes towards working independently outside the classroom. For instance, the great majority of the participants note down new words and their meanings. In addition to that, almost most of them read books or magazines in English, watch English TV programs, watch English movies and talk with foreigners in English.

Similar to the results that have been found about the activities and behaviours outside the classroom, all the participants share positive attitudes towards the activities and behaviours inside the classroom, but with a slight difference in which the first and third-year students have a higher level of independency that the second-year students. Some of the activities and behaviours that students hold autonomously are: asking the teacher questions when they do not understand, discuss problems in learning with their classmates and take opportunities to speak in English.

It could be concluded that it is hard to find out which grade students is the most autonomous of all due to the fact that each of the first, second and third-year students has an autonomous feature more than the others. For instance, first-year students have the highest level independency in terms of their motivation, second-year students have the highest level of independency in terms of their abilities and third-year students have the highest level of independency in terms of their responsibility.

### 4. Conclusion

In this research, learner autonomy has been defined as the ability/capacity of the students to study on their own, taking control of and responsibility for their learning, make decision about their own learning, and willingness to learn by themselves. This general definition encompasses almost all the elements of learner autonomy that previously mentioned in the literature by other researchers. Holec (1981), for example, stated that being an autonomous learner means that one is involved in all the decisions making processes. Similarly, Macaro (1997) defines autonomy as being able to take responsibility for one's own learning.

The data collected over the course of this research indicated that the majority of EFL learners acknowledged that they were to take the responsibilities of the learning process rather than fully depend on their teachers. In the meantime, some of them hold negative attitudes by relying on their teachers with regard to the learning process.

Based on the findings discussed in the previous chapter, this research revealed the fact that the learners' actual perceptions of learner autonomy in terms of their responsibilities, abilities, motivation and different kinds of activities and behaviours they hold in and outside the classroom. Which is to say, EFL learners are having a highly positive tendencies towards autonomously being in charge of their own learning process with only slight differences among them. The lack of opportunities students have is the reason why it is hard to promote learner autonomy. The traditional way of teaching which is mainly the teacher-centeredness is still affecting students progress in their learning. However, it is believed that students' awareness

nowadays is higher than before according to the results found in this study. For instance, students who are in advanced level of their study are highly willing to take responsibility in learning more than the students who are still at the beginning of their studies in which they need more help from their teacher.

Furthermore, further studies are required to know better why is it that the second-year students have the highest ability to learn English independently. In addition, students such as the first-year students are the most motivated students among all grades due to the fact that they are exploring the subjects they are about to study. However, it has been noticed that as soon as they further their studies, they gradually start losing their motivation.

An interesting finding indicates that all the participated students have positive attitudes towards working independently outside the classroom. For instance, the great majority of the participants note down new words and their meanings. In addition to that, almost most of them read books or magazines in English, watch English TV programs, watch English movies and talk with foreigners in English. Furthermore, similar to the results that have been found about the activities and behaviours outside the classroom, all the participants share positive attitudes towards the activities and behaviours inside the classroom, but with a slight difference in which the first and third-year students have a higher level of independency that the second-year students. Some of the activities and behaviours that students hold autonomously are: asking the teacher questions when they do not understand, discuss problems in learning with their classmates and take opportunities to speak in English.

Finally, it could be concluded that it is hard to find out which grade students is the most autonomous of all due to the fact that each of the first, second and third-year students have an autonomous feature more than the others. For instance, first-year students have the highest level independency in terms of their motivation, second-year students have the highest level of independency in terms of their abilities and third-year students have the highest level of independency in terms of their responsibility.

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