

## The Perceptions of the English Language Teaching Preparatory Program Instructors about Learner Autonomy

Emine Bulur Civanoglu <sup>1,a</sup>, Enisa Mede <sup>2,b,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dogus University, Acibadem, Istanbul, Turkey

<sup>2</sup>Bahcesehir University, Besiktas, Istanbul, Turkey

<sup>a</sup>ebulur@dogus.edu.tr, <sup>b\*</sup> enisa.mede@es.bahcesehir.edu.tr

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract.** The concept of autonomy is not new in the field of foreign language teaching but recently there has been an increasing interest in learner autonomy in particular, as new trends in foreign language teaching support a learning environment which enables learners to take control of their own learning. In other words, language classrooms have become more learner-centered than they used to be. The purpose of this study is to find out how language teachers perceive learner autonomy based on their classroom practice. The study was conducted at an English Preparatory Program of a foundation university located in Istanbul. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed significant implications in terms of learner autonomy in language classrooms.

### 1.Introduction

Autonomy and independence have been the two terms which have gained much attention in literature for the last two decades (Little, 1991). According to Borg and Al- Busaidi (2007), most of the research on learner autonomy has mainly focused on three common areas: the definition of learner autonomy, why it should be promoted and how it should be implemented in language teaching and learning. However, to the knowledge of the researcher, most of these studies mostly attempted to identify the perceptions of students' related to learner autonomy rather than instructors considering what learner autonomy means for them and how they promote it in their classrooms. To fulfill this gap, this study aims to identify the perceptions of the EFL instructors about learner autonomy. The results of the study will provide some suggestions in terms of the design and evaluation of the language preparatory program.

#### 1.1. Literature Review

##### 1.1.1. Definition of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is one of the current research topics being investigated in the field of language teaching. Holec (1981, p.3) describes learner autonomy as learners' ability to take charge of their own learning. By being responsible for their own learning, learners actually take control over all the decisions regarding their learning process. According to Little (1991), learner autonomy is a matter of the learners' psychological relation to the process and content of learning. According to this definition, autonomous learners are ones who take responsibility for their own learning explicitly. Finally, Benson and Voller (1997) state that learner autonomy is taking personal responsibility for learning. Learners can be regarded as autonomous if they are able to study entirely on their own, use skills which can be applied in self-directed learning, activate their inborn capacity suppressed by educational institutions, practice learners' responsibility for their own learning, and determine their own learning.

### *1.1.2. Learner Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition*

Apart for reaching a common definition of the term autonomy, the way by which learner autonomy can be developed has been another important point discussed in the relevant literature. Since being an autonomous learner requires creating a sense of responsibility to participate actively in the learning process, it takes quite some time to develop it (Scharle and Szabo, 2000, p.4). To be able to achieve the goal, which is to create autonomy for learners, motivation and self-confidence, monitoring and evaluation, learning strategies, cooperation, sharing information with the learner, consistent control, delegating tasks and decisions must be in the priority list while teaching a language (p. 8).

According to Illés (2012), autonomy is integral to language learning and use which requires engaging students in processes of communication by which learners will have the chance to use their skills for problem solving. She also points out that the course tasks for learners have to include problems which are challenging enough in order to activate their linguistic capacity as well as other resources. For this reason, it is important to choose the communicative tasks which do not replicate or rehearse real-life communicative tasks as in those types of tasks learners are asked to look at the conditions through the eyes of native speakers. However, this doesn't make them autonomous as it doesn't allow them to develop their capacity. While expecting learners to practice meaning making and the concomitant problem solving through the activation of their capacity, teachers are required to create an atmosphere in which they ask learners to go beyond conformity and actively involve themselves in interpretive procedures. When learners are provided with such an atmosphere, they are expected to solve the code and propose solutions which they don't necessarily face in everyday interactions.

According to Reinders (2010), expecting students to turn into autonomous learners in a very short time without giving them a clear rationale, allocating them some reflection time as well as giving them the support they need while acquiring skills for autonomy is rather unachievable as the whole process needs a big change in the whole classroom atmosphere. Asking students to take over the responsibility for their own learning is something different for most students no matter where they are. Although some teachers also complain about their students' unwillingness to be more actively involved in the learning process, they should try to understand the fact that student might not have such an experience before so it is normal for them not to be cooperative at first.

### *1.1.3. Learner Autonomy in Turkey*

Learner autonomy has become a focus of attention of the research in the field of English Language Teaching in Turkey as well. However, as the existing literature is mostly on the definition of the term or how to foster it in language classrooms, the research which has been conducted in Turkey

has dealt with other aspects of learner autonomy, some of which will be summarized in this part of the paper.

Sert (2006), for example, carried out a case study among EFL student teachers in Turkey to investigate English language learning autonomy. 57 student teachers who were studying at their freshman year at a Turkish university participated in the study. The aim of the study was to find out if EFL student teachers were able to direct and monitor their own learning process for autonomous learning. Another point which the study investigated was to question if the student teachers managed to set language learning goals. Finally, the study also searched to answer how the student learners' ratings of their language skills through the CEF self-assessment checklist Level B2 compared with the scores they got from FCE. According to the data gathered from the study, the students were not capable of identifying what to master and how to master it in respect to efficient learning as they lacked the capacity for reflection about how to monitor their learning process.

In another study, Güven and Sünbül (2007) tried to investigate the relation between the learners' autonomy level and their learning style. 110 female and 148 male students were randomly selected for the study and they were both given a questionnaire and a learner style inventory to collect the data. The study revealed five important results. First of all, one third of the participants were in favor of taking part in discussions and simulations with a facilitator and a guide, which were the main features of activists. On the other hand, observations and reflecting were preferred by the other one third who were called reflectors. Secondly, the results show that all participants whose learning styles vary were prone to autonomous learning. Thirdly, it is stated that gender has no effect on participants' autonomy level and their learning styles. Fourthly, reflectors are said to have less autonomy than activists. Finally, activists' achievement scores and autonomy levels were higher than other groups.

Finally, Mede, Inceçay and Inceçay (2012) investigated the perceptions of language learners and teachers in terms of oral book reporting as a medium to foster learner autonomy in extensive reading courses across the English curriculum. The study was conducted at a preparatory program of a private university in Istanbul. The participants were asked to read graded readers chosen by the instructors of the program and write an oral report. For the purpose of the study, the students also had to choose another graded reader according to their own interests. Unlike the common procedure followed in the program, they were also required to present their book reports orally. The analysis of the reflection papers and semi-structured interviews indicated that oral book reporting was an effective tool to foster learner autonomy in language classrooms where extensive reading activities are highly encouraged by the curriculum.

### *1.2. Research questions*

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What does the term 'learner autonomy' mean to the English preparatory program instructors?
2. What are the perceptions of the English preparatory program instructors about the contribution of learner autonomy to foreign and second language learning?

## **3. Method**

### *3.1. Setting*

The study was carried out at English Preparatory Program at one of the foundation universities in Istanbul. The primary aim of the program is to meet the students language needs in general which will help them follow their undergraduate courses at their departments.

### 3.2. Sample / Participants

The total number of participants involved in the study was 58, which included administrative staff consisting of 6 level coordinators, 8 curriculum officers, 6 testing officers and 30 preparatory program instructors. Out of 58 participants, 32 of them were female and 26 were male.

As for their qualifications, half of the participants hold a Master's Degree in various fields while the other half had a Bachelor's Degree in the fields related to English Language including English Language Teaching, English Language and Literature, American Language and Literature and Translation. Regarding the participants' experience in the field of English Language Teaching, the data indicated that 51 of them were experienced teachers whilst the other 7 were novice teachers with a minimum of two years experience.

### 3.3. Instruments

Data for this study were obtained from a questionnaire and semi-structured interview which aimed to gather data about the EFL instructors' perceptions on the importance of learner autonomy in language preparatory programs.

#### 3.3.1. Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2007) study on learner autonomy. Specifically, only Section 1 (Learner Autonomy) from the original questionnaire was adapted since it mainly focused on the English language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Specifically, items 10 (*It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults*), 13 (*Learner autonomy can be achieved by learners of all cultural backgrounds*), 20 (*Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.*) and 23 (*Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners*), were excluded because they were not applicable for the context of this study (Appendix A). Each item in the scale was accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from '*strongly disagree*' (1) through '*strongly agree*' (5). The questionnaire was randomly administered to hundred and thirty six EFL instructors working at the Language Preparatory Program.

Before the questionnaire was administered, it was piloted with thirty-seven EFL instructors. The result of the reliability test for the instructors' questionnaire was found as  $\alpha = .723$  which indicates a high internal consistency of the items in the scale (Gliem and Gliem, 2003).

#### 3.3.2. Interviews

The semi-structured interviews included 7 questions that were prepared parallel to the questionnaire items. The questions mainly focused on the perceptions of the instructors on the topic of learner autonomy by asking their opinions about the main characteristics of autonomous learners, involvement of learners' in the decision making process about what to learn, the teacher's role in an autonomous learning environment, personal experience of autonomy in their own teaching practice, and finally the advantages and disadvantages of autonomy. The interview was carried out with twenty-eight EFL instructors who volunteered to share their opinions on learner autonomy.

#### 3.3. Procedure

The main study was conducted three weeks after the final version of the data collection instruments were prepared. The questionnaire was given randomly to the EFL instructors. Semi-structured interviews were carried out during the same period. Each interview protocol was carried out face-to-face with the instructors according to their weekly schedules.

### 3.4. Analysis

The data obtained through the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 16.00. As for the semi-structured interviews, the data were transcribed and analyzed using pattern coding (Bogdan and Biklen, 1994) and then, compared by two researchers for the inter-rater reliability. In order to find out whether the outcomes of the interviews and questionnaires were consistent with each other, the questions were grouped under the same categories.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Perceptions of the Preparatory Instructors about the Definition of Learner Autonomy

The findings of the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews provided evidence for the importance of learner autonomy in preparatory language programs. The descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and frequencies of the questionnaire are reported in Table 1 below. The statistics are used to discuss the results related to the perceptions of the EFL instructors concerning the definition of learner autonomy and its contribution to foreign and second language learning.

*Table 1. The perceptions of the EFL instructors' about the definition of learner autonomy*

| <i>Teachers' Perception of Learner Autonomy</i>  | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>F</i> |
|--|----------|-----------|----------|
| 1. Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy.   | 3.61     | .956      | 71.4     |
| 2. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.                      | 4.07     | .604      | 85.7     |
| 3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.      | 3.86     | .591      | 82.1     |
| 4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.                                   | 3.79     | .738      | 78.5     |
| 5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.                       | 3.46     | .793      | 50       |
| 6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.                         | 3.14     | .803      | 32.2     |
| 7. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.                        | 4.18     | .612      | 89.3     |
| 8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.  | 2.32     | .945      | 17.9     |
| 9. It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners. | 3.00     | .943      | 28.5     |
| 10. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.      | 3.89     | .737      | 75       |

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|---|------|-------|------|
| 11. Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.              | 3.96 | .576  | 82.2 |
| 12. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.             | 4.04 | .576  | 93.2 |
| 13. Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.   | 3.50 | 1.106 | 53.5 |
| 14. Learner autonomy is promoted through activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other. | 3.96 | .744  | 85.8 |
| 15. Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching.                           | 3.00 | .943  | 42.9 |
| 16. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.  | 2.82 | 1.020 | 28.6 |
| 17. Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners work together.                           | 3.86 | .591  | 75   |
| 18. Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.                                   | 3.82 | .476  | 78.6 |
| 19. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners are free to decide how their learning will be assessed.          | 3.00 | .816  | 28.6 |
| 20. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.                             | 2.07 | .604  | 3.6  |
| 21. Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.                             | 4.04 | .508  | 89.3 |
| 22. Promoting learner autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.   | 3.39 | 1.066 | 53.6 |
| 23. Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.                         | 3.14 | .663  | 32.2 |
| 24. Learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.                       | 4.07 | .663  | 89.3 |
| 25. Learning how to learn is the key to developing learner autonomy.  | 4.43 | .573  | 96.4 |
| 26. Learning to work alone is central to the development of learner autonomy.                                   | 3.11 | .875  | 35.7 |

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|--|------|------|------|
| 27. Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.                      | 3.89 | .497 | 82.1 |
| 28. The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.  | 3.64 | .678 | 60.7 |
| 29. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated. | 4.32 | .548 | 96.4 |
| 30. The proficiency of a language learner does not affect their ability to develop autonomy.                     | 3.18 | .945 | 50   |
| 32. Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner.                                     | 4.14 | .803 | 92.9 |
| 33. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.                   | 4.14 | .891 | 92.8 |

Based on the questionnaire results reported in Table 1, *EFL* instructors perceived the key terms such as independent study (85.7%), learner-centered classrooms (89.3%), motivated language learners (96.4%), supportive teacher role (92.9%), providing learners with choices in learning (89.3%), cooperative group work (89.3%) and self-evaluation (92.8%) to be fundamental while defining the concept of 'learner autonomy'.

On the scale out of 1 to 5, where 1 reflects strong disagreement and 5 reflects strong agreement, the table shows that the most supported definition for learner autonomy represented the technical orientation (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012). Specifically, the items with the mean scores of 3.50-5.00 and frequencies (70-100%) (Table 1) showed what 'learner autonomy' meant for the participants.

Further insights into the perceptions of the instructors about learner autonomy emerged from the interviews where the teachers were asked to elaborate on what the term meant to them (Appendix B). Four major concepts that reoccurred in the answers of the participants were responsibility for your own learning, motivated learner, supportive teacher and self evaluation. The following comments made by the instructors illustrate the prevalence of these ideas:

*I think that the learners should be given the responsibility for their own learning. In other words, they should be aware of what they are doing and why.*

*The teachers should support the students during their learning process to make sure they become independent learners.*

#### 4.2. The Perceptions of the Preparatory Instructors' about the Contribution of Learner Autonomy to Foreign and Second Language Learning

When each item in the questionnaire was analyzed, the most commonly-shared definition of learner autonomy was learning how to learn as 96.4% of the instructors involved in the questionnaire agreed on this. In addition to this, with the same percentage, the instructors also believed that motivated learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than unmotivated ones. Another important point made by the instructors was the role of teachers in a teaching context where students are expected to be autonomous. 92.9% of the instructors participated in the study stated

that the teacher has an important role to play to encourage students to be autonomous (item 31). On the other hand, being able to study in the library independently (item 2) was also regarded as an activity which supports the development of autonomy by 85.7% of the instructors. The present results reflected the belief of the instructors regarding to the positive effect of autonomy on the success of learners. 92.9% of the instructors perceived autonomous learners to be more successful than the ones who are not (item 32). The analysis of the items in the questionnaire revealed the qualities of autonomous learners as well. 92.8% of the instructors indicate that being able to evaluate their own learning (item 33) was one of the qualities autonomous learners need to develop. Another quality that these learners need was to be capable of making decisions about what to learn (item 7), which 89.3% agreed on. Finally, the two items in the questionnaire showed that 89.3% of the instructors suggested that in order to develop learner autonomy, language classrooms must be learner-centered (item 24) and the materials used must require cooperative group work (item 21).

Overall, the instructors expressed positive views about the contribution of learner autonomy to foreign and second language learning. These comments are listed below followed by a supporting quote after each.

Autonomous learners are good decision makers:

*I think when learners decide on something they feel themselves important and they follow their decisions as a part of their own learning.*

Autonomous learners are good problem solvers:

*Language learners are problem solvers who try to discover the rules of language.*

Autonomous learners are more motivated and enthusiastic to learn.

*I believe that the more motivated and enthusiastic the learners are the more autonomous they become which affects their ability to learn the language well.*

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, the instructors' perceptions about learner autonomy in the context of English preparatory programs were investigated. The results indicated that special attention should be given to 'learner autonomy' while designing the curriculum for language preparatory programs. Specifically, the preparatory program should foreground the encouragement of student abilities such as learning how to learn, being able to evaluate their own learning, and cooperating with their peers. In addition, learner-centred classrooms promote learner autonomy which has a positive effect on success and the motivation of language learners.

The present study has both practical and empirical implications in terms of promoting learner autonomy. The results of the study indicated that the nature of the Language Preparatory Programs should be based upon learner autonomy. In this sense, the administrators can share the results of this with the university management to revise the existing curriculum into a new one in which learners are given more chances to become autonomous. As a result of this, the quality of education provided by the program is expected to improve since taking more responsibility for their own learning with the help of opportunities created by the school administration will contribute a lot to learners' motivation to learn a language.

Although the present study revealed some interesting and important findings, they should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive due to the following limitations. First, data collector bias might be considered as a limitation of this study. Since the researcher herself worked at the same

department, the instructors might have been hesitant to reveal their genuine opinions about the preparatory program. Another point which needs to be taken into consideration is conducting the study among the language programs of other universities as it can help us to make broader generalizations on what language teachers at a tertiary level think about learner autonomy.

Despite these limitations, this study is important for the field of foreign and second language teaching/learning since it provides foundation for further research. Since the importance of administrative support is a must to implement learner autonomy, further studies must be conducted to learn about what administrators think about learner autonomy. As teaching is an activity which includes students as well, a study to find out students' perception of learner autonomy can be an option for further research. In addition, learner autonomy can be analyzed comparatively in order to see if native and non-native teachers perceive learner autonomy in the same way or not. Another comparative study can be conducted on the perceptions of teachers working at state universities with the ones working at private universities which may lead to some interesting findings. Thus, there need to be more experimental and longitudinal studies that emphasize the importance of learner autonomy in different contexts.

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