# EFL Learners' Perceptions of Their Autonomous Learning Abilities

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**Abstract**

*Learner autonomy is an essential component in educational contexts and plays a key role in language learning. The aim of the current study is to explore the EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities in terms of language learning at the tertiary level in the Turkish EFL context. In accordance with this purpose, a 5-point Likert scale, which was developed by Demirtaş (2010), was utilized. Participants of this research were randomly selected 87 preparatory class students in two different language levels (i.e., elementary and starter). Besides, this paper attempts to ascertain whether there is a relationship between students' autonomous learning abilities and their language proficiency level. The collected data were analyzed by running an independent sample t-test on SPSS software. The findings reveal that most of the students in this study perceive themselves as having low-level autonomous learning abilities. This investigation indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between students' autonomy levels and language proficiency levels. These results provide important insights into the perceptions of Turkish EFL learners of their autonomous learning abilities.*

*Keywords:* learner autonomy, autonomous learners, learning abilities, EFL learners, language proficiency level

## 1. Introduction

Language teaching methods have constantly improved due to changes in technology and social life and new teaching approaches. Teacher-centered traditional education approaches have been replaced with student-centered methods to enable them to take part in learning throughout the last thirty years. Teachers are not the key instrument in the language learning process, and the classroom is not the only place where learning occurs. Students have played a vital role in their own language learning process; that is, they are responsible for their own learning process. (Holec, 1981; Benson,2001, Little,2002) It is possible to say that 'learning autonomy' has emerged as the concept of changing students' and teachers' roles in this process. According to this concept, learners should plan their own learning, determine their own objectives and control the learning process. Little (2002) highlights that learners' awareness, which can be defined as conscious understanding and sensitivity in language learning, plays a vital role in the language learning process. It is not possible to set learner goals and evaluate progress for learners who are not aware of their responsibilities. While learners are responsible for their learning process, teachers have the responsibility of promoting and supporting learning autonomy.

Studies of learner autonomy show the importance of autonomous learning and explore different viewpoints in language education. (Nunan, 1999; Chan,2001) Learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities have been previously observed by researchers in the previous literature. (Sönmez, 2016; Mehdiyev, 2020) In the Turkish EFL context, some studies show that students do not regard themselves as sufficiently autonomous. (Üstünlüoğlu,2009; Demirtaş,2010). These results contrast with the results that show learners have positive attitudes to learner autonomy. (Sönmez,2016; Ünal, Çeliköz & Sarı, 2017) Language level has been the subject of various classic studies in learner autonomy. (Balçıkanlı, 2010; Tılfarlıoğlu & Çiftçi,

2011; Zarei & Zarei,2015) To date, there has been little agreement on the relationship between autonomous learners and high proficiency levels. Numerous studies explored there is a positive relationship between learners' autonomy and their academic success. (Dafei,2007; Valadi & Rashidi,2014; Sönmez,2016, Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıkanlı, 2019) On the other hand, it has been observed that there is not a significant difference between learner autonomy and proficiency levels. (Demirtaş,2010; Ünal, Çeliköz & Sarı, 2017; Güneş & Alagözlü,2020) Motivated by earlier studies, this study set out to examine EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities in the Turkish EFL context. Also, this research focuses on the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency level.

## 1.1 Literature Review

There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of learner autonomy in the language learning process in educational contexts. In 1971, the establishment of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project had a major impact on the concept of "learner autonomy". The term 'learner autonomy' was coined by Holec (1981). In the literature, several definitions of learner autonomy have been proposed. Learner autonomy can be defined as "the capacity to take charge of one's own learning as the result of self-directed learning." (Holec,1981). Little (1999) uses the term 'learner autonomy as a potential for organization, critical thinking, decision-making, and individualistic action. According to the definition by Allwright (1990), learner autonomy is the balance 'between maximum self-development and human interdependence' (p. 12). According to Nunan (1999), autonomy can occur in a variety of contexts and completely autonomous learners have the ability to make their decisions. Benson (2008) claims that there is a relationship between language learning and autonomy; that is to say, learners need to be autonomous in language learning. It is possible to say that autonomous

learning highlights the active role of learners in the learning process. Students' taking responsibility for learning and directing their own learning have resulted in serious changes in the roles of teachers. Promoting and supporting learners have a pivotal role in language learning rather than teaching. Benson and Huang (2008) argue that students may have problems being autonomous, especially at early stages, and therefore teachers should play an essential role in guiding and encouraging them. Teachers' roles can be described as 'facilitator', 'adviser', 'knower', 'mentor', which differs from traditional teachers. (Ridley,1997) Students should be given opportunities to choose their tasks and realize their responsibilities. They are also supported in identifying their aims and preferences by their teachers. Teachers can prompt students to self-evaluate, plan their activities and learning process. The fact that the students are active in this process, directing the process, and taking on their responsibilities has revealed some issues. Learner motivation has received considerable critical attention in autonomy. Previous research has established that motivation is a dominant feature of autonomy. (Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002; Yeşilyurt,2008) It is possible to say that highly motivated students have a high-level autonomy. Autonomous motivated learners can have lifelong and fruitful learning. In addition, the relationship between the high level of autonomous students and the culture they belong to has also been influential at this point. (Little, 2002; Ertürk, 2016.) Many studies have highlighted this subject since students' different cultural backgrounds affect their learning processes and styles. (Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001; Chan, 2001) Shifting student-teacher roles and emphasizing student independence may not be appropriate for all cultures. Ertürk (2016) argued that being an autonomous learner differs in Western and non-Western cultures, and the concept of autonomy may not be proper for non-western cultures.

In the Turkish EFL context, learners' perceptions of learner autonomy have been investigated. Some studies show that students cannot be defined as autonomous learners. (Kocak, 2003; Üstünlüoğlu,2009) Demirtaş (2010) examined the level of autonomous learning abilities of 173

university preparatory class students in his study. According to the findings, it was observed that the students had insufficient and low-level autonomous abilities. Üstünlüoğlu (2009) analyzed the data from 320 first-year students at a Turkish state university. This study investigated language learners' levels of autonomy and concluded that participants do not perceive themselves as adequately autonomous. It is also stated that students still regard teachers as authorities; they avoid taking responsibility for their language learning processes. Kocak (2003) examined 186 preparatory students in terms of their readiness to engage in autonomous language learning. Students' perceptions of their motivational level in learning English, their metacognitive methods, their perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities in the learning process, and their autonomous activities outside of class are all included in the questionnaire. According to the findings, students regard the teacher as more responsible for their learning than they are for themselves. This study suggests that the students are not ready for the teacher to take their own responsibility. Nevertheless, some studies confirm that learners have a positive attitude towards learner autonomy. (Olur,2013; Sönmez, 2016; Ünal, Çeliköz & Sarı, 2017) Olur (2013) investigated the awareness of high school learners of learner autonomy with the participation of 98 English language learning high school students in Turkey. This study suggests the participants are continually autonomous; however, they are in need of being directed or controlled by their teachers.

Language proficiency has been instrumental in our understanding of learner autonomy. The relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency in terms of academic success has been investigated by some researchers. Demirtaş (2010) analyzed the correlation between students' academic success and autonomous learning abilities in preparatory school. The results show that no significant correlation was found between students' autonomous learning ability and GPA. In another study investigating the relationship between language proficiency and learner autonomy, Zarei and Zarei (2015) analyzed Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency

and autonomous abilities. The findings represent that learner autonomy positively affects language proficiency. A recent study by Şakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı (2019) reported that the level of autonomy of Turkish EFL learners at the tertiary level was high. Also, the results reveal that the level of university-level students' autonomy has a strong effect on their language proficiency. In another analysis of learner autonomy, Ünal et al. (2017) examined 326 Turkish-English Language Teaching (ELT) learners' perceptions of learner autonomy with learner's language proficiency level. The participants' levels varied from beginner, elementary, intermediate, high intermediate, to advanced. Participants' proficiency levels were determined by a placement test. The results suggest no notable difference between learner autonomy perceptions of learners and their proficiency level. From these studies Thus, the effect of language level on learner autonomy seems to remain unclear. When related studies are analyzed, it can be clearly seen that there is a gap in the literature. Motivated by previous studies and this gap, this study aims to examine EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities and explore the relationship between students' learner autonomy and language proficiency level.

### 1.2 Research questions

The main aim of the present study is to EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities in Turkey. Additionally, this study set out to explore the relationship between students' autonomy level and language level. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1) What are the perceptions of preparatory class students of their autonomous learning abilities?

2) Is there a relationship between students' autonomous learning abilities and language proficiency level?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

This study was conducted in the preparatory class at a state university in Turkey in the fall semester of the 2021-22 academic year. Students have to take an English language proficiency exam at the beginning of the term. They have two alternatives based on their exam results. They can either go on with mainstream courses or language preparation classes. In preparatory classes, it is required to complete a one-year preparatory program where the students only focus on language learning. Students can go on with one of these languages: English, Arabic, or French, Russian and Greek according to their preferences if they have the competence in English as required at the university. The English language placement test determines the students' language level as starter, elementary and pre-intermediate. The participants in this study were recruited from English preparatory classes. It can be seen from the data in Table 1, the total number of participants for this study was 87. The participants were chosen randomly from a total of 830 preparatory class students. The majority of the study group is male, so there are 85 male and 2 female students for this study because of the school's unique feature. The age range of the students was between 18 and 20, and the mean value of the participants' age was 18,73. As can be seen from Table 1, there were 43 elementary level and 44 starter level participants in this study. The participants have been learning English for approximately eight years. All the students in this preparatory program attend 25 hours of Main course and Four skills courses (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening) in a week.

Table 1

*Age and Level*

| Level | Age (M) |
|---|---|
| *Starter (n=44)* | *18,69* |
| *Elementary (n=43)* | *18,77* |

*2.2 Data Collection Instrument*

The data were collected in the fall term in the 2021-2022 academic year. To assess the perceptions of EFL learners' autonomous learning abilities, Autonomy Perception Scale, which was developed by Demirtaş (2010), was used. The questionnaire was distributed online to 87 English preparatory class students. The questionnaire consists of 30 questions investigating students' autonomous learning abilities. All survey questions utilized a 5-point Likert scale (5 = always, 4 = often, 3 = occasionally, 2 = seldom, 1 = never) and participants are asked to answer each item. The participants were informed about the importance and purpose of the study by the researcher. The questionnaire was used in students' first language to avoid any misunderstanding from language. A small part was included to obtain personal information at the beginning of the questionnaire, which is about the participants' gender, age, language level, and placement test score. In order to measure reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used. According to the statistics, the reliability coefficient was calculated for the scale, and this value was found to be .89. The results show that the reliability of the scale is at a high level. (Demirtaş, 2010).

As the second instrument to examine the relationship between students' autonomous learning skills and language level, the university's placement test was utilized. The participants had the language placement test at the beginning of the term and their language proficiency levels were determined as starter and elementary level. The test is divided into three categories, each with

100 questions: grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. It's a multiple-choice test that needs to be completed in 100 minutes by the students. Permission from both the participants and the university was obtained prior to the data collecting procedure for both data collection sources.

**3. Results**

Participants were asked to respond to thirty questions to assess their autonomous learning abilities. In order to explore the students' perceptions of their autonomy, first, the mean for the 87 participants' answers was computed. For each question, the lowest possible score was 1(one), and the highest possible score was 5(five). The score of 1-2.49 indicates that students perceive that they do not have autonomous learning abilities, while 2.50-3.49 shows that the level of their autonomous learning abilities is not sufficient, 3.50-4.49 indicates that they have adequate autonomous learning abilities, and scores of 4.50 and above reveal that they have effective autonomous learning abilities.

According to the mean scores of responses to the questions about EFL learners' perceptions about their autonomous learning abilities, 62 students were categorized as having a low autonomy level, and 25 students were classified as moderate level autonomous learners. None of the participants were classified as having effective autonomous learning abilities in this study. As shown in Table 2, the results demonstrate that most of the participants (71,2%) perceive that they do not have effective autonomous learning abilities in the English language learning process.

Table 2

*Autonomy Level*

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Low-level Autonomy | 62 | 71,2 |
| Moderate- level Autonomy | 25 | 28,7 |

Table 3 represents the distribution of mean scores on EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities.

Table 3

*Distribution of mean scores on EFL learners'*

*perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities*

|  | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Item 1 | 87 | 3,023 | ,8624 |
| Item 2 | 87 | 2,885 | ,8549 |
| Item 3 | 87 | 3,586 | ,9220 |
| Item 4 | 87 | 3,126 | ,8734 |
| Item 5 | 87 | 3,253 | ,9303 |
| Item 6 | 87 | 3,299 | ,9659 |
| Item 7 | 87 | 2,943 | ,9807 |
| Item 8 | 87 | 3,667 | ,9107 |
| Item 9 | 87 | 2,782 | 1,0502 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Item 10 | 87 | 2,460 | 1,1186 |
| Item 11 | 87 | 2,805 | 1,0325 |
| Item 12 | 87 | 2,391 | 1,1243 |
| Item 13 | 87 | 3,161 | 1,0877 |
| Item 14 | 82 | 3,805 | ,8231 |
| Item 15 | 82 | 3,610 | ,9396 |
| Item 16 | 82 | 3,671 | 1,0190 |
| Item 17 | 82 | 3,390 | 1,1305 |
| Item 18 | 80 | 3,187 | ,8728 |
| Item 19 | 82 | 3,207 | ,9524 |
| Item 20 | 87 | 4,115 | ,8684 |
| Item 21 | 87 | 3,379 | 1,1127 |
| Item 22 | 87 | 3,195 | ,9381 |
| Item 23 | 87 | 3,138 | ,9903 |
| Item 24 | 87 | 2,736 | ,9208 |
| Item 25 | 78 | 3,718 | ,9102 |
| Item 26 | 79 | 3,519 | 1,0236 |
| Item 27 | 79 | 3,418 | ,9950 |
| Item 28 | 79 | 2,367 | ,8649 |
| Item 29 | 79 | 2,987 | ,8842 |
| Item 30 | 79 | 3,089 | ,8798 |

As it can be observed from Table 4, the students perceived themselves to be insufficient in terms of autonomous learning skills, especially in the following items. It has been observed that they perceive themselves as inadequate in receiving, giving, and writing comments about the learning process and using recently learned words.

Table 4

*Least highly-rated items about learner autonomy*

|  | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Item 10: I ask my friends or teachers to comment on how much I have learned at the end of a learning activity. | 2,46 | 1,11 |
| Item 11: At the end of a learning activity, I make constructive comments about how much my friends have learned. | 2,80 | 1,03 |
| Item 12: I write comments about my learning activities that I have made myself or that I have received from others. | 2,39 | 1,12 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Item 29: I try to use every new word or phrase I encounter by speaking at every turn. | 2,98 | ,88 |

Table 5 presents the most highly rated items by participants in which participants can be labeled as autonomous in terms of various autonomous behavior.  It is apparent from this table that most of the participants are aware of the subjects they do not understand, and they are open to getting help from their teachers or friends. (Item 8) Also, items 14 and 20 show that the participants are careful about the language while listening or watching English.  Additionally, the majority of the students try to make predictions about the topic from the title and pictures before reading texts.

Table 5

*Most highly rated items about learner autonomy*

| | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Item 8: I try to get help from my friends or teachers about a subject that I do not understand. | 3,66 | ,91 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Item 14: I concentrate on important keywords while listening to English. | 3,80 | ,82 |
| Item 20: When watching English TV programs or movies, I pay attention to the vision for a better target. | 4,11 | ,86 |
| Item 25: Before I start reading a text, I try to guess the topic from the title and pictures. | 3,71 | ,91 |

Independent-samples t-test was carried out to examine any statistical differences between the English preparatory students' autonomy level concerning their language proficiency level. The results of the independent sample t-test analysis are summarised in table 6. It is obvious there is not a significant difference between the means of Starter students (M= 3.11, SD= .58) and Elementary students (M= 3.25, SD= .40)

Table 6

*Independent Sample T-test*

| | Language Level | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Autonomy Level | Starter | 44 | 3,1149 | ,58130 | ,08763 |
| | Elementary | 43 | 3,2588 | ,40402 | ,06161 |

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Std. Error Differe nce | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Differe nce | | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 4,783 | ,031 | -1,338 | 85 | ,184 | -,14393 | ,10756 | -,35779 | ,06993 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | -1,344 | 76,804 | ,183 | -,14393 | ,10713 | -,35725 | ,06939 |

As presented in Table 6, t-tests found no significant differences in mean scores on these variables, conditions; t(85)= -1,338, p=,184.

Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis was utilized to examine whether there was a relationship between the participants' placement test scores and their autonomy level. It is highlighted that closer values to 1 revealed a stronger correlation between two variables, while values near 0 indicate a weak connection. (Mackenzie &Knipe,2006) The results of the correlational analysis are set out in Table 7.

Table 7

*Correlation between Placement Test Scores and Autonomy Level*

|  |  | Placement Test Scores | Autonomy Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| Placement Test Scores | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,134 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,216 |
|  | N | 87 | 87 |
| Autonomy Level | Pearson Correlation | ,134 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,216 |  |
|  | N | 87 | 87 |

Table 7 illustrates no significant correlation was found between students' autonomy level and their placement test scores, r=.134, n=87, p=.216

## 4. Discussion

This study examined the EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities in language learning at the tertiary level in the Turkish EFL context. Concerning the first research question, "What are the perceptions of preparatory class students of their autonomous learning abilities?" the data revealed that most Turkish preparatory school students (71,2) in the study were labeled as having low autonomous learning abilities. The rest of the participants (28,7) are moderate-level autonomous learners. This finding is consistent with that of Üstünlüoğlu (2009), who investigated the perceptions of university students regarding responsibilities and abilities related to autonomous learning and autonomous activities. The results indicate that students do not take responsibility for their learning which can be associated directly with autonomous learners. Also, Üstünlüoğlu (2009) highlighted that students still perceive the teacher as a dominant figure. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in another study conducted by Sert (2006), who posits that students may not have autonomous learning abilities in some educational contexts such as Turkey because of the authority figure in the class.

A possible explanation for this might be that students continue to perceive teachers as authority figures. It can be said that they do not take responsibility for their own learning, and teachers continue to have the responsibility for learning in the Turkish EFL context. In general, therefore, it seems that promoting and encouraging learner autonomy in and outside class has become a crucial topic in educational contexts. Hence, it is necessary that teachers motivate students to be active in this process, direct the process, and take their responsibilities for a better learning environment. The fact that how to promote and encourage language learners to be more autonomous learners has been a significant issue for future research.

With respect to the second research question, whether there is a statistically significant relationship between autonomous learning abilities and their language proficiency level, the results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between students' autonomy levels and language proficiency levels. (p = .184) In addition to students' language proficiency level, students' autonomy levels and placement test scores were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis. According to this analysis, no significant difference between the two groups was evident. (p=.216)

Another similar learner autonomy study was carried out by Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıkanlı (2019), exploring the relationship between EFL learners' level of autonomy and language levels. The results indicate that there was not a significant relationship between learner autonomy and language level. These results are in agreement with Koçak's (2003) findings which showed the relationship between learner autonomy and language level. The findings demonstrate that there was no evidence that language proficiency level has an influence on students' perceptions of learner autonomy. A possible explanation for these results may be the lack of different language levels in this study. The reason why autonomy level appeared to be unaffected by language proficiency level is that starter, and elementary groups are close in terms of their levels.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study was designed to explore Turkish university students' perceptions of learner autonomy. The first research question of the current study examined Turkish preparatory class students' perceptions of their autonomous learning abilities. These experiments confirmed that Turkish EFL learners do not perceive themselves as autonomous learners, which aligns with a body of relevant studies in the literature. The second research question focused on the relationship between the students' autonomous learning abilities and their English language

proficiency. According to the analysis, there is no statistically significant difference between students' autonomy levels and language proficiency levels. Additionally, there is not a significant correlation between participants' autonomous learning abilities and language placement test scores. Although the improvements and changes in the language learning and teaching process recently, it is not possible to expect the students to be autonomous learners in a short time. It can therefore be assumed that learners need time to be effective autonomous learners. These findings have some limitations for understanding the perceptions of students and their language proficiency. First, this study was conducted at a single state university, and the number of male students was considerably higher than the number of female students because of the school's unique feature. Secondly, this questionnaire was applied only to starter and elementary language levels. Hence, a limitation of the study is the lack of different language levels such as pre- intermediate, intermediate, advanced. Another limitation of this study is that the participants' age range is between 18-20. Therefore, the inability to evaluate autonomous learning skills according to age and gender limited the study. In spite of its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the Turkish EFL learners' autonomy level at the tertiary level. A further study could assess asking teachers' opinions on how to encourage and promote autonomous learning abilities in the language learning environment.

İngilizce Öğrenenlerin Özerk Öğrenme Becerilerine İlişkin Algıları

Özet

Öğrenen özerkliği, eğitim bağlamında önemli bir bileşendir ve dil öğrenme sürecinde kilit bir rol oynar. Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerin, Türkçe EFL

bağlamında üçüncül düzeyde dil öğrenimi açısından kendi özerk öğrenme yeteneklerine ilişkin algılarını keşfetmektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda Demirtaş(2010) tarafından geliştirilen 5'li Likert tipi ölçek kullanılmıştır. Bu araştırmanın katılımcıları, starter ve elementary düzeyinde olmak üzere farklı iki dil düzeylerindeki 87 hazırlık sınıfı öğrencisi rastgele seçilmiştir. Toplanan veriler SPSS yazılımı kullanılarak analiz edildi. Bulgular, bu çalışmadaki öğrencilerin çoğunun kendilerini düşük düzeyde özerk öğrenme becerilerine sahip olarak algıladıklarını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, bu makale öğrencilerin özerk öğrenme yetenekleri ile dil yeterlilik düzeyleri arasında bir ilişki olup olmadığını belirlemeye çalışmaktadır. Bu araştırma öğrencilerin özerklik düzeyleri ile dil yeterlilik düzeyleri arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark olmadığını göstermektedir. Bu sonuçlar, İngilizce öğrenenlerin özerk öğrenme yeteneklerine ilişkin algıları hakkında önemli bilgiler sağlar.

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