# Who is More Responsible?
# Preparatory Class Students' Perceptions of Responsibility

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**Abstract**

The main aim of this study is to explore learners' perceptions of their own responsibility in learning English. The question of whether our learners in Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University (hereafter COMU) Compulsory and Voluntary English Language Prep Classes are responsible enough for their own learning or not is the main focus of this study. Whether some variables like gender, the type of the prep class education (compulsory or voluntary) and the students' departments will affect their perceptions on responsibility is questioned in this study. Quantitative research methodology was used in the study. Being a sub-category of a survey method, a questionnaire was used by the researchers to find out the students' perceptions of responsibility in English preparatory classes of COMU. Findings reveal that female students are much more responsible than the male students are. Also, voluntary learners are less aware of their strengths and weaknesses in learning English. Students at Travel Management were found to know what to practice in English and how to learn English more when compared to the students of Archeology. Furthermore, students seem to have some problems in planning and revising their own learning. Bearing the findings of the study in mind, suggestions were drawn at the end of the study.

**Key Words:** *Learner Autonomy, Responsibility*

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## Introduction

As learners, we start learning from our parents just after we were born. Then, the environment teaches us a lot. We also learn many things from our surroundings informally. However, at the age of seven, we have a formal setting which is our school in order to learn things. Learning, in its real sense, starts at school but never stops after the school. At schools, it is aimed to teach many things to the learners. However, the most important thing to teach learners is learning to learn. "However a good teacher might be, students will never learn a language unless they aim to learn outside as well as the class time" (Harmer, 2001:335). As language is very complex, students need much more exposure to the language than they have in their classes. If they develop their own learning strategies, only then may they become autonomous learners. This process of being autonomous requires responsible learners.

Responsibility has a crucial place in learner autonomy. Both autonomy and responsibility are concerned with learners' active involvement in the matters that are closely related to their learning. In order to learn a language, students should be actively involved in the teaching and learning process. In the preparatory classes, it is a must that students not only learn the language in the class, but also pursue learning it outside the classroom. Thus, in order to train our learners to become more active, successful, responsible and autonomous in their learning; we as teachers should first identify how responsible they are and who those responsible learners are. It is important that we find out whether the level of our learners' responsibility changes according to their genders, departments, etc. or not. Only then can a teacher implement activities aiming to foster autonomy to create autonomous learners.

The main aim of this study is to explore learners' perceptions of their own responsibility in learning English. The question of whether learners in Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University (hereafter COMU) Compulsory and Voluntary English Language Prep Classes are responsible enough for their own learning or not is the main focus of this study. Whether some variables like gender, the type of the prep class education (compulsory or voluntary) and the students' departments will affect their perceptions on responsibility is questioned in this study.

## Literature Review

### *Definition of Learner Autonomy*

Learner autonomy has been defined in various aspects by many researchers. As there are different versions of autonomy, there are also differences in the ways of defining and describing learner autonomy. In common use, the term autonomy refers to a significant measure of independence from the control of others. More scientifically, it is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981: 3). Vanijdee (2003: 76) defines the term as "a capacity – a construct of attitudes and abilities – which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning". Learners are suggested to take part in their own learning activities voluntarily. Thus, the term 'responsibility' is considered as important. To understand the concept better, it is necessary to explore some of the definitions in the literature. *Autonomy* is about (quoted in Bayraktar Balkır, 2007):
- the *capacity* to take control of one's own learning (Benson, 2001:47);
- learner's *psychological relation* to the process and content of learning… a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action (Little, 1991: 4);

- the students' *motivation* to make their own environment for their learning (Usuki, 2001:2);
- involving students' capacity to use their *learning independently* of teachers (Cotterall, 2000:109);
- the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to *use a set of tactics* for taking control of their learning (Cotterall, 1995: 195);
- the *freedom* and ability to manage one's own learning, which entails the *right* to make decisions as well (Scharle and Szabo, 2004: 4);
- *exploration* of self-concept and the *realization* of personal and group potential (Kenny, 1993: 431); and
- *control* over the content and processes of one's own learning (Benson, 1997: 25).

Autonomous learners have the characteristics of the enthusiastic learners. They take an active role in the learning process instead of just reacting to the teacher's instructions. They have many other characteristics which are really important and advantageous for the learning and teaching process. In brief, autonomous learners (Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42):

- have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
- take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- are willing to take risks to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
- develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
- have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

In all respects, autonomy does not mean learning in isolation. It means students' having more responsibility for their own language learning process. It can be interpreted from the definitions that autonomy is the freedom and ability to manage one's own learning.

### The Importance of Learner Autonomy

It is a clear fact that you cannot teach everything at schools (Nunan, 1988; cited in Harmer, 2001). Thus, the teaching and learning process must go on beyond the borders of the school. Then, learner autonomy is very important. Because of the time limitation, syllabus design, etc., everything cannot be completed in the classroom. That is why we should help the students to take their responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy enables learners to take active role in decision-making process of their own learning (Benson, 2001; Little, 2000).

Ellis and Sinclair (1989: 1; cited in Esch, 1997) state the importance of fostering learner autonomy as:

Helping learners take on more responsibility for their own learning can be beneficial because:

- learning can be more effective when learners take control of their own learning because they learn what they are ready to learn.
- those learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom.

Moreover, Dickinson (1995: 165) supports the first point stated above. He believes that "there is convincing evidence that people, who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better than people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught". Supporting especially the second point stated above, Lee (1998) says that language learning is a life-long process, and that is why it is important to help students become aware of the benefits of independent learning.

Scharle and Szabo (2000: 4) explain the importance of giving more responsibility to learners with the help of an American proverb. They use the following proverb to answer the question 'Why should you develop responsibility and autonomy?'

> You can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. In language teaching, teachers can provide all the necessary circumstances and input, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute. … In other words, success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude.

As most authors suggest, the importance of responsibility cannot be ignored in language teaching.

### *Relationship between Autonomy and Responsibility*

Autonomy and responsibility are two interrelated concepts. Both of them are "concerned with learners' active involvement in the matters that are closely linked to their learning" (Bayraktar Balkır, 2007: 39). Usuki (2001:2) defines the term responsibility as "it is the learners' internal attitude towards themselves as a learner". Bearing this definition in mind, one can claim that responsibility is a crucial element of autonomy.

Many definitions of the term 'responsibility' are available in the literature; however, in order to understand the definition of responsibility better, it is necessary to describe the characteristics of responsible learners (Scharle and Szabo, 2000):

> Responsible learners are those who:
> - accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, and behave accordingly;
> - believe that their own efforts will be significant in their progress;
> - are aware of the benefits of working collaboratively with the teacher and peers;
> - consciously monitor and evaluate their progress;
> - are willing to use every opportunity for their benefit to facilitate their learning;
> - have a sense of responsibility of their own efforts in the learning process;
> - are aware of the fact that both success and failure are the result of their efforts;
> - and are in charge of their own learning.

Both autonomy and responsibility, and their characteristics can be defined in quite similar ways.

It is obvious that responsibility plays a central role in autonomy. Most of the definitions on autonomy include or emphasize the importance of responsibility. To Dickinson (1987; quoted in Bayraktar Balkır, 2007: 41), "responsibility is a prerequisite to autonomous learning. A language course whose goal is to promote autonomy requires learners to assume increasing responsibility for their learning". Similarly, Zehir Topkaya (2004: 40) believes that

responsibility and autonomy are actually "two complementary behaviors" in that "students need to accept themselves as the centre of learning, so that they could become autonomous learners". Therefore, it can be concluded that autonomy depends highly upon responsibility.

Briefly, taking on responsibility for one's own learning is a step towards becoming an autonomous learner. In order to become autonomous, learners should first become responsible. In the light of the literature review, finding out whether our students are responsible enough or not and what their perceptions of responsibility are would be beneficial before implementing some learner training activities to foster learner autonomy at COMU prep classes. Thus, the following research questions are aimed to be answered in this study:

**1.** What are the preparatory class students' perceptions of responsibility for learning English?

**2.** Is there a significant difference in the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to their gender?

**3.** Is there a significant difference in the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to the type of the prep class education (compulsory or voluntary) they take?

**4.** Is there a significant difference in the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to their departments?

## Methodology

*Quantitative research methodology* was used in this descriptive study. Being a sub-category of a *survey method,* a questionnaire was used by the researchers to find out the students' perceptions of responsibility in English preparatory classes of COMU. In the following, the study with its setting, participants, instrument, and procedures for data collection and analysis are presented in detail.

### Setting and Participants
**Table 1.**
*Number of students involved in the study*

| Gender | Female | | | Male | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 114 | 55 | | | 59 | | |
| **Type of Education** | **Voluntary** | | | **Compulsory** | | |
| 114 | 28 | | | 86 | | |
| **Department** | **Travel Man.** | **Accom.** | **Physics** | **Archeology** | **Foreign Trade - EU** | **Tourism (Vocational)** | **Others** |
| 114 | 19 | 19 | 24 | 13 | 11 | 11 | 17 |

This study was conducted at the preparatory classes of COMU. 114 students from different departments involved in the study. The researchers conducted the questionnaire to the students available and randomly chosen.

To see whether there is a significant difference in students' perceptions of responsibility, three variables are used: gender, type of the preparatory class education and departments.

### Instrument

A responsibility scale adapted from that of Bayraktar Balkır's (2007) was used as a questionnaire in this study. This questionnaire consists of 24 items each of which includes 5-point Likert-type scale involving the options of (5) very appropriate to me, (4) appropriate to me, (3) undecided, (2) not appropriate to me, (1) not appropriate to me at all.

### Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data collection process nearly took two weeks. The researchers randomly selected equal number of students (11 or 12 students) from each class (10 classes in total) and applied the questionnaire to 114 students. The data collected from the students were analyzed via "Descriptive Statistics", "Independent Samples T-Test" and "Nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis Test" by using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 13.0 for Windows. Moreover, the researchers analyzed *the internal consistency* of the items of the questionnaire.

**Table 2.**

*Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach Alpha Coefficient) for the questionnaire*

| Questionnaire | Alpha Reliability | n | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Valid** | **Excluded** | **Total** |
| Responsibility Scale | .86 | 114 | 0 | 114 |

Twenty-four items given in the questionnaire have a high degree of internal consistency with the value of *.86* for the students' questionnaire. This value is acceptable according to Büyüköztürk (2006) who recommends levels of *.70* or greater for scales like this.

## Findings and Discussions

The findings are presented below the research questions (**RQ**). Discussions are made for the research questions below the tables in which the results are shown.

**RQ1** What are preparatory class students' perceptions of responsibility for learning English?

**Table 3.**
*Students' perceptions of responsibility*

| Students' Perceptions of Responsibility | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I would like my teacher to share the information about my progress in English with me | **114** | **4.49** | **.74365** |
| 2. I know what I should practise more in English. | 114 | 3.75 | .96681 |
| 3. I pay more attention to the lesson if we are practising something I am not so good at. | 114 | 4.45 | .76531 |
| 4. Sometimes I try to learn things that the teacher did not give as a task. | 114 | 3.40 | 1.13449 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5. I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses in English. | 114 | 4.16 | .90797 |
| 6. Doing homework is one of the good ways to improve my English. | 114 | 3.93 | 1.14226 |
| 7. I ask my teacher to help me with the things I am not good at. | 114 | 4.02 | .99541 |
| 8. I am aware of the ways that I learn English best. | 114 | 3.47 | 1.09819 |
| 9. I often revise what I have learned. | **114** | **3.33** | **1.05316** |
| 10. I know what the reason is when I do well in English. | 114 | 4.18 | .88493 |
| 11. I search different ways to improve my English outside the class. | 114 | 3.70 | 1.02128 |
| 12. My own efforts as well as the teacher's will contribute to my learning. | **114** | **4.53** | **.64094** |
| 13. I set my own goals in learning English. | 114 | 3.87 | .95485 |
| 14. I would like to know how I can learn English better. | **114** | **4.47** | **.82237** |
| 15. I try to make use of every opportunity that can help me improve my English. | 114 | 4.18 | .92407 |
| 16. I try to find and correct my mistakes before I submit my assignments to my teacher. | 114 | 3.39 | 1.14836 |
| 17. I am in control of my success in learning English. | 114 | 3.89 | .97189 |
| 18. I usually know what the reason is when I get good marks in English. | 114 | 4.27 | .83385 |
| 19. If I do badly at English, I usually know how to do better next time. | 114 | 3.77 | 1.04784 |
| 20. I try to find my own ways of learning English. | 114 | 3.93 | .99307 |
| 21. I often review my progress in learning English. | **114** | **3.37** | **1.13093** |
| 22. I plan my English studies carefully. | **114** | **3.22** | **1.06230** |
| 23. I evaluate my progress in English. | 114 | 3.62 | 1.05922 |
| 24. My success in English is mainly up to my own efforts. | 114 | 4.37 | .89505 |
| **Total Mean of the items above:** | 114 | 3.91 | .47833 |

When the total mean value of the items above are examined ($\overline{X}_{Sum}$= 3.91), it can be said that students involving in the study are responsible enough to have activities aiming to foster autonomy. The highest mean values suggest that students do not have confidence in their own learning and they need teacher assistance ($\overline{X}_{Item\ 12}$= 4.53, $\overline{X}_{Item\ 1}$= 4.49, $\overline{X}_{Item\ 14}$= 4.47). However, the lowest mean values indicate that students have some problems in planning and revising their own studies ($\overline{X}_{Item\ 22}$= 3.22, $\overline{X}_{Item\ 9}$= 3.33, $\overline{X}_{Item\ 21}$= 3.37).

**RQ2** Is there a significant difference in the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to their gender?

**Table 4.**

*The results of independent sample T-Test regarding the difference between male and female students' perceptions on their own responsibility.*

| Students' Perceptions | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Dev. | df | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total mean of all the items** | Male | 59 | 89.76 | 1.4752 | 112 | 4.085 | .00 |
| | Female | 55 | 98.00 | 1.3626 | | | |

The results of the Independent Samples T-Test indicate that there is a significant difference between the male and female participants' perceptions of responsibility [$t_{(112)}$ = 4.085, p<.05]. Female students are much more responsible ($\overline{X}_{Sum}$= 98.00) than the male students ($\overline{X}_{Sum}$= 89.76). This verifies the general idea that female learners are much more responsible than male learners.

Not only for the total sum of the items, but also twelve out of twenty four items showed difference in terms of gender (Item 2, 4, 8, 9, 13, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23). The most significant differences are obvious in the items given in the table below.

**Table 5.**
*The results of independent sample T-Test regarding the difference between male and female students' perceptions on their own responsibility. (Items 9, 16 and 22).*

| Students' Perceptions | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Dev. | df | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **9.** I often revise what I have learned. | Male | 59 | 2.98 | 1.4752 | 112 | 3.903 | .00 |
| | Female | 55 | 3.71 | 1.3626 | | | |
| **16.** I try to find and correct my mistakes before I submit my assignments to my teacher. | Male | 59 | 2.98 | 1.4752 | 112 | 4.149 | .00 |
| | Female | 55 | 3.82 | 1.3626 | | | |
| **22.** I plan my English studies carefully. | Male | 59 | 2.78 | 1.4752 | 105.36 | 5.105 | .00 |
| | Female | 55 | 3.69 | 1.3626 | | | |

The results of the Independent Samples T-Test for these three items indicate that there is a high level of significant difference between the male and female participants' perceptions of responsibility in terms of these three items. Female students plan their studies ($\overline{X}_{22}$= 3.69) and revise what they have learned ($\overline{X}_{9}$= 3.71) better than the males ($\overline{X}_{22}$= 2.78; $\overline{X}_{9}$= 2.98). Female students are also much more responsible ($\overline{X}_{16}$= 3.82) than males ($\overline{X}_{16}$= 2.98) in trying to find and correct their mistakes before they submit their assignments to their teacher.

**RQ3** Is there a significant difference in the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to the type of the prep class education (compulsory or voluntary) they take?

**Table 6.**

*The results of independent sample T-Test regarding the difference between voluntary or compulsory preparatory class students' perceptions on responsibility.*

| Students' Perceptions | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Dev. | df | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total mean of all the items** | Voluntary | 28 | 95.32 | 1.9280 | 112 | .840 | .403 |
| | Compulsory | 86 | 93.22 | 1.2807 | | | |

When the results of Independent Sample T-Test regarding the difference between voluntary or compulsory preparatory class students' perceptions on responsibility are examined, there occurs no significant difference between the students ($\overline{X}_{Voluntary}$= 95.32;

$\overline{X}$ Compulsory= 93.22). However, only two items show significant difference between voluntary and compulsory English Language learners. The difference can be seen in the following table:

**Table 7.**
*The results of independent sample T-Test regarding the difference between voluntary and compulsory preparatory class students' perceptions on responsibility*

| Students' Perceptions | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Dev. | df | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **4.** Sometimes I try to learn things that the teacher did not give as a task. | Voluntary | 28 | 3.86 | .8909 | | | |
| | Compulsory | 86 | 3.26 | 1.1701 | 112 | 2.858 | .006 |
| **5.** I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses in English. | Voluntary | 28 | 3.82 | .9049 | | | |
| | Compulsory | 86 | 4.27 | .8868 | 59.84 | 2.300 | .023 |

Table 7 shows that there is a significant difference between voluntary and compulsory learners of English preparatory classes in that voluntary ($\overline{X}$ Voluntary = 3.86) learners try to learn the things that the teacher did not give as a task more than the compulsory ($\overline{X}$ Compulsory= 3.26) learners do [$t_{(112)}$ = 2.858, p<.05]. Voluntary learners do not have the fear of failure in the preparatory classes as they go on their education in their departments no matter they pass or fail. That is why; they believe that they try to learn other things their teacher did not give as a task. However, compulsory ($\overline{X}$ Compulsory = 4.27) learners are much more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English than the voluntary ($\overline{X}$ Voluntary = 3.82) ones. This can be because a compulsory learner has right to be a university student by taking the "University Entrance Exam" while most of the voluntary students do not have to take that exam to be university students. Namely, it is normal that the students taking the exam are much more aware of their characteristics than the ones entering the university without an exam.

**RQ4** Is there a significant difference in the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to their departments?

**Table 8.**

*The Results of Kruskal-Wallis test regarding the difference between the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to their departments*

| Students' Perceptions | Departments | N | Mean Rank | df | Chi-Square $X^2$ | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Travel Management | 19 | 61.97 | | | |
| | Accommodation | 19 | 61.05 | | | |
| | Physics | 24 | 53.96 | | | |
| **Total mean of all the items** | Archeology | 13 | 41.27 | | 4.477 | .612 |
| | Tourism (Vocational) | 11 | 62.00 | 6 | | |
| | Foreign Trade and EU | 11 | 60.95 | | | |
| | Others | 17 | 60.79 | | | |

When the total mean of the items are examined, there is no significant difference among the students from different departments. Significant difference has only been found in their perceptions of responsibility in two items. It can be seen in the following table:

**Table 9.**

*The Results of Kruskal-Wallis test regarding the difference between the students' perceptions of responsibility with regard to their departments (Item 2 and 8)*

| Students' Perceptions | Departments | N | Mean Rank | df | Chi-Square $X^2$ | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2.** I know what I should practise more in English. | Travel Management | 19 | 70.42 | | | |
| | Accommodation | 19 | 54.53 | | | |
| | Physics | 24 | 57.17 | | | |
| | Archeology | 13 | 30.31 | 6 | 16.410 | .012 |
| | Tourism (Vocational) | 11 | 59.29 | | | |
| | Foreign Trade and EU | 11 | 52.00 | | | |
| | Others | 17 | 70.09 | | | |
| **8.** I am aware of the ways that I learn English best. | Travel Management | 19 | 72.16 | | | |
| | Accommodation | 19 | 47.68 | | | |
| | Physics | 24 | 60.54 | | | |
| | Archeology | 13 | 42.62 | 6 | 13.024 | .043 |
| | Tourism (Vocational) | 11 | 47.00 | | | |
| | Foreign Trade and EU | 11 | 52.36 | | | |
| | Others | 17 | 69.29 | | | |

Table 9 displays that the students of Travel Management Department ($\overline{X}_{TM}$= 70.42 / 72.16) know what to practice in English and how to learn English when compared to the students of Archeology ($\overline{X}_{ARC}$= 30.31 / 42.62). As the preparatory classes were compulsory for the students of Archeology department when the study was being carried out, they might not have much idea about what to practice in English and how to learn English best and in fact why to learn English, too.

**Conclusion and suggestions**

As the findings of the first research question suggest, students need teacher assistance. Learner autonomy does not mean a complete freedom for the learners. As teachers, we should be a guide while fostering learner autonomy. Furthermore, students seem to have some problems in planning and revising their own learning. Teachers can help them develop new strategies for learning. Moreover, findings reveal that voluntary learners are less aware of their strengths and weaknesses in learning English. They enter the university without an exam and they do not have the fear of failure in the preparatory classes as they continue their university education no matter they pass or fail. Thus, organizing seminars for these voluntary learners will be good idea to make them aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

In this study, it has also been found out that there is a significant difference between the male and female participants' perceptions of responsibility. Thus, teachers can develop

more awareness of the role students' gender play in their acceptance of learner autonomy. For example, in the classroom activities, teachers can assign more roles to the males and make them pair off with females or group them with females in group works, group discussion; thereby, can lead to an increase in the motivation level of males (Baylan, 2007).

As to the academic field of students, students at Travel Management were found to know what to practice in English and how to learn English more when compared to the students of Archeology. Students studying Archeology may not attach importance to English course as much as the students of Travel Management Department due to the needs of their field of specialization. Having a more restricted area of job opportunities, students at this department may not be required to use English as much as the students at Travel Management. However, if autonomy is a concept defined as the liberation in man, it should not only aim the role of the individual inside the class. "Regardless of their departments, students who have gained a high sense of autonomy are more likely to reach success in their lives after graduation" (Baylan, 2007:91). Thus, making learners more active than ever at the learning process is the main answer for life-long learning.

All in all, learner Autonomy is a 'must' in the EFL classes. The teacher himself/herself is never capable enough to teach a language as language itself is very complex phenomenon. There are materials, course books, classroom environment and many other things that teacher use while teaching a foreign language. However hard the teacher tries to teach English by his/her own efforts, he/she will most probably be unsuccessful unless the learner takes part in the learning process.

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