Turkish EFL Learners' Readiness for Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

The notion of 'learner autonomy' has become more and more crucial in the field of language learning for the last three decades due to the development of learner centered approaches in education. Current literature on learner autonomy suggests that the perception and practice of autonomous learning change according to specific cultural and educational contexts. Therefore, in any given country, it is important to identify students' readiness for learner autonomy before designing or adapting activities to promote autonomous learning. This study is an attempt in that direction. Aiming at identifying university level Turkish EFL learners' readiness for learner autonomy, the study investigated 103 learners' perceptions of teacher and learner responsibilities, their opinions about their own abilities to act autonomously, and the frequency of actual autonomous language learning activities they employ. Results indicated that learners seem to be ready to take more responsibility in many areas of the language learning process.

Özet

Otonom öğrenme son otuz yılda giderek daha fazla önemli olmaya başlamıştır. Otonom öğrenme ile ilgili son çalışmalar, bu kavramın algılanması ve uygulanmasının kültürel ve eğitimsel koşullara göre değiştiğini işaret etmektedir. Bu sebeple, herhangi bir ülkede otonom öğrenmeyi teşvik edici aktivitelerin tasarlanması veya uyarlanmasından önce o ülkedeki öğrencilerin otonom öğrenme ile ilgili hazır bulunuşluk düzeylerinin saptanması önemlidir. Bu çalışma böyle bir amaca hizmet etmektedir. Üniversite düzeyinde İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin otonom öğrenme ile ilgili hazır bulunuşluk düzeylerini saptamayı amaçlayan çalışma, 103 öğrencinin öğretmen ve öğrenci sorumlulukları ile ilgili fikirlerini ve

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bu öğrencilerin kullandıkları otonom öğrenme aktivitelerini araştırmıştır. Çalışmadan elde edilen sonuçlar, öğrencilerin dil öğrenim sürecinin bir çok aşamasında daha fazla sorumluluk almaya hazır olduklarını göstermiştir.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language classroom has gained a new perspective with the development of learner-centered approaches in the last three decades. This new perspective has changed the roles of learners and teachers in the classroom. In today's language classroom, learners are expected to take more responsibility of their own learning, and teachers are expected to help learners become more independent inside and outside the classroom. These developments have brought the concept of "learner autonomy" in the field of language teaching (Benson, 2001).

Learner autonomy can be basically defined as the capacity to take control over, or responsibility for, one's own learning; that control or responsibility may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process (Benson, 2001). In a simpler definition, learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). However, 'taking charge of one's own learning' should not be understood as a complete independence from teacher and peers. Learner autonomy does not mean learning in isolation. Autonomous learners do not learn language without a teacher or peers. Instead, they develop a sense of interdependence and they work together with teachers and other learners towards shared goals (Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001).

Expressing the importance of learner autonomy in the modern language classroom, Esch (1997) suggests that helping learners take on more responsibility in the language learning process can be beneficial as they learn what they are ready to learn; as they can carry on learning outside the classroom; and as they can transfer learning strategies to other subjects.

Considering the definition and importance of learner autonomy, one may claim that every teacher should start to foster learner autonomy as soon as possible. However, although everything seems perfect in theory, implications and applications of these theories might change when they come into practice. Literature suggests that the concept of learner autonomy is perceived differently in different cultural and educational contexts. In other words, the cultural and educational contexts of students and teachers affect the realization of learner autonomy (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001).

Ho and Crookall (1995, 236-237) state this view as:

> "While personal autonomy appears to be a universally desirable and beneficial objective, it is important to remember that learner autonomy is exercised within the context of specific cultures. Therefore, in choosing the skills and kinds of knowledge to develop and selecting the procedures or methods that are to be used to help learners develop skills for autonomy, the culturally-constructed nature of the classroom setting needs to be taken into account."

Since the perception of autonomy changes according to different cultural and educational conditions, before making any attempt to promote learner autonomy, we should investigate students' readiness for autonomous learning. That is, we should shed light on how ready students seem to take on the autonomous learning conditions and opportunities (Chan, 2003). Promoting learner autonomy involves responsibility change between teachers and learners, and researchers state that prior to this responsibility change, we should investigate learners' readiness for this change by investigating their perceptions of responsibility in the language learning process, and their actual autonomous language learning practices (Cotterall 1995; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Spratt, Humpreys, & Chan, 2002; Chan, 2003).

Such an understanding of readiness for learner autonomy could provide guidance for curriculum development, material revision and adaptation, classroom practice and teacher training (Little, 1995; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Chan, 2003).

Considering all the aforementioned arguments, the purpose of the study reported in this paper was to identify a group of university level Turkish EFL learners' readiness for learner autonomy. Although the study was limited to university level language learners, it was considered to be an important step towards studies with broader scopes. The main objective of the study was to explore the extent to which learner autonomy can work in university level Turkish EFL classrooms. The study tries to reach that goal by examining a group of learners' views of responsibility for themselves and for their teachers, their confidence to act autonomously, and their actual practices of autonomous learning. By conducting this study, it was hoped to understand those learners' readiness, willingness and capacity to learn

autonomously. It is believed that the results of this study can provide guidance for designing more appropriate autonomous learning tasks and classroom activities for Turkish learners.

The study addressed the following research questions in order to reach the aims stated above:

1. How do university level Turkish EFL students view their own and their teachers' responsibilities in the language learning process?
2. What do they think about their ability to behave autonomously?
3. Is there a relationship between their perceptions of their own abilities and their own responsibilities in their language learning process?
4. What are their actual practices of autonomous learning outside the classroom?

2. STUDIES ON READINESS FOR LEARNER AUTONOMY

One of the seminal studies on readiness for learner autonomy was conducted by Chan (2001). The study, which was conducted in Hong Kong, aimed at identifying learners' perceptions of learner autonomy. Twenty students participated in the study. The researcher carried out a questionnaire with the participants. The study specifically focused on the learners' views in four main areas: (1) aims and motivation of language learning, (2) perception of the teacher and learner roles in the language learning process, (3) learning styles and preferences, and (4) perceptions of autonomous learning. Results of the study indicated that the learners had an awareness of the different roles of the teacher and themselves, they were reasonably autonomous in several ways, and they had positive attitudes towards the autonomous approach. The study also revealed two guiding principles for the design of autonomy-oriented classroom activities. First, students should be involved in the teaching process; second, activities should stimulate motivation and interest.

A different study on readiness for learner autonomy was conducted by Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002). These researchers developed a questionnaire and conducted a study to investigate their students' readiness for taking autonomous roles. Working with 508 participants, they aimed at identifying whether the autonomy precedes motivation or motivation precedes autonomy or the relationship works in both directions. Results of the study revealed that *"motivation is a key factor that influences the extent to which learners are ready to learn autonomously, and that teachers might therefore endeavor to ensure motivation before they train students to become autonomous"* (p. 245).

Cotterall (1999) worked on students' beliefs and those beliefs' effects on learner autonomy. She worked with 131 learners of English applying a 90-item questionnaire in order to investigate learner beliefs about six key variables: (1) the role of the teacher, (2) the role of feedback, (3) the learner's sense of self-efficacy, (4) important strategies, (5) dimensions of strategies-related behavior, and (6) the nature of language learning. Results revealed that learners' beliefs regarding these six variables have important effects on their autonomous behavior.

Focusing on their perceptions of autonomy, Murray (1999) conducted a study with twenty-three French second language learners as they worked on their own with an interactive video program. The researcher tried to identify how the application of simulation technology might foster both language acquisition and learner autonomy. The work sessions with the program were videotaped and the students were asked to keep a journal on each work session. The participants reported that in order to work independently they had to have self-discipline and desire to learn. The study also gave some evidence to the idea that motivation contributes a lot to learner autonomy.

As the studies briefly mentioned in this section indicate, students' readiness for autonomous learning is important, and the level of this readiness should be taken into consideration before designing an autonomous environment for students in a specific educational culture. Being an attempt on that direction, the study reported in this paper aimed at identifying university level Turkish EFL learners' readiness for learner autonomy.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Subjects

A total number of 103 students participated in the study. All the participants of the study were first year students studying English in Anadolu University, Faculty of Education. When the study was conducted, all the participants had been attending an intensive English language program for approximately seven months. The program consisted of three hours of grammar, three hours of speaking, three hours of reading and three hours of writing lessons in a week. The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 21.

3.2. Instrument

The data was collected through a questionnaire which was adapted from Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002). The questionnaire consisted of forty-three items in three

sections: Section One (thirteen items) focused on students' evaluation of their own and their teachers' responsibilities in the language classroom, Section Two (nine items) asked about students' confidence in their ability to operate autonomously, and Section Three (twenty-one items) focused on students' actual practices of autonomous learning practices outside the classroom. Participants answered the questions on a five-point Likert scale.

In order to ensure the validity of the instrument for the study context, the questionnaire was given to experts from Anadolu University, ELT department for expert opinion. Experts were requested to evaluate the questionnaire in terms of content validity, face validity and clarity of the items. Taking their evaluations and suggestions into consideration, the questionnaire was revised and necessary changes were made. After the revision procedure was completed, the questionnaire was piloted to a similar group of students from Anadolu University to foresee the possible problems that may occur in the administration process.

For reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to see the internal consistency of the instrument. The coefficient was found to be .88, which indicates a high level of internal consistency.

3.3. Data Analysis

For the data analysis purposes, first, percentages of responses were calculated for each item in each section. Then, cross tabulations were run (a) between 'teacher's responsibility' and 'student's responsibility' parts of Section One items, and (b) between corresponding items in Section One and Section Two. In other words, chi-square tests were carried out in order to identify the relationship between:

1. students' perceptions of their own responsibilities and their teachers' responsibilities in their English lessons;

2. students' perceptions of their own responsibilities and their own abilities in their English lessons.

The relationship was considered to be statistically significant when the p value of the chi-square tests was found to be less than .05.

4. RESULTS and DISCUSSION
4.1. Students' perceptions of their teachers' and their own responsibilities

In the first section of the questionnaire participants were asked to evaluate their own and their teachers' responsibilities in the language learning process. Students' perceptions of responsibility might give us an idea about their readiness for learner autonomy because giving more responsibility to teacher might be understood as more dependency to teacher, whereas giving more responsibility to student might be interpreted as being more ready to behave autonomously.

The percentages of respondents' evaluation of their own and their teachers' responsibilities are given in Table 1. The table also shows the statistical relationship between participants' perceptions of student and teacher responsibilities. The "not at all" and "a little" categories, and the "mainly" and "completely" categories were combined in the table in order to make the evaluation easier.

As the table represents, there is a statistically significant relationship between the participants' perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities in ten out of thirteen items. When we look at the percentages of responses in the significantly related items, we see that students gave more responsibility to the teacher in six out of ten items (4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11). However, it is worth mentioning that there is not a great difference between the percentages of responses for the items 4, 6, and 11. In other words, we can say that for the situations expressed in these items, the students share the responsibility with the teachers. On the other hand, we see a bigger difference between the percentages of responses for the items 7, 8, and 9. It means that for the situations expressed in these items the students do not share

Table 1. Students' perceptions of their teachers' and their own responsibilities - percentage of respondents and chi-square (n = 103)

Section 1 items Students' perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities	Students' perceptions of teachers' responsibilities - %			Students' perceptions of their own responsibilities - %			Chi-square *p* value
	Not at all / A little	Some	Mainly / Compl.	Not at all / A little	Some	Mainly / Compl.	
1. Make sure you make progress during lessons	6.8	31.1	62.1	3.9	31.1	65	.044
2. Make sure you make progress outside class	37.9	35.9	26.2	14.5	10.7	74.8	.019
3. Stimulate your interest in learning English	2.9	20.4	76.7	24.3	19.4	56.3	.371
4. Identify your weaknesses in English	15.5	21.4	63.1	7.7	31.1	61.2	.005
5. Make you work harder	12.6	35.9	51.5	9.7	21.4	68.9	.019
6. Decide the objectives of your English course	6.8	23.3	69.9	9.7	34	56.3	.000
7. Decide what you should learn next in your English lessons	16.5	12.6	70.9	37.9	16.5	45.6	.000
8. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	1.9	18.5	79.6	34	30.1	35.9	.001
9. Decide how long to spend on each activity	7.8	9.7	82.5	49.5	24.3	26.2	.000
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	4.9	9.7	85.4	52.4	20.4	27.2	.077
11. Evaluate your learning	10.7	12.6	76.7	23.3	21.4	55.3	.019
12. Evaluate your course	5.8	23.3	70.9	19.4	30.1	50.5	.186
13. Decide what you learn outside class	48.5	23.3	28.2	20.4	8.7	70.9	.002

the responsibility with the teacher. Especially for the item 9 (decide how long to spend on each activity), students gave the most responsibility to teachers and took the least responsibility to themselves. When we examine these items in detail, we see that they are directly related to the profession of language teaching, and the students give almost all the responsibility to the teacher with these items.

Students gave more responsibility to themselves than teachers in four out of ten significantly related items (1, 2, 5 and 13). For the first and fifth items, we could again talk

about a notion of sharing responsibility because the percentages of responses are not very different from each other. On the other hand, when we look at the second and thirteenth items, we see that the students gave the most responsibility to themselves and the least responsibility to teachers. Both of these items are about engaging in outside class activities (make sure you make progress outside class & decide what you learn outside class) and the students think that they have the greatest responsibility for outside class activities.

Then, considering the participants' perceptions of their teachers' and their own responsibilities, we can say that students have a notion of sharing responsibility with the teachers for most of the classroom actions. However, they also think that there are some actions (e.g. choosing activities to use) for which the teacher has the greatest responsibility; and similarly, there are some actions (e.g. deciding what to learn outside class) for which the students have the greatest responsibility.

Knowing that the students have the notion of sharing responsibility might be good for the teachers who want to encourage autonomous behavior in their classrooms. Giving more responsibility to the students who are aware of that notion might be easier than giving more responsibility to the students who think that it is the teachers' job to do all things in the learning process.

4.2. Students' perceptions of their abilities to behave autonomously, and the relationship between their perceptions of responsibilities and abilities

In the second section of the questionnaire, participants of the study were asked to evaluate their own abilities to behave autonomously. Having an understanding of the perceptions of their own abilities to behave autonomously might give us some ideas about how much responsibility to give them in the language learning process.

Table 2. A comparison of students' perceptions of their responsibilities and their corresponding abilities in learning - percentage of respondents and chi-square (n = 103)

Section 1 items Students' perceptions of their own responsibilities	Not at all / A little	Some	Mainly / Compl.	Section 2 items Students' perceptions of their own abilities in learning	Very poor / Poor	OK	Very good / Good	Chi-square *p* value
4. Identify your weaknesses in English	7.7	31.1	61.2	**20.** Identify your weaknesses in English	17.5	22.3	60.2	.000
6. Decide the objectives of your English course	9.7	34	56.3	**15.** Choosing learning objectives in class	19.5	41.7	38.8	.219
7. Decide what you should learn next in your English lessons	37.9	16.5	45.6	**21.** Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	21.4	36.9	41.7	.002
8. Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	34	30.1	35.9	**14.** Choosing learning activities in class	5.8	49.5	44.7	.018
9. Decide how long to spend on each activity	49.5	24.3	26.2	**22.** Deciding how long to spend on each activity	21.4	41.7	36.9	.074
10. Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	52.4	20.4	27.2	**17.** Choosing learning materials in class	12.6	43.7	43.7	.012
11. Evaluate your learning	23.3	21.4	55.3	**18.** Evaluating your learning	9.7	22.3	68	.002
12. Evaluate your courses	19.4	30.1	50.5	**19.** Evaluating your course	3.9	30.1	66	.057
13. Decide what you learn outside class	20.4	8.7	70.9	**16.** Choosing learning objectives outside class	19.4	36.9	43.7	.906

Table 2 shows the percentages of responses to items in Sections One and Two which focus on the same areas. The chi-square test results which compare the corresponding items in Sections One and Two are also presented in the table.

As the table reveals, students evaluate their abilities to behave autonomously very positively. In other words, participants of this study have positive views about their abilities to behave autonomously. As it is seen in the table, the highest percentage for each Section Two item is in either "OK" or "Very good / Good" columns. That is, majority of the students evaluated their abilities as "OK", "Very Good" or "Good". In students' responses, "OK" can be accepted as a weak positive category (Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002). Knowing that the students have positive views about their abilities to behave autonomously, teachers can use more autonomy-encouraging activities with our students.

When we look at the relationship between the students' perception of their abilities to behave autonomously and their perceptions of corresponding responsibilities, we see that there is a statistically significant relationship between the five out of nine item pairs (items 4-20, 7-21, 8-14, 10-17, and 11-18). It means that there is a relationship between how students perceive their abilities and their responsibilities. Perception of greater ability might bring perception of greater responsibility, or vice versa.

Then, we can say that the participants of this study generally have a positive approach to their abilities to behave autonomously, and there is a significant relationship between their perceptions of responsibility and ability. Therefore, being aware of that the students have positive views about their abilities to behave autonomously, teachers can give students more responsibility in the language learning process and they can use more autonomy oriented activities in their classrooms.

4.3. Students' actual practices of autonomous learning outside the classroom

In the third section of the questionnaire participants were asked how often they had engaged in outside class learning activities which were considered to be possible signs of autonomous language learning behavior. Being aware of the students' frequency of engaging in these activities might provide guidance to teachers who want to encourage autonomy in their classrooms.

Table 3 shows the percentages of participants' responses about engaging in outside class learning activities. According to the table, twelve out of twenty-one activities are

Table 3. Percentage of respondents about students' engaging in outside class learning activities (n = 103)

Section 3 items **Students' engagement in outside class learning activities**	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
23. Read grammar books on your own	5.8	48.5	36	9.7
24. Done assignments which are not compulsory	16.5	13.6	45.6	24.3
25. Noted down new words and their meanings	31.1	44.6	19.4	4.9
26. Written English letters to penpals	4.8	17.5	19.4	58.3
27. Read English notices around you	39.8	47.6	10.7	1.9
28. Read newspapers in English	4.8	31.1	47.6	16.5
29. Sent e-mails in English	3.9	20.4	23.3	52.4
30. Read books or magazines in English	25.2	47.6	24.3	2.9
31. Watched English TV programs	4.9	38.8	42.7	13.6
32. Listened to English radio	35	16.5	25.2	23.3
33. Listened to English songs	56.3	32	11.7	0.00
34. Talked to foreigners in English	2.9	13.6	34	49.5
35. Practiced using English with friends	14.5	33	28.2	24.3
36. Done English self-study in a group	11.6	33	28.2	27.2
37. Done grammar exercises	12.7	48.5	30.1	8.7
38. Watched English movies	28.2	41.7	23.3	6.8
39. Written a diary in English	4.9	9.7	33.9	51.5
40. Used the internet in English	31.1	31	27.2	10.7
41. Done revision not required by the teacher	10.6	30.1	31.1	28.2
42. Collected texts in English	17.5	39.8	29.1	13.6
43. Gone to see teacher about work	14.6	24.3	38.8	22.3

"Often" or "Sometimes" practiced by the majority of the students participated in the study. This means that more than half of the activities in Section Three are widely practiced by the majority of the students who participated in this study.

A close look at the activities which the participants "Rarely" or "Never" practiced shows that their not engaging in these activities might be related to conditions they are in. For example, they may not have the opportunity of 'reading newspapers in English', 'watching English TV programs' or 'talking to foreigners in English' simply because they do not have access to these resources.

Then, it can be said that the majority of the students who participated in the study generally engage in some outside class learning activities which can be considered as the signs of autonomous behavior. Being aware of the activities that students are engaging in, teachers may try to create conditions to facilitate the use of these activities in order to encourage learner autonomy. Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) support this idea by stating that "teachers seeking to promote autonomous behavior in the form of outside-class activities may have more immediate success if they build on those that students already engage in, rather than on those activities which would require students to change their attitudes or behavior (p. 256)".

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to identify university level Turkish EFL learners' readiness for learner autonomy. Such a study was needed by language teachers in Turkey because teachers can develop a more appropriate autonomous environment for their students only if they know their readiness for this concept. Therefore, the main objective of the study was to explore the extent to which learner autonomy can work in Turkish EFL classrooms. A 43-item questionnaire was administered to 103 students in order to reach the goals stated above. The questionnaire was designed to determine learners' views of responsibility for themselves and for their teachers, their confidence to act autonomously, and their actual practice of autonomous learning.

The results of the study indicated that:

1. There is a significant relationship between the students' perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities in the language learning process. For most of the classroom actions, students have a notion of sharing responsibility with the teachers. However, they also think that there are some actions (e.g. choosing activities to use) with which the teachers have the greatest responsibility; and

similarly, there are some actions (e.g. deciding what to learn outside class) with which the students have the greatest responsibility.

2. Students have a positive approach to their abilities to behave autonomously; in other words, they see themselves capable of performing autonomous behavior.

3. There is a significant relationship between how students perceive their abilities and their responsibilities. There is the perception of greater responsibility where there is the perception of greater ability, or vice versa.

4. The majority of the students have already been engaging in some outside class learning activities which can be considered as the signs of autonomous behavior.

By considering the results stated above, we can draw the conclusion that university level Turkish EFL students are ready to take more responsibility in their language learning process because they have the notion of responsibility in their minds and they generally feel themselves capable of performing autonomously. In addition, majority of them are already practicing some kind of autonomous behaviors outside the classroom.

The results of the study bring two important classroom implications to mind. Firstly, students seem to be ready to take more responsibility. Therefore, English teachers should not shy away from involving their students more in the language learning process. Secondly, teachers should start encouraging learner autonomy by facilitating the activities which their students seem to practice more because encouraging familiar practices would be easier for them than encouraging unfamiliar ones.

Keeping the conclusion and implications of the study in mind, we can also bring some suggestions for further studies. First of all, although the results of the study let us draw some conclusions, various further studies are needed to draw more concrete conclusions on Turkish EFL students' readiness for learner autonomy. Therefore, further studies should be conducted in different contexts with different students. Secondly, since various researchers around the world propose different ways of developing learner autonomy, further studies should be conducted on how to best encourage autonomy in Turkish students' specific learning context. In the light of those studies, the most appropriate ways of developing autonomy should be determined and applied in English classrooms. Teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy should also be investigated in further studies in order to develop more appropriate materials, and in order to see if there is a need to design in-service teacher training programs.

Autonomy might be considered a relatively new concept in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. However, many studies indicate that teachers may reach their instructional goals more easily by fostering learner autonomy in their classrooms. Therefore, teachers in Turkey should encourage and facilitate autonomous behavior in their classrooms by considering their students' culture specific conditions and readiness for autonomy.

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