

# *English Language Instructors' Conception of Learner Autonomy\**

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## **Abstract**

Independent learning has gained a special attention in English Language Teaching (ELT) for fairly forty years. And in recent years, the prominence of autonomous learning as well as the active participation of students in leading their studies, not only in but also out of the classroom, has been dramatically acknowledged. Typically, the traditional teaching style is missing this attribute and the students are not engaged in the learning process. Though, confirming that students are prepared to undertake this responsibility as well as maintaining them in such a role is often said not to be clear in rehearsal. Thus, it is indispensable to explore the English language teachers' conceptions of learner autonomy and find out if they have the means for fostering it in their classrooms. Hence, the current study examined the EFL teachers' conceptions of learner autonomy and to what extent their understanding was applied in their actual teaching practice. To do so, 36 English language teachers were the participants in this study. Utilizing a mixed method, the researcher used a questionnaire and semi-structure interviews to collect the required data for the current study. The results showed that the teachers' actual teaching practices contradicted with their theoretical conceptions about learner autonomy.

**Keywords:** *Learner Autonomy, English Language Teaching, English Language Learners.*

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## **İngilizce Okutmanlarının Öğrenci Özerkliği Algıları**

### **Öz**

İngiliz dili öğretiminde öğrenci özerkliği son otuz yıldır üzerinde durulan konulardan biridir. Ve son yıllarda, öğrenci özerkliğinin yanı sıra dil öğretim sürecinde öğrencilerin sadece sınıf içerisinde değil sınıf dışında da aktif katılımlarının önemi kabul edilmektedir. Genel anlamda, geleneksel öğretim metotları bu nitelikten yoksundur ve öğrencilere öğrenme süreçleriyle ilgili düşünme olanakları verilmemektedir. Bu bağlamda İngilizce öğretmenlerinin öğrenci özerkliği konusundaki algılarının araştırılması ve dil öğretiminde öğrenci özerkliği kazandırma tekniklerini kullanıp kullanmadıklarını bulmak çok önemlidir. Bu sebeplerle, bu çalışma ile İngilizce öğretmenlerinin öğrenci özerkliği konusundaki algıları ve dil öğretiminde öğrenci özerkliği kazandırma tekniklerini ne ölçüde kullanıp kullanmadıkları araştırılmıştır. Araştırmaya bir vakıf üniversitesinde çalışmakta olan 36 İngilizce öğretmeni katılmıştır. Araştırma karma yöntemli vaka çalışması şeklinde tasarlanmış ve veriler anket ve yarı yapılandırılmış mülakat yoluyla toplanmıştır. Çalışmanın bulguları katılımcıların öğrenci özerkliği konusundaki algıları ve sınıf içi öğretmenlik uygulamalarının çeliştiğini göstermiştir.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Öğrenci Özerkliği, İngiliz Dili Öğretimi, İngilizce Öğrenen Öğrenciler*

### **1. Introduction**

Although many researches have been conducted and many academic papers have been published on learner autonomy over the last forty years (e.g. Little, 1991, Chitashvili, 2007, Summer, 2010, Tütüniş, 2011, Dang, 2012, Kamberi, 2013, etc.), a teacher-led approach is yet widespread in education in many contexts, worldwide. That is, teaching and learning is restricted to “spoon-feeding” students and far from engaging the learners in every aspect of learning. In other words, the teacher is a knowledge provider (Trinh, 2005) rather than being a facilitator and paving the way towards promoting autonomous learners which has created a gap between the twenty first century teachers and the twenty first century education (Nga, 2014). Hence, bridging this gap in language education through bearing in mind the promotion of autonomous learners was the main purpose of this study.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

Salimi and Ansari (2015) argue that the difficulties of EFL learning should be understood by the teachers, then accordingly, they have to change their teaching materials and syllabuses as well as their beliefs about EFL learning. They add, when one turns out to be a teacher, they typically make effort to regulate their teaching practice and methodology and the things they learned over the duration of their education with recent methods, approaches and philosophies concerning providing English language lessons, nevertheless once they experience teaching in an actual context, they reappear the old-fashioned position spontaneously – teacher-centeredness – in class. Hence, these teachers like many other old-fashioned ones stick to the textbooks and fixed syllabuses and they are more or less unwilling and opposed to hand over the responsibility to the learners. As a result, renovating the teachers' perceptions is a challenging task as it requires perseverance, tempo and endeavor (Tütünis, 2011).

Based on what has been discussed so far, one of the teachers' main intentions in education is helping students to stand on their own and become independent and lifelong learners over the course of their learning process (William & Burden, 1997). Nowadays, in educational areas, autonomy has been watched with keen interest; however, it is still seen that many teachers do not seriously take this into account and lack of autonomous learning is felt in their classrooms (Salimi, and Ansari, 2015).

### **1.2 Significance of the Study**

Being an EFL teacher is always thought to be very challenging, therefore, there is a sensible intention behind creating an environment where the students are engaged in the decisions making process of all aspects of learning; on top of this, observing its results on the students' accomplishments might provide an opportunity not only for the teachers but also for the policy-makers and the educators to achieve a more vivid picture of this phenomenon.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Definitions of Learner Autonomy**

Autonomy was conceptualized as an ability for sequestration, analytical thinking, making decisions and self-governing performance, by Little (1991). Accordingly, Macaro (1997) defined autonomy as being able to take responsibility for one's own learning as well as being engaged in decision making process. Additionally, Holec (1981) indicated that becoming a self-governing student means that one is engaged in all the decisions making processes regarding his/her learning such as: regulating the learning points, selecting the contents, choosing the learning techniques and strategies, observing the learning procedures, and assessing what has been learned.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Participants**

The target group consisted of 36, both male and female, university teachers who came from different nationalities including native and non-native English speakers and were studied through questionnaires and interviews.

### **3.2 Instruments**

The required data was gathered using two key instruments. A questionnaire developed by Nga (2014) and semi-structured interview.

### **3.3 Data Analysis Procedure**

After administrating, distributing and collecting the data through utilizing the questionnaire, the data was analyzed via SPSS. Additionally, the audio recordings of the interviews with 12 respondents were listened to a number of times for their accurate transcription, and the data collected from this phase was analyzed through descriptive analysis.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Finding from the Questionnaire**

The data collected over the course of this research indicated that the EFL teachers admitted that they were to take the responsibilities in the learning process in their classrooms rather than their learners. Since they obviously stated that their students were not involved in making decisions of any

aspects of learning in their classrooms such as determining the objectives of every lesson, choosing the materials, choosing the activities, and assessing their progress. In the meantime, they held negative conceptions about their learners' current autonomy. The teachers confessed that their students relied on them on almost everything and were not keen enough to discover the learning on their own. Moreover, the teachers declared that there were a number of crucial restrictions barricading the promotion of learner autonomy in the Turkish context. Exams, time, and pre-prepared syllabus, for example, were believed to hinder fostering autonomy in the setting where the study was conducted. On the other hand, the teachers believed that adopting specific approaches can help encouraging learner autonomy such as applying ICT in the classroom, training teachers and students, reforming the curriculum, and integrating cooperative learning principles into their lessons.

#### **4.2 Findings from the Interviews**

Based on the findings, this research revealed the fact that the teachers' actual teaching practices contradict with their theoretical conceptions about learner autonomy. That is to say, they implemented the principles of the traditional and teacher-centered instruction with no or very little opportunities of promoting learner autonomy in their classes. Lack of teachers' knowledge, the influence of the traditional teaching setting, pre-designed curriculum and textbooks, governmental educational policies, and the students' lack of understanding about what autonomous learning is, since most of their classes were teacher-fronted with no learners' engagement in the learning process throughout their school education, were said to be the key reasons hindering the promotion of learner autonomy.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The results of the current study suggest that changes must be brought in the educational system of the Turkish government, especially in the lower levels (i.e. primary, secondary and high school) prior to the university level. The policy makers, educators, curriculum designers and professionals have to take the crucial influence of the local language teaching-learning context into consideration in fostering learner autonomy. In the meantime, encouraging learner autonomy should be part and the main purposes of

education. As a result, not only the teachers but also the learners will be aware of the concept of learner autonomy, its importance and the methods and strategies to foster learner autonomy in Turkish educational framework.

Moreover, the findings indicate that, nowadays, the central focus of language education in Turkish contexts is on the examinations. The current research was conducted in a specific setting with the participation of a small population of university teachers, though. Throughout the first phase of the study, examinations were said to be one of the major barriers to the development of learner autonomy. The main emphasis is, particularly, placed on the summative assessment rather than formative assessment. Hence, it is suggested that the EFL teachers' awareness should be raised about all the techniques and strategies that help them actively engage their learners in the learning process such as implementing different types of formative assessments (e.g. peer-assessment and self-assessment) which this alone leads to shift the focus from the exams to the learning process.

### **5.3 Limitations**

The researcher identifies the scope of the research as a limitation. That is, the current research aimed to investigate learner autonomy in a specific setting with a small number of participants in Istanbul, Turkey, therefore it cannot be generalized to other contexts. Even though one university can be a representative of all universities through the country, because all the universities follow more or less the same educational principles, it still cannot be claimed that one will find compatible results with all the universities in Turkey.

### **5.4 Recommendation**

Although, majority of the EFL teachers who took part in the second phase of the study were able to define learner autonomy and elaborate on the topic by talking about the strategies and ways of fostering learner autonomy and the specific barriers towards its promotion, they did not feel quite confident and found themselves in a touch-and-go situation while putting it all into practice; and they themselves proposed the idea of holding workshops and seminars on encouraging learner autonomy for their professional advancement.

Consequently, equipping the EFL teachers through holding teachers' capacity building programs and raising their understanding of autonomous learning and ways of incorporating it in their actual teaching practices would be a striking step towards shifting the responsibilities from teachers to learners, thus creating a student-centered environment, and promoting autonomous and life-long learners.

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