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## How Ready Are Your Students For Autonomous Language Learning?

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to explore 100 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' readiness in learning English as a foreign language through a quantitative approach. Data were gathered by means of Learner Autonomy Readiness Instrument (LARI) (Koçak, 2003). Results showed that participants were not only extrinsically motivated but also intrinsically motivated in some cases. They also perceived to apply some metacognitive strategies and their perceptions about taking responsibility were dependent on the task. Finally, they appeared to be willing to engage in outside class activities to learn the language.

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### 1. Introduction

Language learner has been placed in the center of language learning process as a result of the alteration in the language learning methods and techniques over the past thirty years. That is, learners' needs and strategies were fore fronted and they became the focus of the process. This change in the field of language learning has given birth to "learner-centered approach" as a new concept which accepts collaboration between teacher and the learners as the main approach instead of dictating rules of language. As Tudor (1993) explained, this approach requires students to be more participatory and responsible during the language learning process in contrast to outdated approaches as a consequence of the switch in the teacher and learner roles.

Additionally, two major aims of learner-centeredness in language learning are stated to be; focus on language content and language learning process (Nunan, 1996). In order to accomplish these objectives, learners have to take the responsibility of decision making. That is, teacher has the duty of planning the content according to the needs of the learners.

This emphasis on the changing role of the language learner is of importance for recent methods in the field of foreign language learning. Communicative language learning, for instance, gives significance to the learners' engagement in authentic language use (Savignon, 2002). This responsibility enables them to be active performers with communicative opportunities. This innovative method has led to some notions. One of them is communicative competence. As claimed by Kumaravadivelu (1993), anything related to language learners (e.g. materials, tests, curriculum guidelines) placed communicative competence in the center of learning process.

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Secondly, cooperative learning has been of value by being linked to learner-centered approach. It necessitates social interaction of students during group activities to activate learning from each other (Crandall, 1999). Last but not the least, the concept of learner autonomy has also emerged as a result of the shift towards learner-centered language learning.

Autonomy was first promoted to cover educational contexts and described as “a means of breaking down the barriers that so often exist between learning and living” by Holec (1981). Holec (1981) also defined the concept of autonomy as “the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning” as the outcome of self-directed learning. Within the frame of self-directed learning, learners are the only determiners of the learning goals and progress. This focus of self-directed learning affected the definition of learner autonomy in the field of language learning. In other words, learner autonomy as an approach has concerned with enabling learners to think critically, solve problems by the help of necessary skills and strategies, and making decisions during their language learning process.

Autonomy of language learners has been the focus of many researchers in the field internationally (e.g. Benson & Voller, 1997; Cotterall, 2000; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Lee, 1998; Little, 2009; Littlewood, 1999).

The common outcome of all these research is the necessity of learners’ being in charge of their learning in language learning context. Littlewood (1999), for instance, investigated the autonomy level of learners in East Asia, and explained the importance of being responsible learners with two reasons; (a) performing learning oneself and (b) being able to continue learning out of formal education settings. In addition, Little (2009) emphasizes the role of taking control in the learning process. In order to help learners take these roles, teachers are claimed to shift some of their roles with their learners. To illustrate, they are suggested to take the role of a counsellor to raise student awareness and facilitate student motivation (Benson & Voller, 1997).

In order to accelerate learner autonomy in language classroom, some researchers investigated the impact of European Language Portfolio (Little, 2009), language course design (Cotterall, 2000) and self-directed language program (Lee, 1998).

Little (2009), found that the Council of Europe’s European Language Portfolio is capable of helping the employment of language learner autonomy to a great extent as a result of goal-setting and self-assessment. Moreover, Cotterall (2000) discusses the importance of appropriate language course design to foster learner autonomy and proposes a variety of principles. Similarly, Lee (1998) investigated the role of implementing a self-directed learning program in Hong Kong on students’ abilities to be self-directed and autonomous. He concluded that flexibility is significant for students’ autonomy since it provides learners with different tasks and objectives depending on their needs.

Apart from these studies, Ho and Crookall (1995) investigated the effect of a traditional language environment on promoting learner autonomy. It was found that large-scale simulation could transform this type of a classroom into a learning context that powerfully facilitates learner autonomy.

In the field, some other studies claimed the necessity of investigation of learners’ readiness for this responsibility (Cotterall, 1995; Koçak, 2003; Ming & Alias, 2007; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002; Yıldırım, 2008).

All these studies argued that since perception and practice of autonomous learning change depending on the cultural and educational environments, it is of value to investigate learners’ level of readiness for such a responsibility prior to any intervention to curriculum and materials design to facilitate such learning. Otherwise, as were stated in above mentioned studies, problems

regarding learners' motivation level, application of appropriate metacognitive strategies, their perceptions of shared and individual roles in the classroom might occur.

Therefore, in order to take action against these possible problems investigating learners' readiness for autonomous language learning can be beneficial for the language teachers who are investing great amount of energy and receive insufficient response from their students. It can also explain the reasons of student misbehavior such as not listening to each other or not participating in class activities. Therefore, this study examines the readiness of Turkish language learners for autonomous learning.

## **2. Methodology**

Present study investigated whether university level foreign language learners are ready for autonomous language learning, and employed a quantitative approach which helps the researcher to judge the reliability of the findings by the help of suitable statistical methods and generalize the results to other contexts.

Particularly, this study tried to find answer for the following main research question and its sub questions:

1. Are the university level language learners ready for autonomous language learning?
  - 1a. What is their level of motivation to learn a foreign language?
  - 1b. To what extent do they use metacognitive strategies?
  - 1c. How do they perceive their own and their instructors' responsibilities in the process of learning English?
  - 1d. To what extent do they perform outclass activities to pursue language learning?

### **2.1. Setting and Participants**

In Turkey, students registered to universities with English medium of instruction have to take a language proficiency test. According to their results, they either have the chance to go on with mainstream courses or go on with language courses. Students, whose language proficiency is not high enough, attend language skills courses for one year according to their levels which are decided depending on their scores. This study was conducted in one of these language preparatory schools in the south-east of Turkey in the fall semester of 2015-16 academic year. Students in this prep program attend 24 hours of skills-based courses (e.g. Reading, writing, speaking, listening) in a week. The program applied was an integrated one with task based syllabi.

100 (61 male, 39 female) English as a foreign language (EFL) students participated in the study on voluntary basis. At the time of the study 76 students were pre-intermediate level, and other 24 students were intermediate level.

### **2.2. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure**

In order to gather data Learner Autonomy Readiness Instrument (LARI) was used (Koçak, 2003). It was originally developed in Turkish. This scale consisted of four independent sections with 49 items in total. First section aims to investigate the motivation level of learners to learn English as a foreign language with 20 items. In the second section, there are 8 items to tap the metacognitive strategies employed by language learners. These two sections were on a 6-point likert scale (1: strongly agree – 6: Strongly disagree). Third section aiming at examining the perceptions of learners regarding their own and teachers' responsibilities in language learning process involves 12 items. In this section, participants are required to put a tick in the appropriate

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box. The first box indicated the students' perceptions of their teachers' responsibilities, the second box indicated the students' perceptions of not only their own but also their teachers' responsibilities, and the third box indicated the students' perceptions of their own responsibilities. And the last section of the instrument consisted of 9 items to investigate learners' outside class activities to continue their language learning. Students were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert type scale. The weight of each response ranges from 5 (always) to 1 (never).

Questionnaire was administered during a class hour to randomly selected five classes and only volunteered students participated in the administration. It nearly took 20 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. In order to prevent misunderstandings, the questionnaire was administered in Turkish which is the original language of the questionnaire and the students' native language.

### 2.3. Reliability of the Instrument

In the following table reliability values of each section and the overall value of the questionnaire can be seen.

Table 1  
Reliability of the Questionnaire

	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>
Section 1. Motivation	.67
Section 2. Metacognition	.60
Section 3. Responsibilities	.74
Section 4. Outside Class Activities	.72
Overall	.79

### 3. Results

To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics were used. In order to investigate the motivation levels of the participants, data came from section 1. Descriptive statistics were used to present the frequencies, means and standard deviations of the items. Table 2 demonstrates the results.

Table 2  
Most and least highly rated items about motivation.

<i>Highly rated items</i>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>SD</b>	<i>Least highly rated items</i>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>SD</b>
19. If I learn English better, I will be able to get a better and well-paid job.	5.64	89	.74	31. If I do not do well in this course, it will be because I have not tried hard enough.	2.76	15	1.47
29. The teacher should encourage students to make contributions in the English lesson.	5.55	88	.93	22. I cannot concentrate easily on the English class.	2.92	23	1.78
17. I want to continue studying English for as long as possible.	5.35	84	1.10	23. I am afraid I will not succeed in the English exams.	3.60	37	1.92
18. I believe that I will be successful in the English class.	5.21	81	1.04	27. In the English class, the teacher should be the one who talks more.	3.74	37	1.79

As can be seen in the above table, getting a well-paid job, teachers' encouragement, own desire to continue studying English and to be successful in the class are the items that were most highly rated items. This result shows that students are not only motivated by external factors; besides, their own will as intrinsic factor to learn English facilitates their motivation level. Majority of the participants (N=89) think that they can earn more money when they learn English. Similarly, more than half of the respondents (N=84) have the necessary desire to continue learning English which is very important for self-directed learning. On the other side of the coin, they do not think they cannot concentrate or will not succeed. This shows their self-confidence and belief in their own success. Moreover, the necessity of teacher's talking more is one of the least highly rated items demonstrating their will to participate and take active role in the learning process.

Data came from section 2 were analyzed to investigate the extent that participating language learners' use of metacognitive strategies in learning English. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics regarding the most and least highly rated items in this section.

Table 3  
Most and least highly rated items about metacognitive strategies

<i>Highly rated items</i>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>SD</b>	<i>Least highly rated items</i>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>SD</b>
39. I learn better when I try to understand the reasons of my mistakes I have done in English	5.24	85	1.16	40. I arrange time to prepare before every English class.	3.9	29	3.45
38. When studying for my English exam, I try to find out which structures and terms I do not understand well.	5.08	79	1.24	34. When I study for my English course, I pick out the most important points and make diagrams or tables for myself.	4.25	41	1.64
33. When I am learning a new grammar rule, I think about its relationship to the rules I have learned.	5.04	79	1.28	36. I use new English words in a sentence in order to remember them easily.	4.30	47	1.48

It is obvious that learners are well-aware of the strategies they need to make use of during language learning process. To specify, more than three fourth of students (n=89) indicated that they learn better when they try to figure out the reasons of their own mistakes showing self-assessment as a metacognitive strategy (Item 39). Moreover, more than 75 % of the respondents stated thinking about the relationship between new grammar rule and the rules they had learned before (Item 33). Also, item 38 indicate that the majority of the students considered the importance of using self-evaluation and self-monitoring strategies in the language learning process. In other words, data show that respondents were used to identify their problems prior to English exams (Item 38).

On the other hand, less than half of the participants stated making diagrams or tables while studying (Item 34) or make sentences to learn new words (Item 36). Finally, only 29 respondents indicated preparing for the English lessons (Item 40).

Data for the research question aiming to explore preparatory school students' perceptions of their teachers' and their own responsibilities in learning English were gathered by Section 3. Frequency of each item was given in table 4.

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Table 4  
Responsibility perceptions of participants

Item	Teacher's responsibility	Both teacher's and my own responsibility	My own responsibility
	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
41. stimulating my interest in learning English	19	72	8
42. identifying my weaknesses and strengths in learning English	15	58	26
43. deciding the objectives of the English course	29	43	27
44. deciding what will be learnt in the next English lesson	64	28	8
45. choosing what activities to use in the English lesson	57	39	4
46. deciding how long to spend on each activity	67	30	3
47. choosing what materials to use in the English lessons	71	27	2
48. evaluating my learning performance	34	60	6
49. evaluating the English course	14	75	11
50. deciding what I will learn outside the English class	11	38	51
51. making sure I make progress during English lessons	17	65	18
52. making sure I make progress outside the English class	8	40	52

Results showed that more than half of the students perceived continuing their learning outside the classroom as their own responsibility (Items 50 and 52). However, they thought that deciding what to learn when and how long should be spent on which activity are all teachers' responsibilities (Items 44-45-46-47). Most of them, on the other hand, wanted to share responsibility in stimulating their interest (Item 41), evaluating the course and their performance (Items 49 and 48), and deciding on their progress (Item 65).

In order to investigate what kind of outside class activities are performed by the respondents, data were gathered from 9 items in the last section. Following table shows the most and least highly rated items.

Table 5  
Most and least highly rated outside class activities

<i>Highly rated items</i>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>SD</b>	<i>Least highly rated items</i>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>SD</b>
61. I listen to English songs.	4.07	75	1.23	59. I make use of the self-access center to study English	2.93	35	1.42
55. I try to learn new words in English.	4.00	71	1.03	54. I do assignments, which are not compulsory.	3.01	31	1.17
57. I watch English movies or TV programs.	3.93	64	1.16	53. I do grammar exercises though it is not homework.	3.08	36	1.14

Results demonstrate that participants prefer listening to English songs (N=75), learning new vocabulary (N=71), and watching English movies or programs (N= 64) as outside class activities. On the other hand, the least preferred activities are using self-access center (N=35), doing assignments which are not compulsory (N=31) and doing grammar exercises even though it is not homework.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study investigated the readiness of Turkish university level foreign language students for autonomous language learning with regards to learners' motivation level, use of metacognitive strategies, perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities while learning English, and practice of autonomous language learning with activities outside the borders of the class.

Results of the first research question showed that participants have high motivation in some cases. To illustrate, getting a well-paid job in future and teachers' encouragement motivate them extrinsically. Besides, they have necessary intrinsic motivation to continue studying English and to be successful in the classroom. Therefore, respondents can be stated as likely to be involved in autonomous learning depending on their motivation level. As claimed by Dörnyei and Csizer (1998), high level of motivation increases the possibility of being involved in autonomous learning. It is also one of the crucial features to promote autonomous learning (Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002). Moreover, participants designated high level of intrinsic motivation by indicating their own will to continue learning English even after their university education. Having such an intrinsically motivated group of students is a chance for the language instructors and the administration in this specific context. This finding is in line with the claims of Deci and Ryan (1985) that support the effect of intrinsic motivation on learner autonomy. On the other hand, results showed that teacher's talking more is one of the least highly rated items. This finding also supports participants' will to participate and take active role in the learning process which is a parallel finding to Dickinson's (1995), attribution theory which claims the direct relation between learner autonomy and their taking the responsibility of their own learning.

Second research question aimed to investigate the extent of metacognitive strategies used by the participants while learning English as a foreign language. Obviously, respondents indicated they apply some metacognitive strategies during their language learning process which is linked to autonomous learning (Victori & Lockhart, 1995). For instance, more than half of the participants appeared to be aware of the role of strategies such as figuring out the reasons of their mistakes, doing the analysis of the newly learned rules. Furthermore, they indicated applying self-evaluation and self-monitoring strategies. These results are parallel with the findings of Koçak (2003) and White (1995). On the other hand, less than half of the participants stated their willingness to take time before language class to make necessary preparation. As stated by Koçak (2003), this finding can be because of the requirement that makes students be exposed to learning English for long hours every day. However, McClure (2001), and Ho and Crookall (1995) state that students' preparation and organization during their language learning process is one of the signs of autonomous learning.

Third research question explored students' perceptions of their teachers' and their own responsibilities for varying tasks in learning English. Clearly, more than half of the students perceived continuing their learning outside the classroom as their own responsibility. Nevertheless, deciding what to learn, when and how long should be spent on which activity were indicated as teachers' responsibilities. These results are parallel with the findings of Yumuk

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(2002) who states that Turkish students have to be more responsible in selecting, analyzing, evaluating and applying information for their own purpose. On the other hand, participants indicated that they want to share responsibility in stimulating their interest, evaluating the course and their performance, and deciding on their progress. This finding can be explained with the traditional teacher-centered learning experiences of the students.

Final research question aimed to identify how frequently the participants carry out outside class activities to continue language learning. It is good that majority of the participants preferred extracurricular activities such as listening to English songs and watching English movies or programs. These results are consistent with the findings of Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002). However, participants are neutral to engage in activities such as reading newspapers or magazines, using Internet in English, talking to foreigners. This finding is contrary to the findings of Victori and Lockhart's (1995).

This study has some major limitations. First of all, autonomous language learning in this study is limited to basic concepts such as the motivation level of students, metacognitive strategies used by students, responsibility perceptions of students and their outside class activities. Moreover, the participants of the study are only a group of students in a specific language learning context which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other contexts.

### 5. Implications

The results of this study suggest significant implications for practice. First of all, as one of the factors affecting learners' autonomy, raising their awareness is of value. That is to say, language learning environment should be in the form to facilitate learners' decision making. To support learner autonomy, appropriate tasks, group works, engaging them into decision making, planning and evaluation process of the course and their own success can elevate their autonomy.

Secondly, teachers, curriculum designers should be well-informed about the recent and up-to-date teaching methods. In other words, they need to stop learners' dependence on the instructor by the help of appropriate activities, methods and materials. If this can be achieved, learners better learn how to take responsibility of their own learning and become more confident learners. That's why, learners should be supported to engage in outside class activities such as reading newspapers in English, listening to English songs and watching movies with subtitles.

As another implication, language teachers should know how to improve learners' use of metacognitive skills. In order to support learners' application of these skills, effective reading and writing projects and studies can be asked. In this case, Dickinson's (1993) GOAL framework can be applied effectively. In this framework, G refers to "What am I supposed to learn from this?", O stands for "What is the specific objective of the task?", A refers to Act "How am I going to do it?" and L stands for Look to monitor the strategy and self-assessment "How have I done?".

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