



TURKISH PREP CLASS STUDENTS' VIEWS ON AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH

(Araştırma Makalesi)

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Abstract

This paper is focused on two issues, learner autonomy and blended learning, in language education by presenting an empirical study. The study aims to investigate university-level students' beliefs about their autonomous learning just after the implementation of a blended learning approach. In order to set up this approach, the study integrated the practice of both activities from a course management system and online journal writings into an English writing course for academic purposes in a Turkish state university. Data collection took place in December 2019. Among course takers, 21 voluntarily filled out a survey asking about their views on their learning, particularly autonomous language learning. Afterwards, five of them agreed to attend a semi-structured interviewing process. Data from both research instruments indicated that Turkish prep class students had positive feelings about autonomous language learning. The findings also showed that the combination of classroom learning with online learning facilitated their learning of the current course and their adaptable skills for future learning environments. Accordingly, the study makes some recommendations for course designers, policymakers and researchers to consider designing a blended learning environment consistent with the classroom curriculum and learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Learner Autonomy, Blended Learning, Beliefs, English Language Learning, English for Academic Purposes.*

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Türk Hazırlık Sınıfı Öğrencilerinin Karma Öğrenme Yaklaşımının Uygulaması Sonrasında Özerk Öğrenme Konusunda Görüşleri

Öz

Bu araştırmada dil eğitimi ile ilgili iki konu üzerinde durulmuştur: Öğrenen özerkliği ve harmanlanmış öğrenme. Bu araştırmanın amacı, harmanlanmış öğrenme yaklaşımının uygulamasından hemen sonra üniversite düzeyindeki öğrencilerin kendi özerk öğrenmeleri hakkındaki inançlarını incelemektir. Araştırmada ilk önce akademik amaçlar için İngilizce yazma dersi için harmanlanmış öğrenme yaklaşımı oluşturulmuştur. Bu bağlamda, hem ders yönetim sistemindeki etkinlikler hem de çevrimiçi dergi yazımı bu sınıf içi derse eklenmiştir. Veri toplama Aralık 2019'da bir Türk devlet üniversitesinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Derse kayıtlı 21 öğrenci araştırmaya katılmış ve kendi öğrenimleri, özellikle de özerk dil öğrenimleri hakkındaki görüşlerini soran bir anketi gönüllü olarak doldurmuştur. Öğrencilerden beşi ayrıca yarı yapılandırılmış bir görüşme sürecine katılmayı kabul etmiştir. Her iki araştırma aracından elde edilen verilere göre, Türk hazırlık sınıfı öğrencileri özerk dil öğrenimleri hakkında olumlu görüşlere sahiptirler. Ayrıca, harmanlanmış öğrenme yaklaşımının mevcut dersi öğrenmelerini ve gelecekteki öğrenme ortamları için uyarlanabilir becerilerinin oluşmasını kolaylaştırdığı belirtilmiştir. Son olarak, bu araştırma, ders tasarımcılara, politika yapıcılara ve araştırmacılara, sınıf içi müfredat ve öğrenme çıktısıyla tutarlı harmanlanmış öğrenme ortamı tasarlanması ile ilgili önerilerde bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Özerk Öğrenme, Harmanlanmış Öğrenme, İnançlar, İngilizce Öğrenme, Akademik Amaçlar İçin İngilizce.*

1. Introduction

Autonomy has been seen as a “buzzword” in tertiary education (Graham, 2006, p. 4) as it can take place in both formal (e.g. classroom-based learning) and informal (i.e. outside educational institutions) spaces (Lai, 2017). With the widespread use of technology, it has become interrelated with online learning, especially in language education. However, the connection between autonomy and technology in language learning is getting “more complex” on the one side and “more promising” on the other (Reinders and White, 2016, p. 143). This uncertainty necessitates further studies on learner autonomy and online learning.

Despite several studies on these two issues stated above (Inal and Korkmaz, 2019; Wright, 2017), the current research still remains lacking. As regards, Wright (2017) indicates: “Although research to date shows some focus on blended learning, literature on distance online teaching seems more prevalent.” (p. 64). Furthermore, the increasing demand for enhancing language skills in a global context because of the employability competition (Smith, Bell, Bennett and McAlpine, 2018) pushes language learners to deal with their learning on their own. Also, Smith, Kuchah and Lamb (2018) call for research

to examine the use of technology in benefiting learners, especially in undeveloped contexts. In the meantime, learner autonomy differs across cultures, countries and regions (Godwin-Jones, 2011), which also demands the conduct of further studies.

All of these aforesaid circumstances have revealed the research gap in the field (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Kuchah and Lamb, 2018), and in turn, have directed the current study. Furthermore, studies conducted in the Turkish context have indicated that Turkish students still need teacher support despite their willingness to pace their learning on their own online (Istifci, 2017). Therefore, this study is significant because it has purposed to investigate students' views on their autonomous learning after the implementation of a blended learning approach. Within the scope of the understandings from this implementation, the study can contribute to the field, especially making suggestions for researchers, course designers and policymakers, by indicating what to consider in the design of a blended learning environment. In this sense, it has sought out to respond to one research question: What do learners perceive about their autonomous learning after the intervention of the blended learning approach?

To do this, the paper will define learner autonomy and show research on autonomous language learning in digital "learning environments including blended learning environments" (Dooly, 2017, p. 171) at first. After this, it will present methodological considerations. As a qualitative research method, surveys were included to answer the research question. As this method may not be enough to understand students' beliefs about their autonomous learning deeply, interviews were held as a qualitative research method to get "closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers and Corte, 2019, p. 139). Next, it will demonstrate research findings of Turkish students' perceptions about their autonomous learning. Ultimately, it will argue these findings by concluding the research and giving recommendations for designers and researchers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Learner Autonomy

A variety of definitions of autonomy have been put forward in the context of education; however, it is commonly based on a concept providing learners with more autonomy to take responsibility for their own learning, namely, how, what and when to learn. Recently, the notion of autonomous learning has moved from an individual effort to a social one in learning environments.

Holec (1981) identifies it as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3). He further distinguishes it from directed learning by calling for applying certain methods to develop it. Accordingly, learners need the training to decide their needs, see their learning preferences and styles, apply the right learning strategies, set their goals, and make assessment and evaluation of their learning. Being opposed to the idea of excluding tutors' role in a learning environment, Little (1995) draws attention to the social aspect

of learning in that learners need a collective struggle for autonomous learning rather than an individual one. As regards, a developed autonomy in learning is comprised of not only learners but also teachers, curriculum and course books digitally or printed provided. Eventually, Little (2000) indicates that “the growth of learner independence is supported by learner interdependence” (p. 22). Relatedly, van Lier (2004) states that autonomous learning is “socially produced, but appropriated and made one’s own” (p. 59). Recently, this notion of learner autonomy has not changed as Benson and Cooker (2013) claim that learner autonomy can be defined as “a social capacity that develops through ‘interdependence’ rather than ‘independence’” (p. 8). In this sense, Murray (2017) stresses the role of learner autonomy “as an affordance [or an opportunity] in learning environments” (p. 130) for learners to engage in activities.

In autonomous learning environments, both tutors and students have some duties in fostering learning. On the one side, teachers are facilitators and coaches by supporting students to search and find out information, enhancing students’ problem-solving critical thinking skills and preparing lectures “on topics that are selected in plenary discussions with the students and conform to the curriculum” (Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger, 2002, p. 165). Additionally, Alonazi (2017) summarizes teachers’ role as a counsellor, resource, manager and organizer. On the other side, autonomous learners handle their own learning “by independently choosing particular aims and purposes; choosing materials, methods and tasks; exercising choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the tasks; [and] choosing and applying criteria for evaluation” (Dam, 2003, p. 136). Dam (2003, p. 139) also offers four paces to construct learner responsibility: The first one is “experience” in practical activities, appropriate collaborators, suitable methods of designing the project assigned and diverse strategies of assessing learning process and progress. The second one is “awareness” of learning in different aspects (i.e. what, how and why to learn). The third one is “influence on and participation in decision making” in terms of practices and collaborators as well as methods. The last one is “responsibility” for a learner’s own education (Dam, 2003, p. 139).

However, learners can be more exposed to having opportunities to handle their learning in digital learning environments compared to classroom learning environments (Sockett, 2014).

2.2 Autonomous Language Learning in Digital Learning Environments

The emergence of learner autonomy has attracted the attention of applied linguistics (Murray, 2017) in such a way that language teachers and educators have started finding new ways and teaching methods to integrate this phenomenal notion into their classrooms. Although different resources either in classrooms or online have some benefits and challenges for the improvement of learner autonomy, technology has been regarded to play a crucial role in this aim to some extent that learners can reflect on their learning, interact with peers and textbooks, experiment new learning methods and participate into learning

process actively and independently (Schwienhorst, 2007) over the years (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Lai, 2017; Sadaghian, Marandi and Iravani, 2020). Moreover, technology's role in facilitating the discussion and sharing of information provides "potential for autonomous language learning" (Arfae, 2017, p.3) in "globalized online aspects", for example, through YouTube, Wikis, or Flickr (Benson and Chick, 2010, p. 63).

As regards the common definition of learner autonomy as stated above, the characteristics of autonomous language learning in digital learning environments are listed as being more "student-initiated" (Benson, 2013, p. 139), requesting digital literacies and adaptation to new environments (Chik, 2014), being dynamic and evolving following the change in technology (Lai, 2017), being affected by cultural values (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006), being more encouraging for learner awareness of independent learning and language learning (Sadaghian et al., 2020), and being intertwined with "learning preferences, goals and needs, habitual practices and learners' ability to perceive and utilize the affordances of technologies for learning" (Lai, 2017, p. 80) and "social participation" (Godwin-Jones, 2019, p. 19).

Among many terms such as "distributed learning, e-learning, open and flexible learning, and hybrid courses", blended or hybrid learning has become a "buzzword" in tertiary education (Graham, 2006, p. 4), as it combines both classroom learning and computer-assisted learning. Differing from some other types of learning, asynchronously, it constructs a flexible environment where participants can attend courses anytime and anywhere, as well as a deeply reflective environment where students can take more time to reflect on their learning. Also, synchronously, it allows human connection, which improves trust, and spontaneity for related knowledge. However, these functions, namely, human connection and spontaneity, are not encouraged in asynchronous environments, whereas functions such as participation and flexibility do not occur in synchronous environments (Graham, 2006). As such, blended learning systems require students to be more willing to amend and develop learning strategies, which demands learners' capabilities "to take charge of their learning" (H, 2019, p. 71), especially in the process of language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011).

2.3 Previous Studies on Autonomous Language Learning in Blended Learning Contexts

Many studies have investigated autonomous learning in English as foreign or second language contexts and found that both issues are intertwined to some extent that learners are encouraged to improve their learning (Barillaro, 2011; Begum, 2019; Everhard and Murphy, 2015; Fabela-Cárdenas, 2012; Hafner and Miller, 2011; Jiang, 2008; Joshi, 2011; Kostina, 2011; Ma and Ma, 2012; Myartawan, Latief and Suharmanto, 2013; Rungwaraphong, 2012; Shen, 2011; Smith et al., 2018; Yasmin and Sohail, 2018). Furthermore, some studies (Banditvilai, 2016; Gunes, 2019; Inal and Korkmaz, 2019; Isti'anah, 2017; Istifci, 2017; Larsen, 2012; Snodin, 2013; Soliman, 2014; Tosun, 2015;

Wright, 2017) have just focused on language learning and indicated that blended learning promotes autonomous learning and the development of learning skills. Despite the positive notion of these studies on blended learning, they have suggested that the complex system of blended learning has necessitated further research on language learning process and capabilities. Therefore, the paper now describes previous studies on blended learning, learner autonomy and foreign language learning.

A study by Larsen (2012) examined students' perceptions about and performance in blended or hybrid learning in an English writing course. The study found a positive relationship between students' work and focus on learning autonomously and taking responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, Soliman's (2014) study concluded that the involvement of digital tools and resources in learning environments is necessary for the enhancement of both English language skills and autonomous language learning. Based on these studies, Banditvilai (2016) designed an English course to improve four language skills, by combining traditional classroom learning with e-learning strategies that included a variety of activities. The findings indicated that the experimental group who were supported by online lessons outdid the control group who received face-to-face instruction in that they enhanced their four language skills, learner motivation and autonomous learning.

Snodin (2013) also confirmed the previous studies stating that "the road to autonomy is a process conditioned by each individual's zone of proximal development (ZPD) and that there are different degrees of autonomy" (p. 209). This study used a course management system (CMS) to blend teaching that provided e-homework in which students could submit their assignments till the deadline, a Webboard on which they could share their opinions and knowledge with peers or any material, resource that enabled their professor to upload materials or put weblinks for them to do activities outside the classroom, online learning journal that enabled them to describe their learning process, and e-courseware that had a multimedia affordance for independent learning. Drawing from different research instruments such as student learning journal, questionnaire, classroom observation and interview, the findings demonstrated the existence of different degrees of learner autonomy grouped into two: Group 1 did not seem autonomous in the classroom but succeeded with autonomy in blended learning, whereas Group 2 behaved autonomously in both learning environments. Meanwhile, participants perceived that the CMS reduced their dependence on the teacher, and showed some autonomous behaviours such as deciding goals on their own, planning to practice further activities, and monitoring and evaluating the learning process.

Some studies further explored online learning and compared it with classroom learning. In this sense, a study by Wright (2017) investigated the delivery of an online grammar course from the perspectives of course takers. In the findings, the classroom was valued to maintain better understanding, interaction and teacher's input, while the online course was favoured because of its flexibility, convenience and speed. This study suggested that

online courses be implemented and integrated into language learning skilfully, which in turn demands prolific studies on this issue, blended learning. Referring back to Wright (2017), Isti'anah (2017) indicated similar results and concluded that blended learning was effective to promote autonomous language learning and improve motivation, interest and understanding of English.

In a similar vein, studies conducted to examine a blended language learning approach in the Turkish context indicated that students prefer classroom teaching for interaction, whereas blended learning for immediate feedback and self-paced learning (Istifci, 2017). Furthermore, blended learning is viewed as more pleasant than asynchronously distance learning that wrecks more responsibilities for learners (Gunes, 2019). It also contributes to students' academic performance and English language education (Inal and Korkmaz, 2019), and the humanization of the English courses (Meri-Yilan, 2020). However, Turkish students still need a teacher presence in their blended learning, so curiosity, independence and authenticity should be considered key concepts before the intervention of blended learning (Tosun, 2015).

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

To explore students' autonomous learning after the implementation of blended learning, the study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell, 2013). Based on this design, the study began with the quantitative method followed by the qualitative method to understand the issues further that appeared in the quantitative data. Thus, it provided the quantitative results with explanatory results. This means that it is intended to show a wider and deeper aspect of the issue, i.e. students' views regarding their blended learning and autonomous learning (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the presentation of the findings will be ordered in this respect, i.e. first quantitative results and then qualitative results.

3.2. Participants

The inclusion criterion for taking part in this study was being a student at a higher education institution and exposed to doing activities in a blended learning environment. The participants were included by a convenience sampling method (Wagman and Hakansson, 2014) through the author's connection with students in her institution. 21 Turkish students (18 females and 3 males) aged between 17 and 31 participated in the study voluntarily. Their English level was intermediate based on the exam prepared in reference to "the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.1). All participants had never taken such a course designed with a blended learning approach. They had been taking an English writing course for academic purposes for one academic semester at the preparatory year program in a state university.

They were supported to use a CMS platform that included a variety of activities, a gradebook and a discussion form, during the course study. Besides the CMS, they were submitting online journals related to a concerned topic in the course, weekly. Therefore, these participants were chosen because of their practice of and familiarity with online tools. Each participant contacted through emails. They first filled out a questionnaire in which five of them agreed to be reached out for interviews.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

A blended learning approach based on the literature (i.e. Graham, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2011) was implemented during the first academic year of 2019-2020. This approach combined face-to-face teaching that comprised two hours a week, with online learning that was involved in both the CMS and Google Classroom. All students registered into the course carried out the activities in the CMS outside the class independently without any pressure, namely, voluntarily. In the meantime, all of them handed online journals through a virtual class in Google Classroom, as the CMS did not have this function. The topics of these online journals were drawn from the course contents, so they were preparing their assignments after delving into each content. The contents were places, festivals and celebrations, the Internet and technology, weather and climate, sports and competition, business, people, and the universe based on the Reading and Writing book published by Cambridge University Press. In their online journals, the students individually responded to a question related to each content. After integrating technology into classroom learning for nearly three months, the process of data collection started.

Data collection was carried out between 4th and 16th December 2019. First, the author sent the survey items through an email to the participants who filled out them via a Google form. The items included statements about their age, gender and duration of English language learning and 14 items (see Table 1) taken from the Learner Autonomy Scale of Orakci and Gelisli (2017), who found that the scale is a reliable and valid tool, about their autonomous learning. In other words, according to Cronbach's alpha test, its reliability value is above 0.95, and its Kaiser Meyer Olkin value with 0.932 and the Barlett Test result add validity. Also, the present study shares a similar aim with their study (Orakci and Gelisli, 2017) in that both of them intended to examine Turkish students' autonomous learning, so the scale was decided to be appropriate for this research. They may choose the following options: "strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neutral (N), agree (A), strongly agree (SA)" (Adjagbodjou, 2015, p. 8). After the survey conduct, the participants who provided their contact emails were communicated for further investigation of their learning process. Five participants (four females and one male) agreed to spare time and respond to the following semi-structured interview items:

1. Do you have positive or negative feelings about your blended learning process?
2. According to you, what are the advantages of blended learning?
3. According to you, what are the disadvantages of blended learning?

The interview method was developed through consulting two experts in the field. To start with, the author first formed three close-ended questions based on the research aim, i.e. to investigate learners' perceptions about their autonomous learning after the implementation of the blended learning approach. Then, she asked for two experts' opinions on the questions. Ultimately, with an agreement, the last two questions were reframed in an open-ended way to identify the problem or problems (Nelson-Gray et al., 1989).

3.1. Data Analysis

Data from the quantitative research instrument, the survey, were automatically analysed in percentages and frequencies of the participants' views on their autonomous learning in the Google form. Data from the qualitative research instrument, the interview, were analysed through content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007; Miles et al., 2014) "to make valid inferences from text" (Weber, 1990, p. 117) within the scope of Dörnyei's (2007) four-step content analysis. First, pre-codes were formulated such as advantages and disadvantages of the blended learning approach. Since there were a small number of interviewees, the interview data were coded using Microsoft Excel, which helped to label and colour thematic areas (Bree and Gallagher, 2016). Second, the ideas were developed. For instance, themes were labelled to each code, advantages or disadvantages. Third, the data were interpreted to underline the "deeper meaning of the data (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 246). Finally, the conclusions were drawn from this interpretation. Ultimately, in order to provide a consistent, valid and reliable coding scheme, two experts coded data individually. The intercoder-reliability, a measure of the agreement between two experts' and the researcher' categories, was found 95% (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which ensures the validity of the qualitative data analysis.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were involved during the conduct of the current study. Just before filling out the items in the Google form, the respondents gave their consent to take part in the study. The author confirms that she contacted the institution before data collection and then the institution permitted her to conduct the study. Additionally, the author affirms that an ethics committee approval was not required in accordance with the research integrity principles in Turkey as the study was conducted in 2019.

4. Findings

Data from the quantitative and qualitative research instruments indicate their perceptions about their autonomous learning after the implementation of the digital resources and activities into the class-based writing course. All of 21 students in the survey stated to have done activities in the CLMS and submitted their weekly online

journals as well as agreed to handle their learning. Consistent with this, five interviewees expressed similar thoughts.

Table 1. Participants' Views on their own Autonomous Learning in the Survey

No	Item	F & %	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I would like to choose the most appropriate activities to help me learn English.	F %	0 0	0 0	0 0	4 19	17 81
2	I would like to take responsibility for my English language learning.	F %	0 0	0 0	1 4.8	11 52.4	9 42.9
3	I wish that my opinions are asked while I am studying English.	F %	0 0	0 0	1 4.8	9 42.9	11 52.4
4	I would like to have a word about prospective English topics.	F %	0 0	0 0	4 19	12 57.1	5 23.8
5	I can decide my weaknesses while learning English.	F %	0 0	1 4.8	2 9.5	11 52.4	7 33.3
6	I can decide my strengths while learning English.	F %	0 0	0 0	1 4.8	13 61.9	7 33.3
7	I would like to use videos and CDs about my English course outside the classroom.	F %	0 0	0 0	3 14.3	12 57.1	6 28.6
8	I like taking a risk in order to communicate in English.	F %	0 0	1 4.8	7 33.3	9 42.9	4 19
9	I can learn English just with the support of a lecturer.	F %	2 9.5	15 71.4	3 14.3	1 4.8	0 0
10	I read English books written appropriately based on my language level.	F %	0 0	0 0	3 14.3	12 57.1	6 28.6
11	I can determine my own learning needs.	F %	0 0	0 0	2 9.5	14 66.7	5 23.8
12	I can evaluate my English work on my own.	F %	1 4.8	4 19	9 42.9	7 33.3	0 0
13	I would like to be given the right to choose activities as well.	F %	0 0	0 0	2 9.5	13 61.9	6 28.6
14	I feel afraid of not being able to understand an English topic if the lecturer gives no instruction.	F %	2 9.5	9 42.9	7 33.3	3 14.3	0 0

Frequency=F, Percentage=%, Strongly Disagree=SD, Disagree=D, Neutral=N, Agree=A, Strongly Agree=SA

Table 1 illustrates participants' beliefs on their autonomous learning after the intervention of the blended learning approach taken from the survey. All of them favoured selecting the most suitable activities for their English language learning (Item 1). Nearly all (95.3%) of them preferred to take charge of their English language learning (Item 2) and to be asked about their opinions about their language learning (Item 3) and believed that they could make their decisions on their language learning strengths (Item 6). However, just one student was neutral to those items. Similarly, the majority (90.5%) felt that they were able to determine their learning needs (Item 11) and liked to be given the right to make their own decision on language practices, too (Item 13). But two students were unsure about those items. Moreover, eighteen (85.7%) of them agreed that they wanted to make practices with English videos and CDs outside class (Item 7) and construed English works published according to their language levels (Item 10), whereas the rest were uncertain. Also, more than four-fifth consented that they were able to decide their language learning weaknesses (Item 5). Yet, one student disagreed with this item and two students were sceptical. Besides, four-fifth of them preferred to have a participatory role in planning future topics (Item 4), while the others were doubtful.

Although the overwhelming majority of them agreed on the below items and very few of them remained neutral to them, the participants gave contrasting views on the rest of the items. On the one hand, more than half (61.9%) thought that they enjoyed challenging themselves to talk in English (Item 8), while one student disagreed with the item and one-third were neither for nor against it. On the other hand, nearly half of them neither agreed nor disagreed that and one-fifth contested that they were able to evaluate their English work themselves (Item 12), whereas a quarter of them was in agreement with the item. Above all, most of the participants required a tutor to help with their language learning. The majority (80.9%) of them perceived that they were not able to handle their language learning without the teacher support (Item 9) and slightly more than half (52.4%) expressed their need for their tutor's instruction to learn English (Item 14). However, these items stayed neutral for three of the former and seven of the latter.

Data from interviews are in accordant with the aforesaid statement but help the study further delve into their autonomous learning process. All five interviewees had positive feelings about their blended learning process. As regards, they indicated that its advantages predominated its disadvantages. The most stated advantage is that it enabled them to practice more on their own. Interviewee 1 uttered her experience as that: *'There are so many activities in the CMS that I do not need to look for any resource.'* Relatedly, the second most expressed benefit is that it enhanced their evaluation skills as Interviewee 2 mentioned: *'Practice activities guided me to see how I can evaluate my language learning.'* Interviewee 3 linked this to his online journal writing by indicating that: *'After I received feedback on my first online writing assignment, I understood the assessment criteria, which has empowered me to think the criteria over my future writing assignments as well as ones of other courses.'* Another benefit uttered by three students is its potential to shift the role of students from *'only takers'* to *'explorers'* (Interviewee

4). Interviewee 5 added: ‘*While writing my assignment, I was able to brush up my vocabulary, for example, by looking up new words at online dictionaries.*’ Interviewee 1 drew attention to the dependence of the full learning authority on the continuum of ‘*these explorings and lookings up*’. On the other side, two disadvantages mentioned by interviewees are technological challenges as some did not have a proper digital device or enough broadband, and the classroom interference such as exams and assignments of other courses.

5. Discussion

Previous research has examined the issue of autonomous language learning in a blended learning approach (Banditvilai, 2016; Gunes, 2019; Inal and Korkmaz, 2019; Isti'annah, 2017; Istifci, 2017; Larsen, 2012; Snodin, 2013; Soliman, 2014; Tosun, 2015; Wright, 2017) in diverse contexts. However, further in-depth research is required (Wright, 2017), especially in disadvantaged regions (Smith et al., 2018) and in Turkish contexts (Gunes, 2019). Upon this requirement, the present study has aimed to explore this issue in a learning environment where students had not received such a designed course with a blended learning approach. It used the term, blended learning, as identified as language learning outside institutions (Lai, 2017).

The study has demonstrated that tertiary-level Turkish students in the preparatory class possess overall affirmative feelings about their autonomous language learning after the intervention of blended learning. In line with the studies (Benson, 2013; Lai, 2017; Sadaghian et al., 2020), it discusses that learners have abilities to choose and make a decision on the best digital tools and materials for their perusal; assess their learning needs, strengths and weaknesses during language learning; and adapt themselves to a new learning setting even though it challenges them.

The study does not claim that students have become totally autonomous after the intervention, which has not been the purpose of the study though. Some studies emphasise the social aspect of autonomy (Benson and Cooker, 2013; Godwin-Jones, 2019; Little, 1995; van Lier, 2004); however, the participants in the current research did not talk about the social dimension of their own learning process. Although the study does not cover all aspects of autonomy, it confirms the claim of Murray (2017) in that autonomy has acted as an opportunity for the students to ‘*brush up*’, ‘*evaluate*’, ‘*explore*’ and ‘*empower*’ their language learning, as stated by the participants in the research.

Meanwhile, the stance of the Turkish students affirms the significance of planning to design a blended learning approach considering activities and contents that are consistent with course aims (Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger, 2002). As such, Dam’s (2003) four stages can work well to see how much of the approach has been effective. In terms of the current research, the participants looked experienced in, aware of, participated in and responsible for learning to some extent, which can be enhanced by digital tools (Arfae, 2017; Sockett, 2014), as partly shown by the empirical findings in the current study.

Turning to the disadvantages of the intervention, the study argues that technological barriers and classroom interference are prevailing as happens in e-learning environments (Bodsworth and Goodyear, 2017; Raja and Nagasubramani, 2018). These challenges might affect learners to have a full role in their learning. As shown in this study, the participants still needed tutor support to handle their learning. As an option, e-tutors (De Metz and Bezuidenhout, 2018) can be integrated into educational environments as omnipresent while designing a blended course.

All in all, the current study supports earlier studies (Banditvilai, 2016; Gunes, 2019; Inal and Korkmaz, 2019; Isti'anah, 2017; Istifci, 2017; Larsen, 2012; Snodin, 2013; Soliman, 2014; Tosun, 2015; Wright, 2017). In sum, the involvement of e-learning in the classroom positively impacts students' views on addressing their learning abilities, such as evaluating their own learning, deciding learning materials and accepting learning challenges.

6. Conclusion

This paper has covered data from the qualitative and quantitative research instruments and discussed the findings of 21 Turkish tertiary-level students' views on learner autonomy after the implementation of a blended learning approach. It is understood from the study that a well-designed blended learning approach is essential to set up a proper learning environment. As found out here, the consistency with the classroom practices and curriculum should be considered while designing a learning content and course. Besides, depending on the findings of the participants' need for help from their tutor, some omnipresent options such as e-tutors should be added to the design. Hence, the paper makes suggestions for designers to rethink the effectiveness and importance of the ideal design.

Moreover, a similar study may be practised in a further experimental study. The study had a small number of preparatory-class samples, so a further study may involve more samples. Also, this research has focused on one Turkish state university. In the future, research may include samples from different parts of the country, for example, by comparing and contrasting technology use with the effectiveness of blended learning between developed and undeveloped regions.

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