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PERCEPTIONS AND VIEWS OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS OVER TEACHERS' AUTONOMY

Abstract

Derived from Greek words “autos” and “self-rule”, autonomy in the literature possesses different definitions and has been classified into various forms as “individual autonomy”, “learner autonomy”, “professional autonomy”, and organizational autonomy. Autonomy, in this paper, is referred to as language instructors’ control over their own teaching, that is, language instructors’ independence in making professional decisions within the classroom” and “their making personal judgment to guide instruction. The purpose of this paper is mainly to discuss the rationale of instructor autonomy and present language instructors’ own views and experiences concerning their autonomy in educational settings in terms of some variables. This paper adopts a quantitative research design. In this context, Teachers’ Autonomy Scale, developed by Pearson and Hall is applied to 80 language instructors working at tertiary education. In the light of the collected data, it is understood that English language teachers have a moderate autonomy level.

Key Words: Language Teaching, Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy, Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years there have been noteworthy changes in the responsibilities assigned to teachers especially in many European countries. The teaching profession has altered conspicuously over the past two decades. Aspects of this change include greater autonomy in educational matters, enabling teachers to become more effectively involved in curriculum development; the acceptance of new day-to-day responsibilities like supervising new teachers and the greater demands placed on teachers in such areas as teamwork and time spent at school.

Being universal moral good and highly valued and desired component of social context in the western world (Berka, 2000; Dworkin, 1988; Shaw, 2008; Smith & Ushioda, 2009), autonomy is also undeniably of importance in educational context. In a detailed manner, the concept of teacher autonomy is defined as “the degree to which teaching provides important freedom, independence, power, and discretion to participate in programming, choosing, and executing administrative, instructional, and socialization and selecting activities both in the classroom and in the school organization generally” (Gwaltney, 2012, p.22). This definition draws a parallelism with the definition of Street and Licata (1989) highlighting teachers’ sense of independence in making professional decisions in the classroom and use of personal judgement to guide instructional activities with students. According to Jiang and Ma (2012), the notion of teacher autonomy means that teachers are responsible for the classroom, the curriculum, the

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day-to-day pedagogical tasks, and pedagogical practices in schools. From language education perspective, it is described as “the capacity of independent decision making composed of abilities and skills; and willingness including motivation and confidence to perform choices (Littewood, 1999). It is also described as “having the capacity, freedom, responsibility to take control of teaching and learning in and out of educational settings” by McGrath’s (2000) and HUANG’s (2007).

As teacher autonomy is a multifaceted concept, there has not been a consensus over its definition so far even though many scholars have tried to define teacher autonomy from different aspects and from different angles. However, in foreign language education, teacher autonomy is outlined as “self-directed professional development” (McGrath, 2000) that is generally regarded as a professional attribute to be developed by teacher education processes. In other words, it purports a professional attribute linked to a capacity to control the processes involved in teaching process and to a capacity to control one’s own development as a teacher, putting emphasis on professional freedom prevalent in the wider teacher education literature. In the context of foreign language education, Benson (2000) claims that the control that most teachers have in educational settings is severely constrained by educational policies, institutional rules and conventions. Actually, the most vital aspect of teacher autonomy is teachers’ willingness and struggle to create spaces within educational settings for students to exercise greater control over their learning.

Extending this argument, Mackenzie (2002) asserts that on the one hand for teacher choosing to take part in curriculum development is the first step towards increasing their autonomy within teaching-learning contexts on the other hand for institutions choosing to be involved in curricular choices is the first step to be learning organization. Concerning constraints on the practice of teaching, Lamb (2000) and Barfield et al. (2000; 220) put forward that teachers need to empower themselves to manoeuvre and transform those constraints into opportunities for change.

All in all, it is understood that there is a widespread tendency to equate teacher autonomy with professional freedom. Besides, teacher autonomy implies the ability and willingness to create spaces for professional freedom in one’s own working environment. This notion of teacher autonomy also has practical implications for teacher education at various levels, including pre-service and in-service activities, and teachers’ own efforts to improve their professional competence. In this study, the researchers have favoured a conception of teacher autonomy integrating components of professionalism, professional freedom, self-direction as well as curricular activities in educational settings because it is believed that autonomous teachers are regarded as “thinkers making decisions that create the curriculum in classrooms,” while teachers without autonomy display the role of “passive people who implement the curriculum” (McCutcheon, 1997). Moreover, the role of teachers in curriculum development and its practice is an important indicator of the extent to which they are considered as autonomous in the modification of content and modes of since according to Stenhouse (1975) curriculum development is a key element of teachers’ professionalism as they are the experts on how to promote learning in educational settings.

In line with the aforementioned knowledge based on the literature, it is believed that taking into account EFL teachers’ opinions will shed more light on the significance of teacher autonomy in pedagogical processes. To this end, autonomy perceptions of teachers are studied in the areas of: (a) defining objectives, (b) defining contents, (c) designing learning experiences, and (d) evaluation. Hence, this study aims at finding answers to the following research question:

1- What percentage of teachers are autonomous in the curricular dimensions: (a) defining objectives (b) defining contents (c) designing learning experiences, and (d) evaluation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Descriptive studies are aimed at finding out "what is" (Borg & Gall, 1989); hence, in this study, to describe the current state of teacher autonomy and determine what percentage of EFL teachers are autonomous general survey model based on quantitative research design is employed.

Participants

In the process of selecting the samples, eighty instructors working at Akdeniz University School of Foreign Languages in 2016-2017 academic year were selected for the purpose of the study by the researchers based on convenience or opportunity sampling in order to meet these rational criteria: 'easy accessibility' and 'availability at any time' (Dörnyei, 2010).

Data Collection Tool

To investigate teachers' perceptions concerning teacher autonomy, a Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS), having 18 items which require participants to reflect on their perceptions of their own responsibilities in their language teaching process, is applied. The items of the questionnaire are rated by a four-point Likert scale, ranging from four points (strongly agree) to one point (strongly disagree). In the study of Pearson & Moomaw (2005) of the TAS which utilizes a stable factor structure with improved internal consistency reliability .83, which is computed based on Cronbach's alpha. The questionnaires are administered to the participants of the study in the fall term of 2016-2017 academic year. The data collection process through the questionnaire took place about 3 months.

Data Analysis

The participants are instructed to consider the whole teaching and language learning process while they are answering the questions. In order to analyse the quantitative data of this study SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 13 was employed. Descriptive statistics is used to describe the current state of teacher autonomy and determine what percentage of EFL teachers are autonomous.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

<i>Variables</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
Academic Degree		
Bachelors	59	73,75
Masters	18	22,5
Doctorate	03	3,75
Teaching Experience		
0-5 years	16	16,7
6-10 years	21	21,9
11-15 years	12	12,5
16-20 years	18	18,8
21- 25 years	05	5,2
26-30 years	04	4,2
Over 30 years	04	4,2

As can be seen from Table 1, while more than half of the participants (n=59) hold a bachelor's degree a small number of the participants (n=18) have a Master's degree and only three of the participants have a PhD degree. The professional experiences of the participants are ranging from 0-5 years (n=16), 6-10 (n=21), 11-15 (n=12), 16-20 (n=18), 21-25 (n=5), 26-30 (n=4), and 26-30 (n=4) respectively.

Table 2. The EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomy in terms of Learning-Teaching Process

<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>				
I am free to be creative in my teaching approach		19,8	44,8	13,5	21,9
My job does not allow for much discretion on my part	29,2	29,2	33,3	8,3	
In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures		9,4	19,8	40,6	30,2
The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control		18,8	20,8	11,5	48,9
I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching	3,1	21,9	11,5	63,5	
I follow my own guidelines on instruction	12,5	24	28,1	35,4	
I have little control over how classroom space is used	38,5	21,9	14,6	25,0	
I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students		34,4	18,8	13,5	33,3
I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom		8,3	20,8	21,9	49,0

As shown in Table 2., more teachers disagree on certain items (3, 4 ,5, and 9). In other words, more teachers disagree on the items, “In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures”, “The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control”, “I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching”, and “I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom” with the following percentages 40,6 %, 48,9 %, 63,5 %, and 49,0 %, respectively. On the other hand, on some items (7 and 8) more teachers agree. On the item “I have little control over how classroom space is used”, more teachers (38,5 %) agreed. Similarly, more teachers agree on the item “I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with”, 34,4 %.

Table 3. The EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomy in terms of Content

<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>				
The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control		10,4	54,2	31,3	4,1
I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching	30,2	37,5	24	8,3	
What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself	2,1	10,4	33,4	54,1	
The materials I use in my class are mostly chosen for the most part by myself		12,5	18,8	29,2	39,5
The content and skills taught in my class are those I select		3,1	15,6	21,9	59,4

As is seen in Table 3, the majority of the teachers disagree on certain items (3, 4, and 5). To put it in different way, most of the teachers disagree on the items, “What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself”, “The materials I use in my class are mostly chosen for the most part by myself”, and “The content and skills taught in my class are those I select”, 54,1 %, 39,5 %, and 59,4 %, respectively. On the other hand, on some items (1 and 2) more teachers agree. On the item “The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control”, more teachers (54,2 %) agree. Likewise, more teachers (37,5 %) agree on the item “I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching”.

Table 4. The EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomy in terms of Evaluation

<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>			
The evaluation and assessment activities are selected by others	50,0	14,6	15,6	19,2

In Table 4, it is seen that more teachers agree on the item that “The evaluation and assessment activities are selected by others” (50,0 %).

Table 5. The EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomy in terms of Objectives

<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>			
My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself	17,7	46,9	8,3	27,1

In Table 5, it is understood that more teachers agree on the item that “My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself” (46,9 %)

Table 6. The EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Curriculum Autonomy

<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>				
In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures	9,4	19,8	40,6	30,2	
I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching	30,2	37,5	24	8,3	
My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself	17,7	46,9	8,3	27,1	
What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself		2,1	10,4	33,4	54,1
The materials I use in my class are mostly chosen for the most part by myself	12,5	18,8	29,2	39,5	
The content and skills taught in my class are those I select	3,1	15,6	21,9	59,4	

As is seen in Table 6, the majority of the teachers disagree on certain items (1, 4, 5, and 6). To put it in different way, most of the teachers disagree on the items, “In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures”, “What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself”, “The materials I use in my class are mostly chosen for the most part by myself”, and “The content and skills taught in my class are those I select”, 40,6 %, 54,1 %, 39,5 %, and 59,4 %, respectively. On the other hand, on only one item (3) nearly half of the teachers agree. On the item “My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself” (46,9 %), nearly half of them agree.

Table 7. The EFL Teachers' Perceptions of General Teaching Autonomy

<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>			
I am free to be creative in my teaching approach	19,8	44,8	13,5	21,9
The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control	10,4	54,2	31,3	4,1
Standards of my behaviour in my classroom are set primarily by myself	10,4	54,2	12,5	22,9
My job does not allow for much discretion on my part	29,2	29,2	33,3	8,3
The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control	18,8	20,8	11,5	48,9

I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching	3,1	21,9	11,5	63,5
I have only limited latitude in how major problems are resolved	4,2	20,8	22,9	52,1
I have little control over how classroom space is used	38,5	21,9	14,6	25,0
The evaluation and assessment activities are selected by others	50,0	14,6	15,6	19,2
I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students	34,4	18,8	13,5	33,3
I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom	8,3	20,8	21,9	49,0

As is seen in Table 7, the majority of the teachers disagree on certain items (5, 6, 7, and 11). To put it in different way, most of the teachers disagree on the items, “The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control”, “I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching”, “I have only limited latitude in how major problems are resolved”, “I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom”, 48,9 %, 63,5 %, 52,1 %, and 49,0 %, respectively. On the other hand, on some items (1, 2, and 3) more teachers partly agree. Besides, on some items (8, 9, and 10) nearly half of the teachers agree.

CONCLUSION

In the process of teaching and learning in the classroom, it is understood that whereas teachers do not feel themselves free to select and use techniques and strategies in classroom instruction, most of the teachers state that they employ alternative procedures, which shows similarity with the study by Douglas and Andrew (1999). Moreover, in a study it is pointed out that the teachers have perceived limitations to autonomy in regard to curriculum, standards, guidelines and assessment (Garvin, 2007).

As for the use of time and the design of the classroom, they do not have the right to arrange the amount of time for different activities in the classroom. Besides, they cannot organize their classrooms based on various activities. Teachers hold the opinion that they are free to be creative in their teaching approach and in selecting methods and strategies; however, the real situation is different because they are forced to apply the curriculum designed by the administration board of School of Foreign Languages. In line with the aforementioned findings, Sparks and Malkus (2015) assert that teachers have a low measure of control over instruction and planning in their classroom. Teachers have moderate self-perceptions of teacher autonomy owing to the standardized intensive curriculum. A standardized curriculum may decide the skills and content that teachers concentrate (Brown, 2008) and their role may be decreased since they follow a pre-determined curriculum.

In related literature, the studies underline the impact of centralized course books upon teaching (Grant, 1987). Because of standardized course books, school work may become more technical as teachers may not exercise their judgment about what teachers must cover regarding teaching and learning content. In line with the findings of the current study, in the selection of teaching and learning content, teachers claim that they are not entitled to determine and prepare the content of teaching process. This situation draws a parallelism with the reality because of the fact that the content of teaching and learning are predetermined by others. It is also stated that in the study carried out by Douglas and Andrew (1999) teachers control over content in educational settings. Also, it is pointed out that not participating in materials development would lower the morale of teachers and hinder them from being creative (Albedaiwi, 2011). In fact, Larrivee (2000) also claims that succeeding as a teacher involves more than adopting the approaches for giving instructions, and making the students remain attentive to the course and also dealing with the behaviours of the students.

Regarding evaluation and assessment activities, teachers assume that they do not take part in selecting, preparing and evaluating those activities, which is quite similar to real life practices in educational settings as in the School of Foreign Languages. This shows similarity with the research

carried out by Cameron (2008) in that the teachers in his study are told to what to teach and given the assessment to use with their students. Briefly, it is understood that teachers' self-perceptions are negatively affected by centralized exams in the issue of determining teaching content, materials, activities and assessment. In line with the findings of the current study, the related literature notes that centralized exams have a negative impact on teacher autonomy (Yan 2005; Carless 2003; Pandian 2003). Actually, based on the findings of current study and literature it is seen that English language teachers have moderate perceptions of autonomy in selecting their assessment tools.

When questions turn to defining objectives of teaching and learning, teachers assert that most of the teachers lead their teaching process based on goals and objectives selected by themselves. The opinion they put forward concerning this issue contradicts with the fact that the goals and objectives have already been specified in the curriculum by others. This draws a similarity with the opinions of Akşit (2007) that Turkey has the most centralized education system among the OECD member states. Similarly, according to Yıldırım (2003) this centralized structure is clearly seen in many fields of the education system including curriculum development, approval and choice of textbooks and other instructional materials, employment of teachers. Moreover, in Turkey, teaching subjects are generally drafted in details in a curriculum. The content description of curriculum is fairly similar to a book's table of contents which provides all details. Detailed description of the subjects leaves no room for the teachers to take initiative and responsibility with respect to the content and goals (Kabapınar, 2003; Öztürk, 2009b).

According to the report entitled with Levels of Autonomy and Responsibilities of Teachers in Europe (2008), teachers have relatively little say in determining the content of the compulsory minimum curriculum, either because this does not occur in schools or because – where it does – the task is mainly the responsibility of the school management, which is similar to our findings. However, in the same report as regards teaching methods, it is highlighted that teachers are free to choose those methods they wish. Additionally, teachers possess extensive decision-making autonomy in another important area of their activity, namely the assessment of pupils.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for English language teachers to gain greater autonomy in decisions related to curriculum and assessment, teachers should be included in the process of designing the core curriculum components. Moreover, teachers should be able to tailor the needs of students in terms of curricular activities, which may only be provided by a real flexible curriculum. The autonomy of English language teachers could be increased through in-service training programs. Instead of centralized education system, decisions concerning education should be made at the most local level possible.

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GENİŞ ÖZET

İNGİLİZCE OKUTMANLARININ ÖĞRETMEN ÖZERKLİĞİNE İLİŞKİN GÖRÜŞ VE ALGILARI

Konuya ilişkin ilgili literatür tarandığı zaman yapılan çalışmaların büyük kısmının öğrenci özerkliği üzerine olduğu, öğretmen özerkliğine ilişkin araştırmaların tarihçesinin yakın geçmişe dayandığı görülmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizce okutmanlarının öğretmen özerkliğine dair görüş ve tutumlarını belirlemektir. Bu çalışmada nicel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Pearson ve Hall tarafından geliştirilen “Öğretmen Özerlik Ölçeği” kullanılmıştır. Ölçeğin güvenilirliğine ilişkin yapılan istatistiksel analiz sonucunda ölçeğin güvenirlik katsayısı .83 bulunmuştur. Araştırmacılar tarafından ölçek “öğrenme öğretme süreci”, “içerik”, “ölçme değerlendirme”, “kazanımlar” ve “öğretim programı” gibi alt boyutlara ayrılarak, katılımcıların bu boyutlara yönelik özerklik düzeyleri betimsel analizler yapılarak değerlendirilmiştir. Ayrıca araştırmanın örneklem grubunu oluşturan İngilizce okutmanlarının genel özerklik düzeyleri de incelenmiştir. Araştırma verilerinden elde edilen bulgular ışığında, okutmanlar öğretim sürecinde öğretim strateji ve tekniklerini kullanma boyutunda kendilerini özgür hissetmediklerini ifade etseler de bir çoğunun alternatif yöntem kullandıkları görülmektedir. Sınıf ortamının düzenlenmesi ve zaman kullanımı boyutunda, okutmanların özerkliğinin düşük düzeyde olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Öğretim programına dayalı öğrenme ve öğretme içeriğinin oluşturulmasında ve seçiminde okutmanların yeterli düzeyde özerkliğe sahip olmadıklarını araştırma bulguları ortaya koymaktadır. Ölçme ve değerlendirme boyutu açısından okutman özerkliğine bakıldığında, okutmanların ölçme ve değerlendirme ile ilgili etkinliklerin hazırlanması, seçimi ve değerlendirilmesi konusunda arzu edilen düzeyde özerk olmadıkları görülmektedir. Her ne kadar okutmanlar öğretim sürecinde kazanımların ve hedeflerin kendileri tarafından belirlendiğini iddia etseler de, bu durum yabancı dil öğretiminde kullanılan ders materyallerindeki kazanımların ve hedeflerin başkaları tarafından hazırlanması ve okutmanların bu hedef ve kazanımlara dayalı olarak öğretim etkinliklerini yürütmeleri beklentisi ile çelişmektedir.