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PAGES: 14-23

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3977699>

A Qualitative Case Study on EFL Students’ Self-Perceived Level of Autonomy and its Relation to Academic Achievement

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Abstract

This case study attempts to investigate English as a foreign language (EFL) students’ self-perceived learner autonomy and its relation to academic achievement. The sample consisted of a total of 8 students attending the Department of English Language and Literature at a major university in northeastern Turkey. The data were obtained via semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The study indicated that the students who claim to be autonomous seemed to have higher academic achievement. The findings also pointed out that the students were aware that there might be a strong relationship between their level of learner autonomy and their academic achievement. It concludes that as long as students are given an opportunity, students have the potential of being autonomous and successful accordingly.

Keywords: English, learner autonomy; academic achievement; responsibility

İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Öğrencilerin Algıladıkları Özerk Öğrenme Düzeyleri ve Akademik Başarıyla İlişkisi Üzerine Nitel Bir Durum Araştırması

Öz

Bu durum araştırması, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin kendi algıladıkları özerk öğrenme düzeylerini ve bunun akademik başarıyla ilişkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu nitel araştırmanın örneklemini, Türkiye'nin kuzeydoğusundaki büyük bir üniversitenin İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü'nde öğrenim gören toplam 8 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış yüz yüze görüşmeler yoluyla elde edilmiştir. Araştırma, özerk olduğunu iddia eden öğrencilerin akademik başarılarının daha yüksek olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bulgular, ayrıca öğrencilerin, öğrenen özerkliği düzeyleri ile akademik başarıları arasında güçlü bir ilişki olabileceği konusunda bilinçli olduklarını da desteklemektedir. Öğrencilere fırsat verildiği sürece öğrencilerin özerk ve akademik olarak başarılı olma potansiyeline sahip olduğu sonucuna varılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce, öğrenen özerkliği; akademik başarı; sorumluluk

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, learner autonomy has been a recurrent theme of discussion in the field of language training and the considerable number of recent research papers (Chan, 2000; Chanock, 2004; Cotterall, 1995; Çubukçu, 2009; Macia et al., 2010; Schmenk, 2005; Spratt, et al., 2002; Sugawara, 2007; Yen and Liu, 2009) and books (Benson, 2001; Camilleri, 1999; Lamb and Reinders, 2008; Palfreyman and Smith, 2003; Paran and Sercu, 2010; Scharle and Szabo, 2000) written on this theme around the world clearly indicate that there is still an ongoing interest in this issue. The current case study, conducted at a Department of English Language and Literature at a major university in northeastern Turkey, aims to show how the students perceive their level of learner autonomy and how they relate it to their academic achievement.

The concept of autonomy

The concept of “autonomy” was introduced to the lexicon of language education since the notions of communicative approaches and learner-centeredness supported a shift of responsibility from teachers to learners. The origins of the concept of learner autonomy dated back to the year 1971 when the concept was first introduced to the field of language education as a part of the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project, of which the basic aim was to avail adults of opportunities for lifelong learning. The project report issued in 1981 has been considered the key document in the field of research on learner autonomy.

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The concept of autonomy did not primarily originate from educational literature, but political and social movements towards the end of the 1960s. The concept naturally arose as a result of the need to have individuals who possess the freedom and the necessary abilities that make individuals feel much more responsible in the society (Benson, 2001). Ideas, inaugurated by innovations in society, like individualism, freedom, and contribution to society gained importance; therefore, learner centered pedagogies, adult education, self-access centers and self-directed, distance, and open learning accordingly grew into the world of education. Educators searched for new ways to enable learners with different needs, preferences, and opportunities to gain an education. From then on, learners were considered to be key agents of the educational process and autonomy was increasingly regarded as a primary goal. Self-access centers became a platform for the first “experimentations with self-directed learning”, and autonomy was seen as a “natural product of self-directed learning” and directly or indirectly associated with “ideas of individualization” (Benson, 2001, p. 8). While independence, individualization, self-instruction, out-of class learning and autonomy were thought to be interrelated and influencing each other; in contrast to the previous views, in recent years, autonomy has been noted as requiring collaboration, negotiation, and interdependence instead of isolation. According to this view, people are social beings and their independence is balanced by their dependence; therefore, one must consider interdependence, rather than independence (Little, 2009). In fact, Little (1991) suggests that considering autonomy as synonymous with self-instruction is one of the misconceptions because autonomy does not make teachers redundant. This idea of teacher significance is also confirmed by Holec who argues that “learners are unlikely to develop a capacity for autonomy without assistance” (cited in Little, 1991, p. 21) and by Dickinson (1987) who focuses on teachers' vital role in self-instruction processes.

Learner autonomy and autonomous learners

There have been different approaches towards defining the concept of learner autonomy from the rise of learner autonomy in education till today. While some take it as a *capacity* or *ability*, others consider it as a *situation*. The earliest and most cited definition of learner autonomy was introduced by Holec (1981, p. 3) who described it as “the ability to take charge of ones' own learning”. From time to time, Holec made some changes to his definition, in that, ‘ability’ was replaced with ‘capacity’; ‘take responsibility for’ or ‘take control of’ were used instead of ‘take charge of’. However, the key issue always was that learners were in the centre of autonomous learning and education is attributed to learners themselves. On the other hand, Dickinson (1987, p. 11) referred to learner autonomy as “the situation in which learner is totally responsible for all of decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions”. Taking some further steps, Little (1991, p. 4) argued that “autonomy is a capacity –for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that learner will develop particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning.” Here Little (1991) focused on psychological capacities of learners. By associating learner autonomy with learners' characteristics, Yen and Liu (2009, p. 347) reported that “learner autonomy is also considered as the characteristics of an individual who exhibited intentional behavior in learning activities”. The common thread in all these definitions is that learners are at the heart of learner autonomy. In spite of nuances in conceptualizations of the concept, there appeared a consensus among researchers that it is a matter of degree and a kind of developmental aspects of the learning processes since there might be various forms or manifestations of autonomy in learners. According to Palfreyman and Smith (2003), differences in interpretations of learner autonomy might arise from the practicality of learner autonomy concepts among different cultures.

When it comes to the characteristics of autonomous learner, Dickinson (1993, p. 41) suggested that autonomous learners:

- understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices.
- are able to formulate their own learning objectives.

- are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies.
- are able to monitor their use of strategies.
- are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

In addition to the representations presented by Dickinson above, characteristics of autonomous learners were associated with those of good language learners. That is, autonomous learners were described to “have developed a degree of control over their learning management, managing their time, seeking help, and coping with pressures and stresses” (Oxford, 1990 cited in Sugawara, 2007, p. 1). Breen and Mann (1997, cited in Gonzales and St. Louis, 2008, p. 28) claimed that autonomous learners had “a desire to learn, have a positive self-image along with metacognitive capacity and the ability to handle change and to negotiate with others”. Related with various aspects of the learning process, autonomous learners were considered as good learners and accordingly, success was naturally expected from such learners. However, it was also noted that such abilities were not fixed, which signified that a student might be an autonomous learner in an area, while s/he might not be so in another. Nevertheless, it was believed that being an autonomous learner might consistently bring success in the end. “Learner autonomy is generally regarded as a defining characteristic of all sustained learning that attains long-term success.” (Little, 1996 cited in Chan, 2003, p. 33). Cotterall (1995) also established a connection with autonomy and successful language learning through the capacity for self-monitoring and for self-assessment. Being successful academically and developing learner autonomy were both among the goals of education and thus were interrelated to the extent that if a learner wants to be successful, one should be an autonomous learner. Accordingly, the current study aims to determine learner autonomy, academic achievement, and their relationships as perceived by a total of eight EFL students in Turkish context.

Research design

Investigating EFL students' self perceptions of learner autonomy and academic achievement, the researcher employed a descriptive case study which aims to “portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts” (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007, p. 85). To this end, the data was collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. As for the sampling procedure, purposive sampling was preferred in that eight senior and junior students attending the Department of English Language and Literature at a major university in northeastern Türkiye were purposively chosen since these groups of students were assumed to have more experience in language learning processes and have established their own way of learning to some extent. Also, their grade point averages (GPAs) were calculated by taking grades accumulated at least in more than five semesters. Their GPAs were taken into consideration to label students as high and low achiever. The interviews were conducted with the low and high achieving students by taking their GPAs into consideration. While half of the participating students in the interview were fourth year students, the other half of the students were third year students. The purpose here was to select both low and high-achieving students from both classes. While low-achieving students (LASs) had the lowest value of GPAs in their own classes, the high-achieving student (HASs) had the highest value of GPAs as compared to their classmates.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Before attempting to construct the data collection instrument, the literature was reviewed comprehensively. In the literature, it was suggested that learner autonomy was not a single easily described concept (Little, 1991) and it was regarded as a multidimensional construct (Benson, 2001). For the current study, a set of 15 questions, addressing different dimensions of learner autonomy and academic achievement, were generated by the researcher with the assistance of experts in the field. After asking them for their consent, the students were invited to have interviews face-to-face and one by one. While semi-structured interviews were conducted, all interviews were recorded in full via an audiotape recorder so as to make the data reviewable. Each of the interviews lasted about 15-20 minutes.

As for the data analysis, content analysis was employed. The whole process of content analysis was conducted by a group of the researcher and two research assistants. After defining the units of analysis, emergent and recurrent themes were highlighted. Thus, cross-validation and synthesis of the data was provided by working in group. The data was summarized and inferences were made.

Findings and Discussion

The data collected during the face to face interviews were analyzed in accordance with the research questions addressed in the current study.

1. What are the characteristics of the students regarding their academic achievement as measured by GPAs and study hours?

Among all the participating students in the current study, four students who have the lowest GPA among their classmates and four students who have the highest GPA among their classmates were participated. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participant students:

Table 1. Characteristics of the students

Achievement Level	Interviewees	Class	GPA
High Achieving Students (HASs)	Informant H1	Senior	95.10
	Informant H2	Senior	93.70
	Informant H3	Junior	87.16
	Informant H4	Junior	84.60
Low Achieving Students (LASs)	Informant L5	Senior	61.73
	Informant L6	Senior	59.16
	Informant L7	Junior	54.03
	Informant L8	Junior	37.93

As for the time they spent on studying, it appeared that HASs tended to spend more time on studying for their courses as compared to low achieving ones. While HASs reported that they study for their courses daily and regularly for exams, LASs stated no need to study each day and they study especially for passing exams. To illustrate this, here are some excerpts from the interview:

Informant H3: *Especially, I study more for the courses that I find difficult to understand. I do regular revisions for courses and try to study before classes because in class time, teachers may ask some questions about the course that I do not know. I should come to class well-prepared.*

Informant L6: *I am not a persistent student, well, I study one day and do not another day. If teacher asks anything to do, I can do it or not, it depends on my mood.*

It was concluded that the students who tended to spend more times on studying for courses were relatively more successful students. In general, LASs did not study regularly or systematically for their departmental courses.

2. To what extent are the students autonomous in their departmental courses?

2.1. How do the students perceive their own and their teachers' responsibilities?

A common point in the findings regarding the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students was that they regard their teachers as a guide in almost all aspects of the learning process including choosing

learning activities and preparing class materials to assessment and evaluation process. Regardless of their achievement level, both HASs and LASs, considered that first teachers should be responsible to show the way to go. The excerpts below support it:

Informant H2: *First, for example, in a translation classes, teachers should show us some strategies, then we can choose appropriate ones. Students already have some strategies to study; they can do it on their own. I want teachers to ask our opinions about the things.*

Informant L8: *Teacher should decide what to do and how to do in a classroom. They should have a program for courses. But on evaluation, it depends. Teachers can ask students' their opinions about giving exams, take-home exams, projects. They can present alternatives for their students.*

As it is seen above, especially LASs wanted to share the responsibility of decision making to make the processes of assessment and evaluation with their teachers. HASs made another point clear. Since they felt like a fish in an ocean, they needed to get their teachers help. As for their own responsibilities, the students expressed that they are responsible of studying for courses efficiently, doing assignments on time, and participating classes regularly. The exemplary statements are as follows:

Informant H4: *As students, we should have our materials in class and come to class prepared, take notes in class and do revision at home for one-two hours.*

Informant L6: *Our responsibilities are like doing projects, assignments, taking part in classes. Sometimes, students should come to the front seats rather than sitting back and participate in course.*

They generally wanted to see their teachers responsible about the learning process in class time. When they were reminded about various aspects such as choosing learning activities, objectives, and materials for courses, HASs supported that they could share their ideas with their teachers if they were given an opportunity to do so. LASs considered that teachers were like bosses and they were the ones who should know such kind of aspects and they expressed that they expected almost everything from their teachers.

2.2. What are the students' perceptions of their decision making abilities?

Almost all the interviewees shared a common point on perceptions of their decision making abilities. They claimed that they were not asked about their opinion on such kind of issues. If their ideas are valued, they stated that they could share their ideas voluntarily. Furthermore, they reported that they were not accustomed to voice their opinions about the issues such as choosing learning materials, objectives or activities for courses and they did not see themselves competent or sophisticated enough to involve in taking such kind of responsibilities. Here are some related data:

Informant H2: *The last word should be in teachers' mouth but he can ask for our opinions, by evaluating and including our opinions he can decide about the things in the end. Provided that they ask our opinions first, they can decide on your own.*

Informant L8: *Teachers should decide everything on the first day of the courses since we do not know anything and they should choose interesting things for students.*

Especially, for some departmental courses, HASs asserted that since they had no background knowledge they could not decide to do anything like choosing a book or determining a learning activity or objectives on their own.

The interviewees were asked about authority concept in the classroom; both group of students generally wanted to see their teachers as an authoritarian figure. However, HASs wanted to share this authority more with their teachers while LASs tended to leave the authority more to them. In their own words:

Informant H2: *We shall share this authority, in fact, not half and half but teachers can have 60% and students can have 40%.*

Informant L7: *Everybody says teacher should be a guide but I think teachers are everything, they should be the authority. I expect 80% of everything from teachers. They should be the authority but without making students feel bored or oppressed.*

It was concluded that LASs tend to be a more teacher-dependent student. They stated to expect much from their teacher about issues regarding class management and providing necessary knowledge.

2.3. How do the students perceive their motivation level in terms of studying on departmental courses?

When they were asked about their motivation about studying departmental courses, there was an obvious difference in their responses. Especially, LASs stated that they were not so motivated for their departmental courses as follows:

Informant H2: *I know I am motivated since I like English and the department. My interest rooted in my secondary school years. I used to like English then and still love it. I like to study courses accordingly. Especially, I like translation.*

Informant L6: *To say frankly, things changed when I came to university. I do not concentrate on things, grading system, courses. For example, I used to like literature before. Now, I am bored. I am not so motivated about the department.*

As it is presented above, while HASs stated that they were relatively motivated to study and like to study, LASs admitted that they were not so motivated to study and they put forward some reasons or activities resulting in their reluctance.

3. To what extent do the students engage in English language activities throughout their academic education?

Almost all the interviewees shared the point to be interested in English language activities. This was probably due to the nature of their department. They were students studying at department of English language and literature. Here are samples regarding their language engagement:

Informant H2: *I am interested in learning words. I like to note down words and try to use them. I like listening music and read newspapers in English. I also like to do translations of poems and lyrics.*

Informant L5: *I like reading short stories. I try to improve my reading skill. I watch movies and listen to music in English.*

Even if they were not equally engaged in improving their language skills, they were at least interested in some activities such as listening to music or watching movies in English. LASs seemed that they did activities in an unconscious manner. Their statements and body language revealed that their main goal had nothing to do with improving their English proficiency level. Yet, since they liked to do such kind of activities, they did some related activities. On the other hand, HASs seemed to be more eager to improve or keep up their English proficiency level and they tried to do such activities to learn something new. This was especially inferred from their discourse and body language. In that, while some students talked excitedly or enthusiastically, some students talked enthusiastically about the issue, others talked with pauses or critics of themselves.

3.1. How do the students perceive their motivation level in terms of engaging in English language activities throughout their academic education?

As compared to their motivation level in terms of studying for departmental courses, the students, particularly LASs claimed to be more motivated about English language learning.

Informant H2: *I like English very much. I think I like to read and write in English more.*

Informant L5: *Indeed, there is no definite goal for this but I like to study English.*

The data showed that they all appeared to be motivated to engage in English language activities. It was probably because of the nature of the department in that students with a considerable proficiency level of English come to the department after passing university entrance exam and most of the students willingly preferred the department.

4. How do the students perceive themselves regarding their proximity to autonomous learner profile identified in the current study?

The students were asked about their self-perceived autonomous level after they were informed about the concept of learner autonomy and characteristics of autonomous learner. LASs did not see their own profile close to the autonomous learner profile. Conversely, HASs were in the opinion that their profile was quite close to the autonomous learner profile. The samples below provide evidence:

Informant H2: *I think I am autonomous because I can control over the things regarding my education. Nobody urges me to study or do something else for my education. I already like to do so. In daily life, suddenly something come to my mind about language or courses. I start to think about it.*

Informant L7: *In fact, students should be autonomous but sometimes our opinions and actions are not same. But this is something which is resulted from interest or motivation. I like to be an ordinary teacher so just try to pass the exams here, nothing more.*

That the responses various questions related to the concept of autonomy, HASs appeared closer to the autonomous learner profile as compared to LASs. Even, LASs believed that it was necessary to be an autonomous student. Nevertheless, they were aware of their potential, weaknesses, and strengths.

5. What are the relationships between the students' self-perceived level of academic achievement and autonomy?

When interviewees were asked about the relationships between their academic achievement, and autonomy level, they expressed that they were somehow related. In this respect, there is a common view about the relationship. When it comes to their self-perceptions of the nature of this relationship, there is a positive relationship among them. Self-perceptions about the relationship are presented below in their own words:

Informant H1: *I feel I am autonomous in many respects. I am interested in language improvement. I am aware about my weaknesses. I study hard; as a result, I am successful. I should study more because there are lots of things to learn. I think all these concepts are interrelated.*

Informant L5: *If I was interested in some courses more, I would be more successful. For instance, I hardly passed linguistic courses but I am good at literature. Therefore, our effort is more important than the other things. But everything is in hands of teachers, if they had asked about things like choosing learning objectives, material, activities or other related issues, we would have felt more responsible and accordingly would have been more successful academically.*

As it is inferred from the interviewees' opinions, they were aware of their weaknesses and their overall academic profile. Both their academic profile that they displayed and their answers to the questions might provide evidence that there might appear a link between their academic achievement level and their autonomy level.

Conclusion

This case study was designed to determine EFL students' self-perceptions of learner autonomy and academic achievement. The evidence obtained via interviews suggested that there might be a link between students' self-perceived level of academic achievement and autonomy. The nature of the relationship seems to be positive as inferred from their self-reports in the interviews. That is to say, the students who claim to perform autonomous activities relatively seem to have higher GPA. Particularly, the students who feel motivated to improve and engage in English language reveal that they have relatively higher autonomy perception. Accordingly, these students are relatively more successful academically. Considering the fact that learner autonomy is a kind of "developmental process" (Benson, 2001, p. 53), the students in this case might move along in this process.

As for their self-perceptions of their own and their teachers' responsibilities, the students tend to share responsibilities with their teachers rather than taking responsibilities on their own alone. Especially, they want to see their teachers responsible for arousing their interest in courses, deciding the objectives of courses and evaluating their learning. Both high and LASs do not have an idea about, especially, deciding objectives of courses. The findings in the study carried out by Balçıkanlı (2006) also showed that 40% of the students state that they are never involved in establishing objectives. The students in the current case study mostly take charge of deciding what they learn outside class and identifying their weaknesses in courses on their own. However, they want to share the responsibilities with their teachers about the issues such as making them work harder, making sure that they make progress, choosing course materials, and evaluating courses. As compared to responsibilities regarding issues in class, they especially, HASs find themselves better in making decisions about out-of-class activities or self-studies such as choosing a material for their own studies. The overall data show that if they, regardless of their academic achievement level, had an opportunity to make decisions about these aspects, most of them consider that they would do it more than good. The reason behind their assumptions might be associated with the cultural aspect of learner autonomy. As Murase (2007, p. 6) suggests that "the important thing is that autonomy is not entirely a Western concept and that anyone has some degree of autonomy and can develop greater autonomy; [however], the culture of the context should not be neglected". Therefore, Turkish context should be borne in mind when students' assumptions are considered. When all these components are taken into consideration to determine the student' autonomy level overall, their autonomy level seems to be on a reasonable level. As it is recommended by Bouchard (2009) and Reinders (2000), it is necessary for the teachers to give more responsibility to their students and negotiate over different decisions regarding their learning processes. It seems that not full independence but constant support and collaboration are expected from EFL teachers. This is also concluded by Bayat (2011) that it is possible for Turkish EFL students to act much more autonomously when they are provided with autonomous learning activities. All in all, the findings of the study implicate that both roles of teachers and students should be revisited in the frame of requirements of learner autonomy. Therefore, students should be given more opportunity to share their ideas and make decisions about different aspects of learning process from the very beginning of the academic education. The students' potential of being autonomous should be uncovered by providing necessary learning environments. Students should be encouraged to behave autonomously; in this way, they can be more responsible students in the school and in the society accordingly.

Acknowledgement

The current paper was produced from the Master thesis prepared by the Author. The author thanks the participants of the study for their volunteer participation and contributions.

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