

Does Learner Autonomy Affect the Language Learning Process?

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to determine if there is an impact of autonomy level of the learner on his/her language learning process. To determine this, a questionnaire was administered to 20 students studying in ELT Department of Uludag University in Turkey. The students' ages were between 18 and 22. They were taking professional lessons about their branch such as Approaches in ELT, ELT Methodology, Classroom Management, etc. so they were aware of the term, namely learner autonomy. With the questionnaire, it was firstly aimed to see how much they were autonomous; the following parts of the instrument were about their skills in English. According to the results of the research, there was an effect of autonomy on their performance because we observed that the students who said they were more autonomous; got higher points in the following part. Finally; we reached a conclusion: While teaching, the teachers should try to grow autonomous learners. By that way it gets easier to teach something to the language learners.

Key Words: autonomy, learner autonomy, FLT (foreign language teaching), language learning

Introduction

Learning a second language has often been considered a complicated process because various factors may affect the linguistic and non-linguistic competence of learners (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999). Some of such variables can be affective (e.g. motivation) or cognitive (e.g. learning strategies) factors. But there is a huge factor which is the combined version of these cognitive and affective factors in all learning and teaching processes. Autonomy can be regarded as the umbrella term of the whole learner-centred approaches. Among the pedagogical principles that have been revealed by learner-centred approaches is the promotion of learner's self-directed and active participation to his/her learning experience, and it is this way of functioning that brings learner autonomy (Benaissi, 2015).

Today in Turkey, there are so many students who don't know even the term autonomy. There are also some teachers who are not aware of learner-centred teaching. Actually it can be said that such approaches are increasing day-by-day, the participants of learning and teaching process now are becoming more familiar with these terms: learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, learner-centred lesson, learner motivation, etc. On the other hand, the number of the participants of the other group is so huge that it can't be underestimated.

It can be said that in language learning classrooms it is an ordinary event to see autonomous teachers more familiar with learner autonomy. Yes, that is fine but we can't observe this situation in other regular classrooms. In this study, language learning environments will be evaluated more closely.

The aim of this study is to find out the effects of learner autonomy on the marks of the students. The autonomy level of the students who are in an FL setting will be assessed and they will be categorized by considering the connection between their levels in both sides. To do that, we will work with a group of students from a regular state university in Turkey.

Literature Review

The results of the study of Liu (2015) established that motivation and autonomy had a high level of positive correlation. As Benaissi (2015) instructed, fostering learner autonomy and motivation is a highly desirable aspiration in FL settings. According to him, the autonomy levels of the students can be changeable culture-by-culture. For example; Chinese students seemed to fail in understanding that the goals for their English courses are not for the teacher but for them. On the other hand, Colombian students' awareness of the importance of classes and of the benefits from working cooperatively with teachers in reaching their goals enhances their autonomy as learners by evidencing more reflection related to the way they react to their teachers' aims and requirements (Arias, 2014). In addition some researchers comment that

autonomy and motivation are the parts of a person's innate capacity and they cannot be increased with education and strategy training.

In contrast, it was asserted by a study in which 48 English Preparatory students participated (Mutlu & Eröz, 2013) that explicit language learning strategy training paired with an interactive environment with computers and the internet aided learners in developing their autonomy and motivation level. Perhaps there are some effects of the culture that the students live in, however, we cannot underestimate the other factors. An example of these is technology. Of course just technology is not enough to develop learner autonomy and motivation. As some studies demonstrated, by using technology it is possible to make the students to feel themselves more autonomous. In addition, when we make learners to work together by using technology, I mean social media; their motivation will also be increased. (Akbari, Simons, and Pilot, 2015). We know that our learners are very interested in using many kinds of social media tools. They like to be in interaction with the people who are living anywhere in the world. It is a way to become open-minded persons and to see the differences among all kinds of cultures, educational systems, learner types, etc. By contrasting each other; or just sharing their ideas and experiences they might feel more relieved. In addition, they will see other opportunities to develop themselves (Murray, 2014).

Some other researchers studied on how to make lessons more attentive. It is advocated that using different kinds of activities or various visuals provide better attention, by the way better learning. Altunay (2013) observed 103 participants, even if the tasks are non-compulsory, the learners give attention to them when they include songs, movies, new and various words related to the meaningful context. To create this, lecturers can also make use of authentic ways according to the proficiency level of their pupils (Kristmanson, Lafargue, and Culligan, 2013). Stressed here, the autonomy level of the language learners can be increased by trying all kinds of ways. One of the researchers who investigated multilingual language learners was Peek (2016). In his study, there were 841 participants with different linguistic backgrounds

and different language repertoire sizes. He aimed to reveal if there is any effect of being a multilingual learner on the level of autonomy. The results of the study demonstrated that more experienced multilinguals had higher autonomy levels. When they moved to another locus, they were more successful to acquire that language, they were aware of what and how to learn it.

To review, almost from all studies, it can be seen that there are several aspects that provide developing learner autonomy and motivation in language learning process. However these factors cannot be provided every time and everywhere. Being an EFL setting; it is also too hard for the Turkish Educational System. With this study, it will be evaluated if the lessons to learn English are enough for university students and if they provide learner autonomy or not. The research questions are as follows:

1. Are university students in Turkey autonomous?
2. Does autonomy level provide better learning?

Method

In this study, a questionnaire which aimed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data was administered to the university students. Its goal was to determine if they were autonomous and there was any effect of autonomy on language learning process.

Participants

The participants were 20 university students who were all studying in the ELT Department of a state university which was Uludağ University. 12 of those twenty students were females and the remaining 8 were males. 15 of them were second graders. Among the remaining 5 participants, there were first and third graders. Their ages were between 19 and 22. Because of their studying in the same department of the same school, their proficiency level was similar. Almost all of them took professional courses such as Approaches in ELT, ELT Methodology, Teaching Principles and Methods, etc., so they were all familiar with the term *autonomy* and

trying to develop themselves in this area. Their feelings while responding to the questionnaire were considered during the analysing session.

Instruments

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire which included 4 different parts. The first part was the background info section. In this part, it was aimed to get a general idea about their ages and grades.

In the second part there were 14 Likert-scale questions each of which had three options; and 1 open-ended question which was asking if there were something that they would like to add. This section aimed to get an idea about the participants' autonomy level.

The third section was formed of 4 different parts each of which included Likert-scale questions and 1 open-ended question like the previous section. In these questions the participants were grading their language skills (1..worst..to..best..5).

In the last section, the students were asked about their linguistic competence, according to their thoughts and their marks in the school. This section just contained 2 open-ended questions. By doing this, it was also aimed to determine their discourse competence in a detailed way.

Participating in such a questionnaire which asked about their marks and competence made the students feel stressed somehow, and it was also realized that when they felt stressed; they didn't want to reply the open-ended questions.

Procedure

The participants selected one of the provided choices, which they individually perceived as the most appropriate one in the provided situations. The questionnaire was administered in the school during students' free time after and before lessons, which took less than 10 minutes for all of them. To make the participants more

relaxed, they were informed that the investigation was a part of a research, and that all private information would be protected.

The data were quantified considering their personal differences which were age, gender, grade, etc.; and then analysed regarding the frequent answers for each situation. It was predicted that the students who gave higher marks for each situation in the autonomy section would be more autonomous. Considering their replies in this section, it was tried to understand if there was an effect of autonomy level on their language skills and competence. The participants who got lower marks from the autonomy section were predicted to have less-developed skills and competence. According to their answers regarding the open-ended questions, it was easier to get reliable information about both their skills and competence.

All answers were synthesized and frequencies were estimated to reach the most reliable and valid results.

Results

The Autonomy Level of Turkish University Students

The results of the questionnaire indicated that the autonomy concept was getting more and more popular among the students, especially ELT students in universities. We were aware that they had been taking so many courses making them familiar with learner autonomy. We knew that some of them didn't have any concern about the term. However, according to their attitudes on their language learning process, it was observed that they were generally autonomous students.

By the way, the other part of the students knew the term; nevertheless, according to the results of the questionnaire, they were not autonomous learners. They were also good at language skills and linguistic competence, but there might be other reasons for this. In this study, we just had a look at the effects of autonomy.

AUTONOMY LEVEL

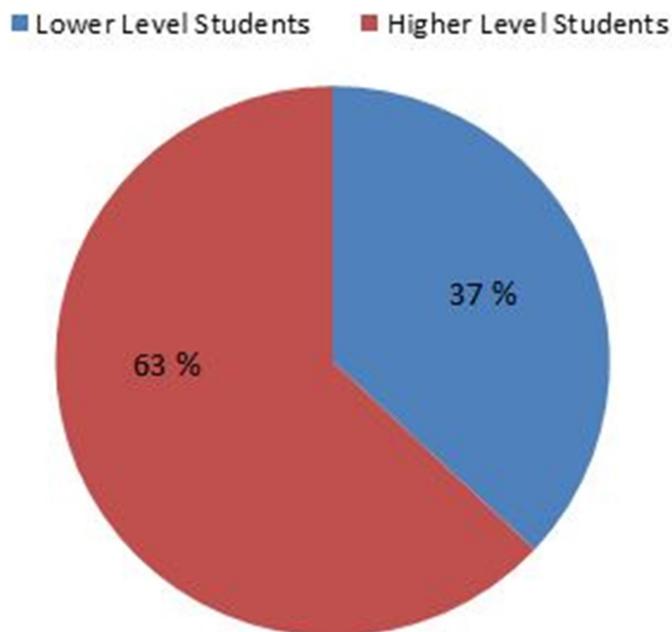


Figure 1. The autonomy level results.

As it could be seen in Figure 1, 63% of the participants were determined to be autonomous learners and 37% of them not autonomous. 45% of the autonomous learners were females. On average, males were fewer than females so it could be understood that seeing more females in each group was normal.

Our first research hypothesis was that most of the students would not be autonomous; however, the results stated that autonomous learners in ELT department were more than the others.

Language skills of autonomous learners

We first supposed that autonomous students would be more successful than others. Overall, the results indicated that our hypothesis was correct. Many questions inquiring language skills of the students were administered, a graphic was created to describe their performance. Their answers were calculated according to the marks they all had given to each question. The numbers written down in Figure 2 are the average of their answers.

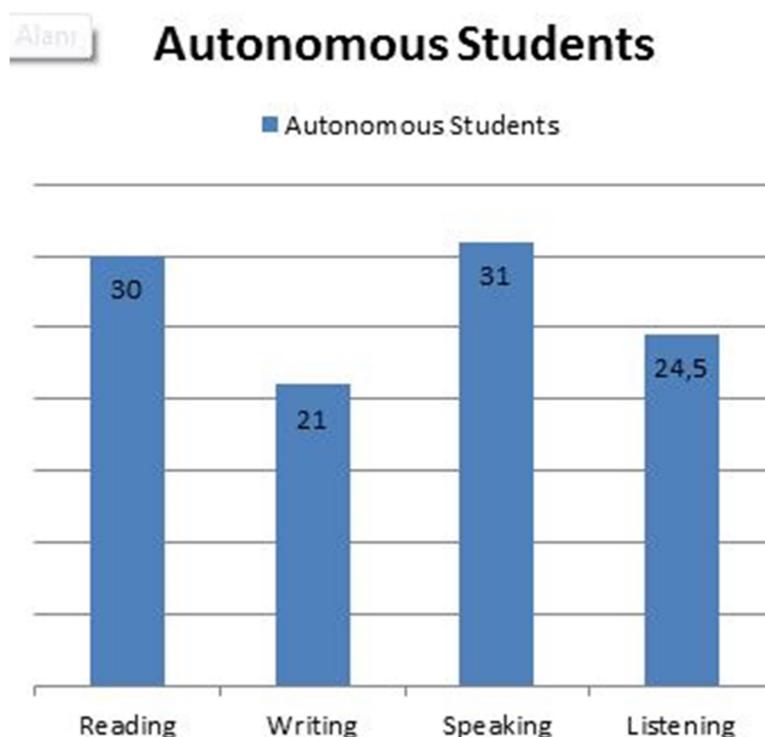


Figure 2. Autonomous students.

As it can be seen in Figure 2, autonomous students said that they were better at speaking, and worse at writing. Generally they were good at almost all of the language skills but in this part of the questionnaire, they also became aware that some of their skills should be developed.

Language skills of the learners who are not autonomous

The results indicated that there were some students who were really better than autonomous students in language performance. But there could be some other reasons for this situation. On the other hand; it could be seen that on average, the levels of autonomous students were higher than the others. Figure 3 was created to describe their performance of language skills.

Students Who Are Not Autonomous

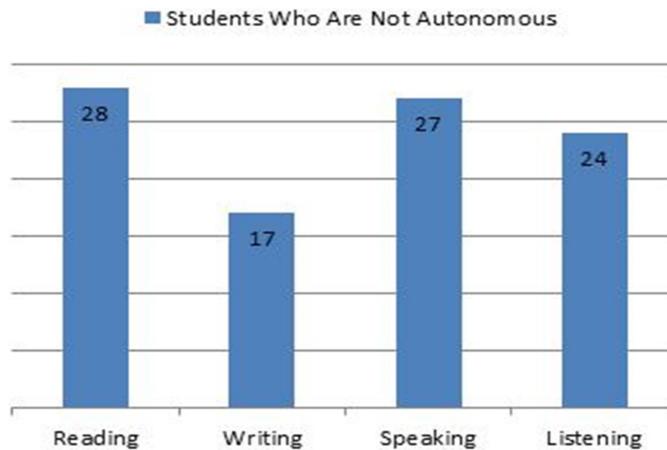


Figure 3. Students who are not autonomous.

These students said that they were better at reading, instead of speaking. Again there could be another reason for this. They were also good at all of the skills but the difference between these two groups could be seen in both tables. They both answered same questions and the data was different. Actually the difference was not too huge; still it was easy to see.

SKILLS OF THE STUDENTS

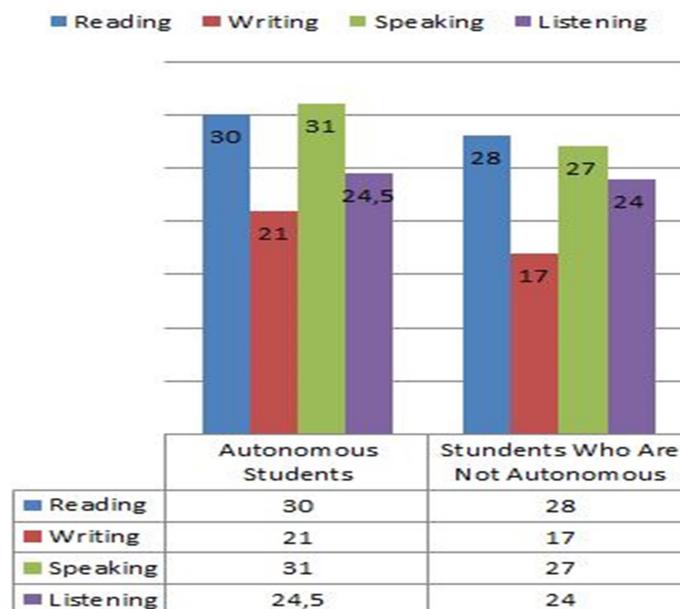


Figure 4. Skills of the students.

Figure 4 aimed to describe the difference between these two groups in the same pace. It was easy to see that autonomous students were better at language learning. The difference was not too significant though; there could be some other reasons for it. But we can say that there are some effects of autonomy on language learning process.

Discussion

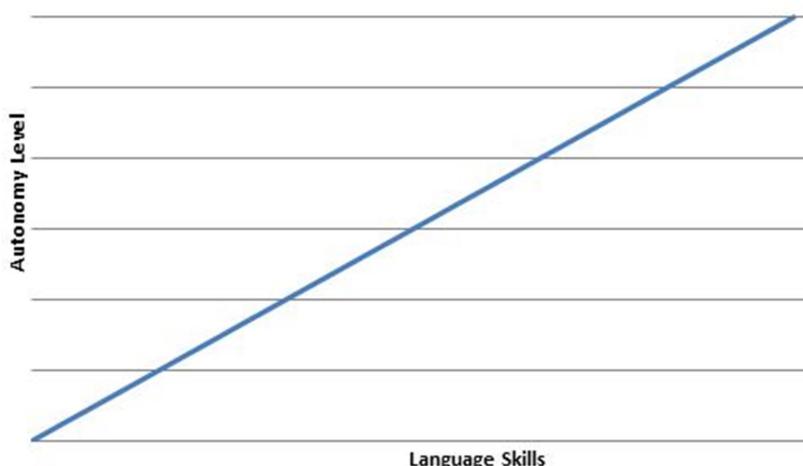


Figure 5. The relation between autonomy and language skills.

According to the results of this study it could be stated that there was a direct proportion between the levels of autonomy and linguistic performance. Our first question was inquiring if Turkish university students were autonomous or not; we saw that a big part of them was autonomous and the other part said they were not autonomous. Still they said that they were nearly the same with the other students in the field of language performance.

The second question was that if there was an effect of autonomy on their levels in the language learning. Results described that the students who said they were more autonomous than others, showed higher performance in the questions related to the language skills. So it could be said that higher autonomy level provides higher language learning and higher performance in that process; or at least higher perception of self-confidence.

Although there was a difference between the answers of these two groups of the students, their performance was very close to each other. Because of this, it could be stated that there were other reasons for this. For example; some of the students were not very good at linguistic competence according to their GPA; but they described that they had higher levels in language skills. So it could be deduced that they had been doing some other things to increase their performance in their field.

As other researchers in the literature had emphasized, the term autonomy was getting more popular within the learners who were studying higher levels of schools. In our field, it had huge effects to develop our learners' and lecturers' levels.

Conclusion

As mentioned before; this research aimed to determine if there was any effect of autonomy on language learning process. A validity assured instrument (see Appendix) was administered to get a reliable conclusion. According to our hypotheses it was predicted that autonomous learners should be better in language learning process in both EFL and ESL settings. It was impossible for us to work with an ESL setting; however, we got enough results to understand if there was an impact of autonomy on ELT learners in Turkey. Firstly, we had to observe their autonomy levels and we saw that the term learner autonomy was a term that they were familiar with. It was observed and determined that most of them were autonomous learners. Then we looked at their skills in the foreign language. It was realized that they were better than non-autonomous learners in most of the cases. Their points were very close to each other but as predicted; the autonomous group got higher points.

In conclusion; this study indicated that autonomy level of a language learner was an effective aspect in his/her language learning process. According to the results of this research; it can be said that while growing autonomous learners, we teach them how to fish rather than giving them fish. By that way we make them aware of how to

study something. They learn how to learn. And this should be the ultimate goal of a teacher of any field.

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Appendix

Data-Collection Instrument: Questionnaire

ULUDAG UNIVERSITY

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING DEPARTMENT

The aim of this questionnaire is to determine the impact of the autonomy level of university students, on their language learning process.

The results of this questionnaire are going to be used for an academic study and never be shared with anyone.

Thank you for your contribution.

A: BACKGROUND

Name:	
Surname:	
Year:	Signature:

B: AUTONOMY (Choose just one option for each situation according to your “own” thoughts.)

	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
I am aware of the importance of the lessons which I take in the school.			
I find my lessons beneficial for my language learning process.			
I am aware of my responsibilities about my language learning process.			
I keep learning journals for my courses.			
I know how to study for my lessons.			
I am generally aware of what I will learn today.			
I always have a look at the topic of the day before I go to the class.			

I take notes in the class.			
I know what to study.			
I always listen to the lecturer in the classroom.			
I repeat the topic of the day, every night before I go to bed.			
I know what will happen if I don't learn "....."			
I read books.			
I know my proficiency level.			
I know when to study for my each lesson.			

Anything you would like to add:

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C: SKILLS (Choose just one level for each situation.)

1. Reading ("1" worst...-...best "5")

	1	2	3	4	5
I can read a passage fluently.					
I can read a passage correctly.					
I can understand the general meaning of a passage by reading it once.					

I can answer questions about a passage after I read it once.					
It is enough for me to take a look at the passage to get the main idea of it.					
I know that correct pronunciation is important while reading a passage.					
I pronounce all the words correctly while I am reading a passage.					

Anything you would like to add:

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2. Writing (“1” worst...-...best “5”)

	1	2	3	4	5
I can write a paragraph whenever I want.					
I can find the correct word for any expression while writing a passage.					
I can write passages appropriate for my proficiency level.					
I can write both paragraphs and essays.					
I know writing techniques.					

Anything you would like to add:

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3. Listening (“1” worst...-...best “5”)

	1	2	3	4	5
I can get the meaning of a record by listening it once.					
I can understand what the lecturer says in the classroom.					
I can understand a native speaker’s speech.					
I can answer questions about a record by listening it once.					
I can catch the important clues of a text that I have just listened.					
I can watch a Hollywood movie without subtitles.					

Anything you would like to add:

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4. Speaking (“1” worst...-...best “5”)

	1	2	3	4	5
I can speak English with my friends in the class.					
I can participate in the discussions in the classroom.					
I try to speak with my friends outside the classroom.					
I can speak English with my teachers.					
I can speak English with a native speaker.					
I can pronounce all the words correctly while I am speaking English.					
I can use correct structure for each language function.					
It is not too hard to speak English with anyone.					

Anything you would like to add:

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D: LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE [Please write about your marks. You can write just “high”, “middle”, “low”; you can write your GPA (tr: GANO). If you write one of the first three options, please explain why you think so.]

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Anything you would like to add:

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Thank you for your being a part of this study.