LEARNER AUTONOMY: WHAT WE NEED TO FOSTER AND HOW

Dr. Simla İçmez
simlaicmez@hotmail.com
Çukurova Üniversitesi
Eğitim Fakültesi
İngiliz Dili Eğitimi ABD

ABSTRACT
Learner autonomy has much to offer to language learners. It promotes not only learning outside the formal education, but also empowering learners to decide on their needs and to work on them. Autonomous language learning will typically entail reflection on the learning process, setting goals, and striving to achieve these goals, while actively being involved in the decision-making processes of their learning. This study inquires about whether or not learner autonomy is practiced by the students, without any formal education, preparatory year programme, in ELT department, at Çukurova University. The findings indicate that the participants are autonomous language learners who employ reflection, goal setting, and taking initiative to achieve their goals. Nevertheless, their responses show that they prefer the comfort of having the teacher as the sole decision-maker.
Key words: Learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation, control in EFL classroom

ÖZET
Eğitimde öğrenci otonomu dil öğrencileri için öğrenme süreçlerinde çok büyük fayda sağlamaktadır. Yalnızca resmi eğitim kurumları dışında öğrenimin devam etmesini sağlamakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda öğrencilere kendi ihtiyaçları doğrultusunda çalışma imkanı sunar. Dil öğreniminde otonom, öğrenme sürecini detaylı olarak etüt etme, hedefler belirleme, bu hedeflere ulaşmak için aktif bir çaba içerisinde olma, ve öğrenme sürecinde verilecek kararlarda doğrudan söz sahibi olmayı beraberinde getirir. Bu çalışma, Çukurova Üniversitesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi ABD, hazırlık öğrencilerinin bu alanda resmi bir eğitim almadan ne derece otonom bir yaklaşım sergilediklerini araştırmaktadır. Bulgular katılımcıların öğrenme süreçlerini etüt eden, hedefler belirleyen, ve bu doğrultuda çalışan otonom sahibi öğrenciler olduklarını göstermektedir. Ancak, veriler aynı zamanda katılımcıların karar verme sürecini öğretmene bıraktıklarını göstermektedir.
Anahtar Sözcükler: Dil öğreniminde otonomi, içsel motivasyon, yabancı dil sınıfında kontrol

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is commonly referred to as the "buzz issue" in language teaching (Field, 2007: 30). Changing understandings in social studies and changing roles in education as well as social structures led to a need for an approach that sees learners as capable of decision-making and taking initiative in their own learning. Thus, language education has seen a growing interest in this area for the last 30 years. Yet, as it is often the case with relatively new research areas with a growing number of studies on, there is little consensus and much controversy on learner autonomy. One of the greatest controversies in this area is the appropriacy of learner autonomy in different contexts, and, closely related to this issue, what actually is learner autonomy and what constitutes autonomous learner behaviour. In the sections below, this paper discusses current perspectives and approaches to autonomy, looking for common themes in these approaches and then moves on to exploring learner autonomy practices of preparatory year ELT students, at Çukurova University.

Different perspectives and approaches to learner autonomy

A common broad definition of learner autonomy adopted by much research is that of Holec's, the learners taking "responsibility of their own learning" (see for example Cotterall, 2000; Little, 1999; Thanasoulas, 2000; Benson, 2006; Field, 2007). In this respect learner autonomy not only aims at helping the students to be equipped with the tools to engage in a life-long learning, but also helps the formal education to be in close contact with the learners' lives outside the classrooms. The latter bears additional importance for contexts, such as the context of this research, where school education has a greater risk of alienating learners due to backwash effect of intensive exam systems. Furthermore, language learning itself bears the risk of alienating learners due to breaking, rather artificially, language skills into their components, thus, posing the danger of making the classroom procedures removed from actual language use outside the classroom (Ushioda, 1996; Little, 1999).

There is not, however, a consensus on what constitutes autonomous language learner behaviour in literature. Such diversity in the

understanding of learner autonomy is reflected in approaches that include a wide range from strategy training and raising student awareness (Cotterall, 1999) to turning the control of classroom procedures, including course content and assessment, to the learners themselves (Nunan et. al., 1999; Vickers and Ene, 2006; Karlsson et. al. 2007). Such distinction is also visible between "learner autonomy" and "self directed language learning", where the former is the awareness and willingness to take charge of the course "content and structure"; while the latter indicates the learner behaviour directed to this aim (Oxford, 2003: 75). Depending on the aims of the educational organisation, ideological assumptions and goals of the educational systems, and so on, different approaches are adopted in different contexts.

It should be noted here that the researchers recognise that learner autonomy is not a new methodology that necessarily needs to be developed under the guidance of the teacher in formal educational contexts; and acknowledge that many good learners are actually autonomous regardless of the formal training they receive on learner autonomy (Little, 1999; Aoki and Smith, 1999).

Although, the researchers reach an agreement on the above points, there is much diversity in the field of learner autonomy. Current approaches to learner autonomy are very often categorised in terms of technical, psychological, socio-cultural, and political perspectives (Oxford, 2003; Benson, 2006); "native-speakerist", "cultural relativist", and "social" (Holliday, 2003: 116); and "strong" and "weak" versions (Smith, 2003: 131). Such distinctions also categorise research in learner autonomy.

Technical perspectives assume that provided with the necessary physical conditions, such as self-access centres, will help develop learner autonomy (Oxford, 2003). Learner autonomy is very often talked about together with self-access centres. Yet, self-access centres are one possible tool of fostering learner autonomy. As reviewed above, autonomy is an inherent human trait and lack of self-access centres will not prevent its development. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see learner autonomy in contexts with scarcity of resources

(see for example Fonseka, 2003). Such studies are important for the context of this study, where there is a lack of self-access centres but not autonomous learners.

Psychological perspectives, on the other hand, mostly work with the motivational theories and specifically with intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy (see for example Ushioda 1996). Therefore, issues of control and agency are important for this approach, as they are central to intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985, Deci and Ryan 1992, Ushioda 1996, and Ushioda 2003).

Sociocultural perspective suggests that autonomy is promoted through social interactions and/or integration. Fostering autonomous learning can require a "more capable other" to provide the basis of autonomous behaviour in some theories while in others, mostly based on studies in immigrant language learners, the more capable other is replaced by the existing practitioners in a social institution (Oxford, 2003: 86). Finally, political-critical perspective, in this respect, approaches autonomy from the issues of social and cultural ideologies, gatekeepers, and control (Oxford 2003).

Smith makes a similar distinction. He proposes two versions of learner autonomy: "weak version" and "strong version" (Smith, 2003: 131). The weaker version sees the learners as lacking any experience of autonomy and aims at providing the learners with language learning strategies to help them become autonomous in following the aims of the institution they are members of. These language strategies aim at helping the learners to become "good language learners", and include cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, communication strategies, and socio-affective strategies, among others (Hedge, 2000: 77-78). The stronger version, by contrast, suggests that the students already have a degree of autonomy and is based on the principle of making use of this experience and involving the students in crucial decision making processes such as syllabus making (Smith, 2003). Language strategies are used in this version too, but are the means to student empowerment, rather than to create more successful learners within the aims of the educational institution.

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Smith's distinction also aims at answering the criticisms that autonomy is a western concept and that it is not culturally appropriate for and bears the risk of cultural imperialism on non-western educational settings since the stronger version will give more freedom for reflecting on and developing more suitable processes for those students' needs and goals. It should be noted here that, although learner autonomy has become an interest of research for almost three decades now, the debate on the appropriacy of learner autonomy has been mostly carried out by "western" researchers, posing an irony, speaking for the "periphery" about cultural imperialism. In this respect, there is certainly a need for more research from a variety of ELT contexts on the appropriacy of learner autonomy. Although it is not the primary aim of this research to explore this issue, the findings will contribute to understanding the current place and role of learner autonomy in Turkish undergraduate ELT education, shedding light to the debate of appropriacy in non-western contexts.

Reflection, goal setting, and agency in learner autonomy

One aspect existing in all proposed definitions and approaches of learner autonomy is reflection by the learners on their own learning process and setting goals, based on these reflections. Learners are encouraged to reflect on their language learning experiences through employing various strategies such as keeping journals, discussions with the course tutor, or peers, and so on (see for example Nunan et. al., 1999; Smith, 2003). Such reflections resonate on the ongoing process of goal setting.

> …one of the primary concerns of an autonomous language classroom is to raise the students' awareness of the learning process itself, which also implies having them reflect on their strengths/weaknesses and progress in various linguistic skills.
>
> (Dam and Legenhausen, 1999: 93)

Therefore, through reflection, autonomous learners can set goals, initiate action to achieve these goals, and assess their own achievement (Hoffmann, 1999). In this respect, it is among the core components of learner autonomy that the learners are aware of their weaknesses and strengths.

Another important point emerging from these different approaches is the issue of control and agency. Regardless of which approach to autonomy is adopted, a certain amount of control on learning will be handed over to the students. Whether this control will be limited to the sequence and selection of classroom practices or will allow the students to decide which skill to study, when, for how long, and to evaluate themselves independent of the teacher will be dependent on the approach adopted. Yet, they all require the learners to assume agency of learning and to see the course tutor as a guide or a facilitator rather than the authority figure with the sole responsibility of teaching/learning experience. This, undoubtedly, requires a shift in the classroom roles "to allow and to guide learner decision-making about learning" (Crabbe, 1999:139).

However, this does not mean that the teacher is no longer the "authority" in the language classroom. As Crabbe argues, authority is linked to expertise (Crabbe, 1999). In fact, most examples of autonomous language practices demonstrate that the language teachers need to rely on their expertise very heavily as they need to organise, develop, and present for multiple needs, goals, schedules simultaneously (see for example Smith, 2003).

STUDY
Purpose of the Study

This descriptive study seeks to find out about the past and current practices of ELT preparatory year students' experiences as autonomous learners. Within this broader aim, the research question this study asks is to what extent preparatory year ELT students are practicing learner autonomy without the formal training. To this end, 61 preparatory year students, currently enrolled at Çukurova University, ELT department, participated in this study. Of the 61 participants, 13 are male and 48 are female. All participants have high self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation since they chose to further their studies in an ELT department.

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Research Instruments

To find out about the students' experiences in high school and at the university with regard to learner autonomy, and about their expectations from the courses they take in their preparatory year as required by the university, a questionnaire adapted from Scharle and Szabo (2000) was given to students. The questionnaire includes likert scale questions as well as open ended questions to inquire about the students' experiences and practices of reflection and goal setting, and their approach to possible change of roles in control in classroom procedures.

FINDINGS

Data will be analysed in two sections, participants' experiences in high school and in their current institution, with the hope of providing a more comprehensive understanding of these students' development as autonomous learners.

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Learner autonomy experiences in high school

Students' responses in Table 1 show a general trend towards autonomous language practices in their high school education. Responses to item number one show that a great majority of the respondents employed metacognitive strategies, which signals reflection on the language by the learner. Answers to items two and three point out that the students found place for their own lives in classroom practices. As reviewed above, autonomous learning fosters integration of institutionalised learning with informal everyday learning. In this respect, it is safe to claim that the participants' previous formal educational experiences created such opportunities for the learners. However, it is not clear at this point whether strategy development oriented "weaker version" or a "stronger version" of autonomous behaviour was adopted by the participants at this point (Smith, 2003: 131)

Table 1: Students' past educational experiences

		Yes	No	Don't know
1	I had to guess rules meanings myself at times.	48	13	0
2	I used to speak about myself in my English lessons.	40	20	1
3	I used to write about myself in my English lessons.	49	12	0
4	My teacher used to ask me to work in pairs or groups.	38	23	0
5	I corrected or marked the work of another pupil.	40	18	3
6	My teacher asked me about my opinion about what to do in the lesson or how I would like to learn.	45	16	0
7	I often used other materials than the textbook for my learning.	35	26	0

The remaining items in this table point out the students' past experiences in the classroom with regard to agency. It is reviewed above that learner autonomy entails agency of the learners in the classroom, which can be practiced via learners defining their own goals or deciding on the syllabus and assessment of their work or taking the initiative outside the classroom to foster their learning. The respondents of this study point out that they took the initiative not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom to achieve their goals, 35 students report that they used other materials for their learning other than their textbooks. Taking the initiative outside the classroom is a point supported further in their later responses too, as will be analysed below.

Surprisingly the number of students who report to have corrected or marked other students' work or to have had a say in what to

do in classroom practices are more than those that report collaborative work. The responses above point out that the participants are autonomous learners, as they have experience in what typically are defined as autonomous learning practices. This is not surprising considering the fact that they have chosen to further their education in language learning under the light of psychological perspective to autonomy, as reviewed above. However, it is yet to be found out whether the learners' autonomy in language learning actually extends to a "stronger version" of autonomy. The responses to this question will be analysed in the next section.

Learner autonomy experiences and Expectations in preparatory year

The responses in Table 2 show that a substantial majority of participants reflect on their learning in their current language learning. The responses to the first item surprisingly show that a majority of students, with high self-efficacy, attribute their success as language learners to their English teachers in high school. However, these responses should be approached with caution since it is likely that these participants are in a way paying their respect to their teachers by acknowledging them, as is the common social practice in the context of this study.

Table 2: Students' reflection on their own learning

		Strongly agree	Agree	Don't agree	Don't agree at all
1	I'm good/bad at reading because of my teacher at high school	16	23	12	10
2	I know what I should practice more	28	26	7	0
3	I pay more attention if we are practicing something I am bad at	38	16	5	2
4	I want only to survive lessons	2	9	26	24
5	I learn/read things that the teacher does not give as a task	14	35	11	1
6	I do as little as possible for my homework	6	9	22	24

The remaining responses in the above table point out that these students, in fact, accept the responsibility of their own learning. In their responses to the second item in this table the students demonstrate awareness of their weaknesses, which signals reflection and is an essential first step of goal setting and taking the initiative to achieve their goals.

The participants were also asked how and when they preferred to be corrected, 45 students responded that they would like to be corrected right after they make a mistake in person. Thus, the participants are not intimidated by making mistakes or being corrected but are actually demonstrating metacognitive awareness and reflection on their learning.

The answers to the remaining questions presented in Table 2, point out that the participants do move to the next step, where they actually work on improving the points they are weak at. Student reports on questions five and six also show that the students are already assuming agency outside the classroom. Yet, the current classroom practices at the context of this study does not involve strong student agency within the classroom. The students are assigned the syllabus, the course book, and the classroom roles.

Similarly, participants' answers to the open-ended question on what they particularly liked and disliked about the way they were taught English at high school demonstrate

metacognitive awareness and reflection. The most common themes in what they liked in their previous classroom practices are:

1. Listening to songs and watching films since they report that they felt the need to improve their listening and speaking skills;
2. Being active and making research on a) the topic to be covered in the lessons beforehand, b) their yearly projects for English lessons;
3. Learning vocabulary in context as opposed to isolated fragments;
4. Improving reading skills;
5. Working in groups and helping each other with error correction; and
6. Having to speak in English in the classroom at all times since they report they needed to improve their speaking skills.

Other themes emerging are, the teacher herself, answering tests for the university exam, and deciding on what to do in the lesson. Nonetheless, these themes are not as commonly referred to.

There is also much dislike reported about the former educational practices:

1. Having to do homework that was not interesting;
2. Writing about topics that they were not interested in;
3. Studying course book that was reported to be insufficient for improving listening and speaking skills;
4. Memorisation; and
5. Being constricted to mechanical exercises.

These answers also support the respondents' need to assume agency in various aspects of the course, selection of materials, homework, and content. Besides, they point out that the students took initiative to improve themselves. One student points out, "We were just asked to copy what was on the blackboard. We had to learn that topic by ourselves". Similarly another student writes, "I didn't like it when our teacher brought few (a small number of) materials because I wanted to improve myself and needed something related to my lessons." Finally one student remarks that they did textbook exercises in lessons and after the exercises were completed, they were left free without guidance, and they had to find other ways of improving themselves. The role of reflection on the learning process of these students is also reflected in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' goals

		Very much	Quite a lot	Not much	Not at all
1	I enjoy learning English	41	20	0	0
2	In my language learning this year I expect to do	32	24	5	0
3	In reading course this year	23	36	2	0
4	In writing course this year	35	25	1	0
5	In listening/speaking course this year	40	20	1	0
6	In grammar course this year	20	24	16	1
7	I read outside the classroom to improve my English	18	37	4	2
8	I listen/speak outside the classroom to improve my English	25	24	10	2

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The respondents' answers regarding their goals for the current academic year also reflect their strengths and weaknesses. The answers in Table 3 show that the central skills they are aiming at improving in their preparatory class is related to listening and speaking and writing skills. They have consistently reported in their responses to other questions that they feel speaking and listening to be their weaknesses, while the majority considers grammar and reading as their strengths due to their exhaustive preparations for the university exam, which currently aims to assess grammar and reading skills.

When asked what their weaknesses were and how they planned to improve them, 39 respondents reported that listening and speaking skills were their weakness. Their answers on how they are planning to achieve these goals extend beyond the classroom practices. All 39 students suggest watching films, listening to radio online in English, such as BBC, and forming study groups outside the classroom in their dormitories. 15 students report that they

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need to improve their writing skills and suggest reading more, keeping journals, practicing writing as extracurricular activities. Finally 6 students report that they need to improve their vocabulary and state that they will read more to achieve that. One student did not provide an answer for this question. The reported strengths of the students are grammar and reading. They report that although their current grammar lessons are more advanced than those in high school, they have enough knowledge to work on. Similarly, they report a feeling of ease for reading.

These responses, also, show that the students have already been taking initiative to improve their language skills. They report assumed agency outside the classroom and complain about the lack of agency inside the classroom in their high school education. Yet, it is still not clear whether or not they would prefer to assume agency inside to classroom and to what extent. Table 4 presents student responses on their perception of agency in classroom

Table 4: Students' perception of agency in classroom

		Strongly agree	Agree	Don't agree	Don't agree at all
1	I prefer having a say in what to do in my lessons	19	41	1	0
2	I prefer the teacher to decide what to do in the lessons	5	21	33	2
3	I know my weaknesses and I am willing to take the initiative in the classroom to improve them	25	26	10	0
4	I would be comfortable to work with friends without teacher's guidance	15	18	26	2
5	I need the teacher's guidance	10	32	17	2
6	I need the teacher to tell me what I need to improve	11	26	23	1

The table above signals that the students are willing to take the initiative in the classroom, all respondents except for one, would like to have a voice in decision-making process. However, the

issue of agency gets far from clear-cut from this point on. While an overwhelming majority reports that they would like to have a say in what to do in their lessons, only 35 respondents

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state that they would not want the teacher to decide what to do in lessons. Surprisingly enough the responses to the following question again show a trend for student agency claiming they are willing to take the initiative in the classroom to improve them. Perhaps, the distinction between a weaker and a stronger version of autonomy as reviewed above can be a useful tool here to understand student-responses. While claiming to have awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and willingness to work on them, a substantial amount of students also report that they need the teacher to tell them what they need to improve. Students' preference for teacher guidance is reflected in the responses to the last three questions, as can be seen in the above table. Similarly, when asked who should lead the classroom activities, 48 students reported that they would prefer the teacher to lead, while only nine students responded that they would like to lead.

These seemingly contradicting self-reports actually point out that the students at the time of the study are closer to the "weaker version" of autonomy where the teacher still holds control and decides on the essential components of the course while encouraging the learners to adopt language learning strategies in their learning.

One danger of misconception of autonomy is the lack of teacher in the whole learning experience. Autonomous learning does not entail lack of teacher guidance or expertise, as reviewed above. Therefore, it is not surprising that the students still report a need for teacher guidance in classroom. Yet, their dependence on the teacher as the sole decision-maker and the sole assessor, it can be argued, is a result of their past experiences, where the roles of learner and teacher are rather clear-cut and traditional.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings show, in relation to the research question posed, that the participants are autonomous learners in spite of the scarcity of resources available to them outside the classroom practices. They demonstrate

awareness of their strengths and weaknesses as language learners, which is an important feature of autonomy in language learning (Dam and Legenhausen, 1999). They also take initiative to improve where formal education fails them, as discussed.

An important feature of learner autonomy is the change of control in language learning process. Taking charge of one's own learning calls for learners that are not dependent of the teacher. Thus, the teacher assumes the role of a guide or a counsellor, rather than the sole decision-maker (Crabbe, 1999). With regard to assuming more control, the findings show a reluctance to take up roles as decision-makers on students' part. It should be remembered that the participants have been involved in educational settings where teacher and student roles are defined rather traditionally. Thus, it is not very surprising that they remark a preference to leave the teacher to decide on what to do in the classroom, to lead the activities, and to evaluate their work.

It is interesting, however, that the very same participants monitor their own learning and take the initiative to achieve their goals. Therefore, it can be argued being in a language classroom where the roles change and they have more control over decision-making processes, as they already have in their language learning outside the classroom, the participants can adopt their new roles without much frustration. Since these students are already autonomous learners, in that they assume agency, reflect on, set goals and work to reach these goals; fostering this autonomy in their formal education in preparatory year courses has much to offer to these students.

However, there is need for further research on the actual implication of such a programme in undergraduate ELT programme preparatory year students. The findings of such research will not only empower students but also the tutors of such courses to shape the teaching/learning experience in a more learner-centred fashion.

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