

Learner Autonomy in an Asynchronous Distance Education Environment Implemented through Frequent Instructor-Involvement

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to clarify the autonomy levels of the students taught English Composition through asynchronous distance education which refers to the separation of learners and instructors both in terms of place and time. The data collection process was conducted at a public university in Georgia, USA. 40 students taking online English Composition Course as a core class were included in this study. In order to collect data, two different online surveys were used; one of them was implemented to the instructors and the other one to the students. The aim of the survey implemented to the instructors was to clarify their profile and the details of their teaching through asynchronous distance education. On the other hand, the student survey was to reveal students' autonomy levels in an asynchronous distance education process provided through frequent instructor and student involvement. The results obtained from the student surveys revealed that most of the students were able to run their learning process in an effective way in an asynchronous distance education process.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, distance education has become more common than ever with the outbreak of Covid-19. Indeed, it maintains its popularity for years. Even though it is a necessity because of the Covid-19 Pandemic today, there are also some other reasons behind distance education's popularity. Having no place or time limitation, technology's being able to act as a bridge between the learners and the instructor(s), providing big number of learners with the educational opportunities at once... etc. may be among the reasons of the popularity of distance education.

Distance education is defined by Moore (1990) as a planned instructional process implemented by means of technology to the people who were included in planned learning without place (or time) limitation (cited in Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011). The distance education can be implemented in synchronous and asynchronous way. In synchronous distance education the learners and the instructor(s) are separate only in terms of place; but in asynchronous distance education, the learners and the instructor(s) are separate in terms of both place and time (İşman, 2011).

As there is a physical separation of teacher and learners in both synchronous and asynchronous distance education, it is important for the learners to be able to direct their own learning processes in an effective way. This is related to the learner autonomy which is defined as "ability to take charge of one's own learning" by Holec (1981). Additionally as stated in Fotiadou, Angelaki & Mavroidis (2017) learner autonomy is explained as "*the willingness of learners to be active, take control and supervise their own learning as well as to take risks and also, as the learners' ability to set goals, to act independently and to take decisions about choosing materials, methods and tasks*". As the learners and instructor(s) are physically separate in a distance education process and the students need to direct their own learning, the importance of learner autonomy for such a learning environment cannot be ignored. Considering the mentioned issue, this study aims to clarify the autonomy levels of the students who are taught English Composition class through asynchronous distance education implemented with the frequent instructor-involvement at a public university in the USA.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner autonomy has crucial importance in all of the educational stages, but it gains more importance in a distance education environment in which the students need to direct their own learning process. Both learner autonomy and distance education are considered from different perspectives by the researchers. For example, the relationship between academic success and learner autonomy was investigated by Güneş & Alagözlü (2020); Hashemian & Soureshjani (2011); Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci (2011). Both Hashemian & Soureshjani (2011) and Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci (2011) revealed a significant and positive relationship between learner autonomy and academic success. Additionally, Güneş (2018) compared asynchronous distance learning with blended learning in terms of learner autonomy, motivation and academic success.

As for the related research in terms of the current study, two studies conducted in Turkey before the Pandemic revealed a low autonomy level for the learners taught at a distance. Altunay (2013) investigated the autonomy level of the students who were enrolled Turkish Open Education System and taught English through asynchronous distance education. The results showed that the students who were included in the study did not present autonomous behaviors.

Similarly, Güneş (2018) investigated the autonomy levels of the students taught English as a foreign language through asynchronous distance education. As stated in Güneş (2018), the distance education process was implemented in the following way at the related public university in Turkey. Except for the students who were studying in English-related faculties or Medicine, Dentistry and Law faculties and the ones who are taught vocational English, all of the freshmen were taught English through distance education at the related university. Before the academic year started, the lecturers had determined the subjects of grammar-based curriculum for an academic term (fifteen weeks). They prepared power point presentations and exercises for each week. A video recording related to the grammatical subject of each week was prepared. While watching the videos, the students were able to see both the lecturer and the power point presentation on the screen. The videos and quizzes (with answer key) prepared for a term were uploaded to an online system at once. At the beginning of the academic term, the lecturers went to the faculties which they had been appointed to and had a face-to-face meeting with the students. The lecturers gave information about how the students could use the online system to follow the classes and gave their contact details in case the students might need assistance. Even though English was an obligatory class for those students; they did not have to participate in the online classes on a weekly basis. On the other hand, they had to take mid-term and final exams to be able to pass the class in a face to face environment. During the term, the students were not given many assignments; they took the responsibility to participate in distance education process and pass the exams. The lecturers provided assistance when needed, but they were not actively involved in teaching process. As a result of Güneş (2018), a low learner autonomy level was revealed for the participants who were taught English through asynchronous distance education.

Concordantly, Abdelrazek (2018) studied the perceptions of the university students about their instructors' roles in terms of fostering learner autonomy. 30 participants included in the study were learning English as a foreign language. As a result of analyzing qualitative data obtained from the interviews, it was revealed that most of the participants thought that the instructors/teachers should train or guide the students on the way of being autonomous learners.

METHODOLOGY

Setting: This study was conducted at a public university which has four different campuses in Georgia, USA. Having different campuses is one of the reasons lying behind being popular in terms of distance education. It also offers online certificate programs and distance education is implemented in an asynchronous way. The students of 4 different instructors were involved in the study. The instructors were asked to reply an online survey including questions about their ways of distance teaching. When the features of current asynchronous distance education context and those of the instructors are considered, following aspects were revealed as the results of survey implemented to the instructors:

- The instructors' years of experience in terms of teaching at a distance were between 4 and 15 years.
- The class size was between 9 and 25 students.
- The frequency of instructor-involvement was seen as daily or at least two or three times in a week.
- All four instructors provided students with opportunities for active participation on at least a weekly basis.
- For teaching a usual unit, the instructors began with presenting the objectives and overview of the unit. The students were provided with the course materials such as books, book chapters/parts, videos, links to videos and presentations. The students were also required to submit assignments or attend distance discussion forums on a weekly basis and the instructors sometimes set short deadlines for the assignments in order to keep students on track. Additionally, for the assignments, the students were provided with feedback on the discussion board or through announcements and class e-mails.
- Formative assessment was used by all of the instructors included in the current study. The grades were determined by means of quizzes, discussion posts, writing and research assignments.

Participants: Totally 40 students taking online English Composition class were included in the study. They were taking English Composition as a core class. 61% of them were female and 39% of them were male.

Instrument: The survey developed by Güneş (2018) was used in order to collect data for the autonomy levels of the students. There were two parts in the survey. The first part included demographic questions in order to indicate the profile of the participants. In the second part, there were 12 items related to the learner autonomy.

Procedure: Before collecting data from the students, required permissions and approval for the research were obtained from Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the related university. After the methods used by the instructors while teaching English Composition at a distance were clarified by applying an online survey, the autonomy survey was implemented to the students in an online manner as they were taught totally online.

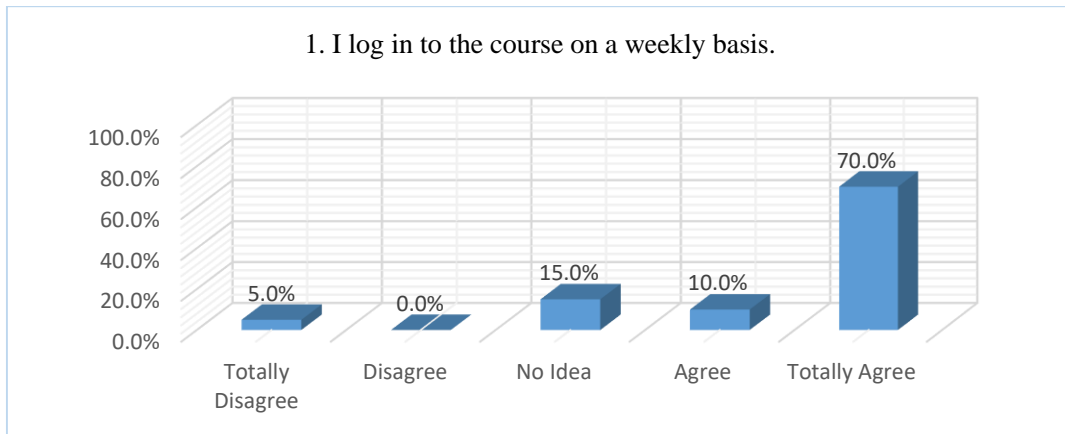
DATA ANALYSIS

The data derived from the surveys were analyzed statistically by using Jamovi (Version 1.0.1). The overall results for the autonomy levels of the participants are presented in Table 1 given below. It is seen that the mean autonomy score is 43, 20 out of 60. Additionally, as the Cronbach’s Alpha value (0,815) revealed, the instrument used for collecting data is a highly reliable one.

Table 1. Autonomy level of the students participated in the current study

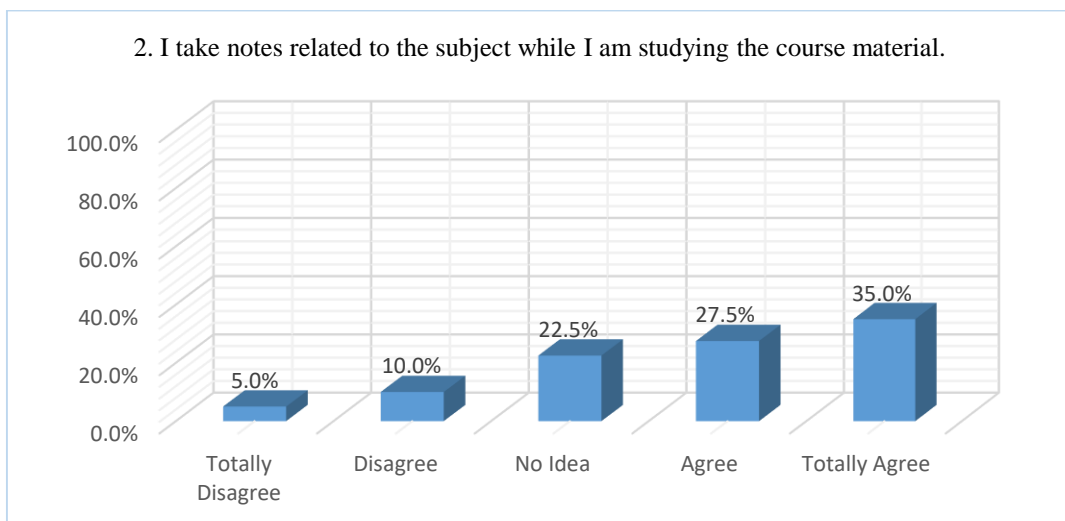
	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Learner autonomy level	12	60	43,20	8,73	0,815

As for the participants’ replies, following results are revealed. The results are presented by means of a graph for each item stated in the survey.



Graph 1. Results for Item 1 stated in the survey.

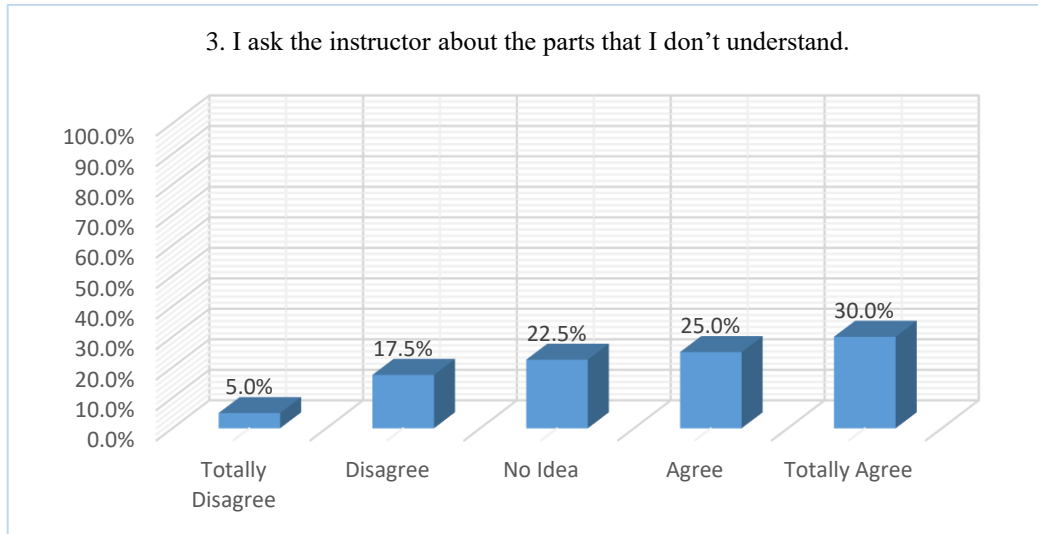
As seen in Graph 1, the students were asked whether they logged in to the online course on a weekly basis. When their answers for ‘Agree’ and ‘Totally agree’ are considered together, it is seen that 80 % of the students log in to the course regularly. Only 5% of the participants indicated a negative reply for this item.



Graph 2. Results for Item 2 stated in the survey.

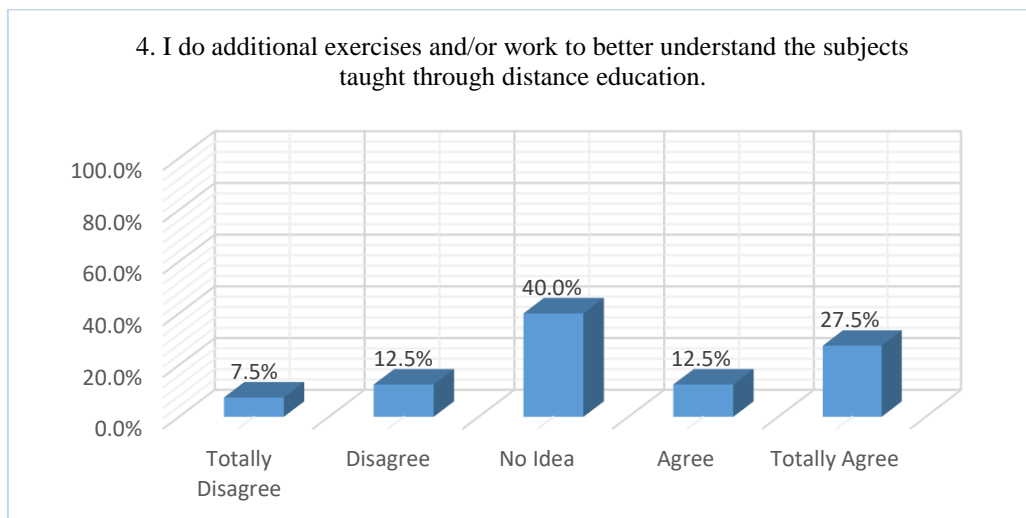
The second item of the survey was about whether the students took notes related to the subject while studying online course materials. The results revealed that 62, 5 % of the participants agree with this item (see Graph 2).

From far in the past, note-taking has been favored by the students as it is believed to effect the academic success in a positive way in terms of concentration, revision and recall, (Hartley & Marshall, 1974). It is also seen as a strategy used by autonomous learners (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2011).



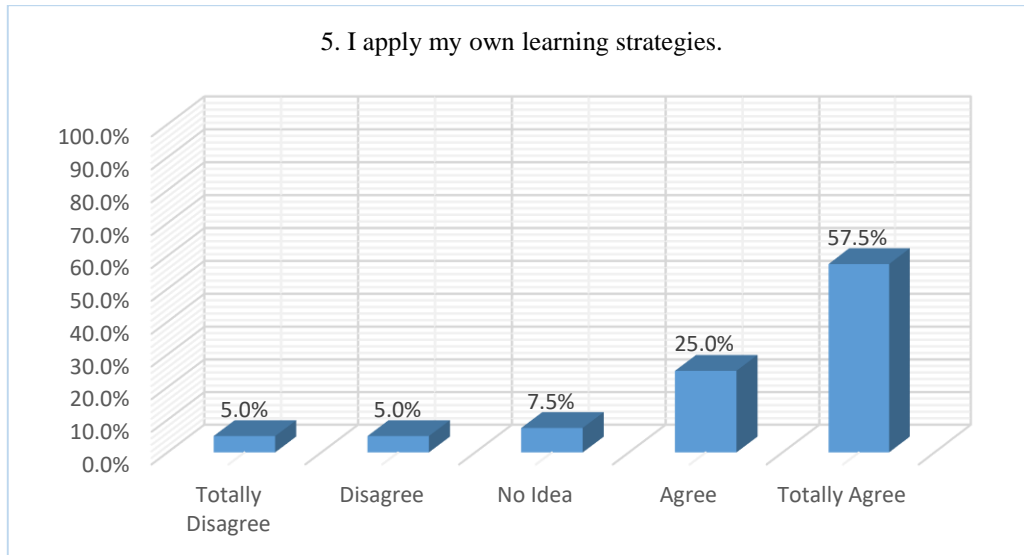
Graph 3. Results for Item 3 stated in the survey.

Having interaction with the instructor or asking the instructor while having a problem in terms of understanding what is taught shows that the students try to run their learning process effectively. These results reveal that more than half of the participants (55%) ask the instructor for support if they do not understand the subject (see Graph 3). According to the results of a research study (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2011), 65% of the students ask questions to get information that they need as a strategy for an effective learning process.



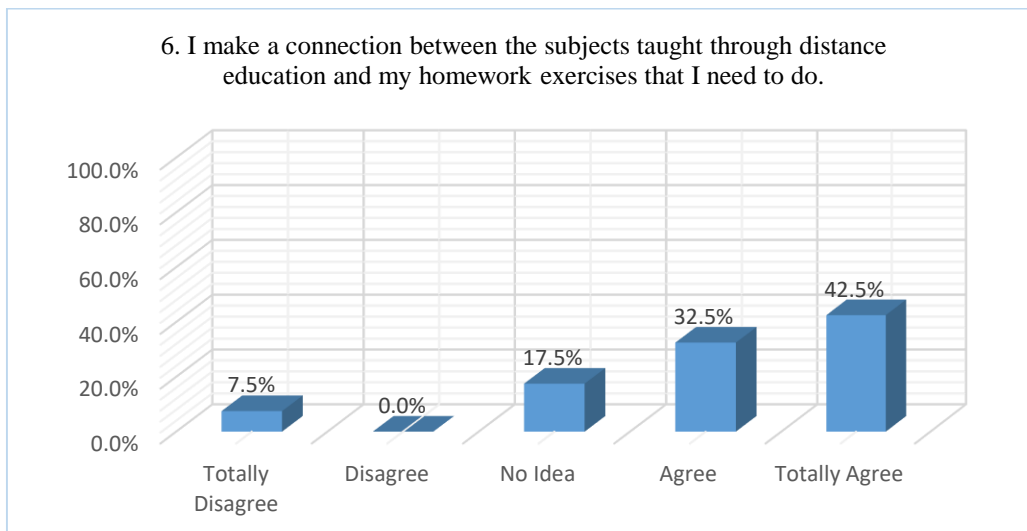
Graph 4. Results for Item 4 stated in the survey.

As shown in Graph 4, with this item, the students were asked whether they do additional exercises in terms of the subjects taught through distance education or not. The results revealed that for a better understanding, 40% of the students do exercises in addition to the homework or exercises given by the instructor. 20% of them do not do additional exercises.



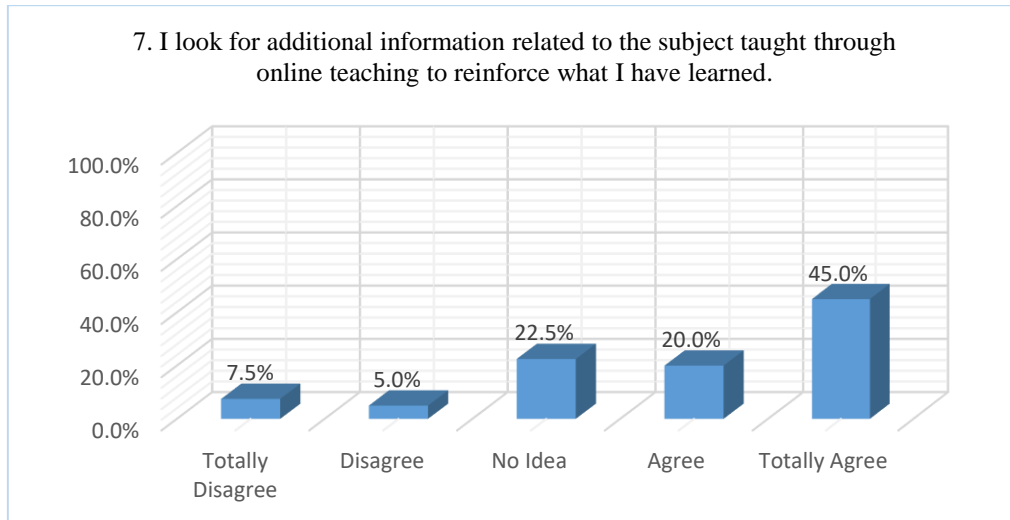
Graph 5. Results for Item 5 stated in the survey.

Graph 5 reveals the percentages of the students who apply their own learning strategies during the distance education process. According to the results, most of the students (82, 5%) apply their own learning strategies; because they are taught in an asynchronous way and they take the responsibility of their learning process with the guidance of the instructor. So, they need to find the best and most effective way for their learning. The results show that students included in the current study are aware of this and apply their learning strategies during asynchronous distance education.



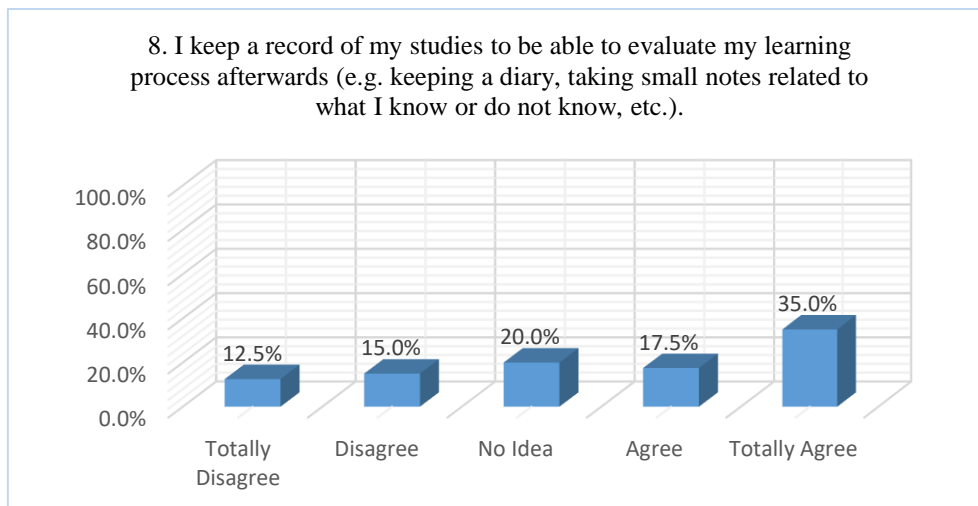
Graph 6. Results for Item 6 stated in the survey.

It is revealed by means of the results that 75 % of the students make connection between the subjects taught through distance education and their homework exercises; this means, they apply what is taught by the instructor to their own part of learning process and the rate of the participants who applied this strategy is high enough to mention about learner autonomy (see Graph 6).



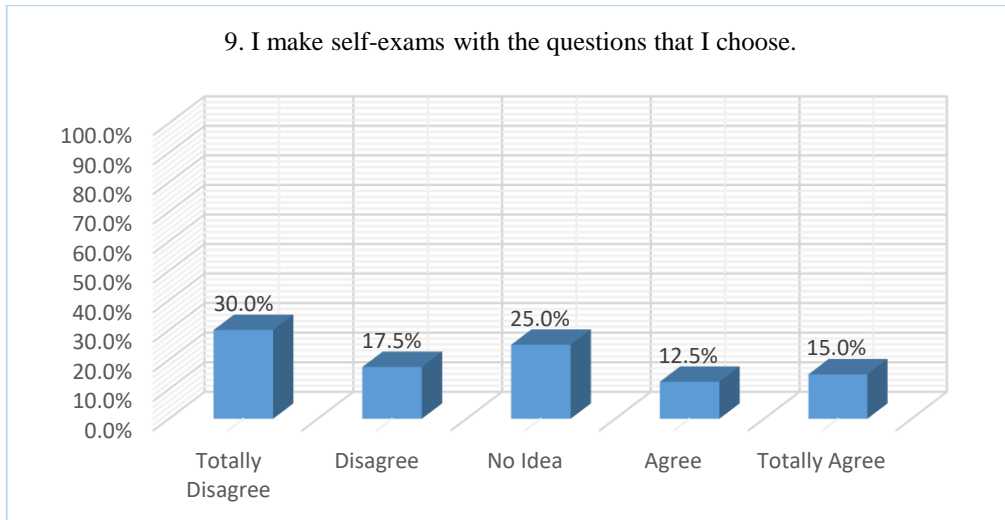
Graph 7. Results for Item 7 stated in the survey.

As stated in Graph 7, the students were also asked whether they look for additional information about what is taught through distance education to reinforce their learning. The results show that 65% of the students agree with this item. That is to say, they try to support their own learning in addition to what is taught by the instructor. The high ratio of the students who agree with this item may result from students' wish to contribute to their personal development in addition to reinforcing what they have learnt.



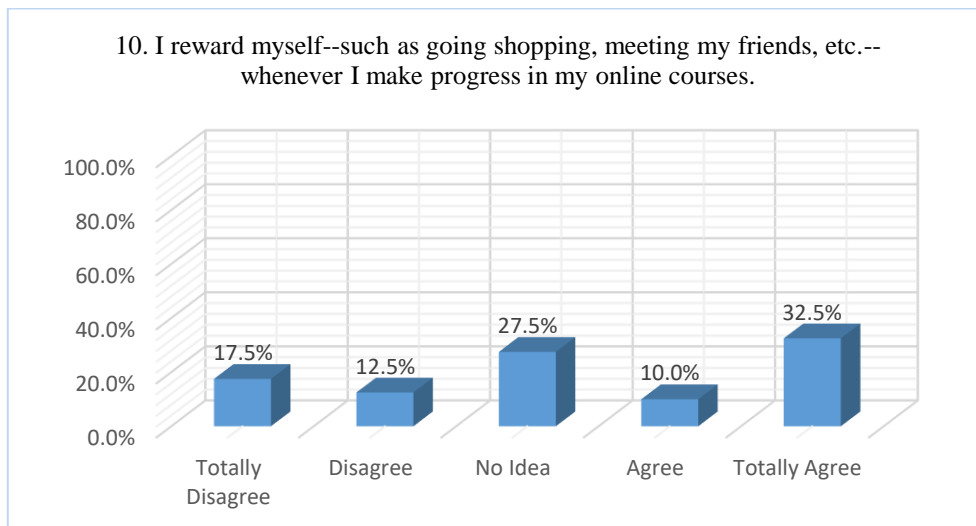
Graph 8. Results for Item 8 stated in the survey.

This item asking whether the students keep a record of their own studies in order to evaluate their distance learning process also aims to reveal whether the students have an effort to evaluate their distance learning process with its positive and negative sides. More than half of the students (52, 5%) included in the current study indicated a positive reply for this item (see Graph 8).



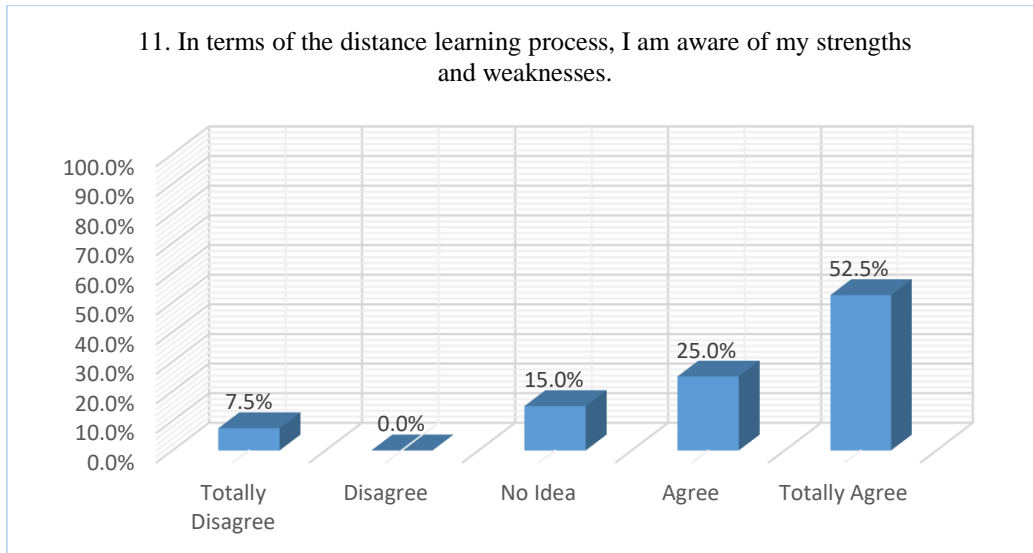
Graph 9. Results for Item 9 stated in the survey.

This item aims to clarify whether the students make self-exams with the questions that they choose in order to assess what they have learnt through distance education. A small rate of the students (27, 5%) agree and 47, 5% of the students do not agree with this item (see Graph 9).



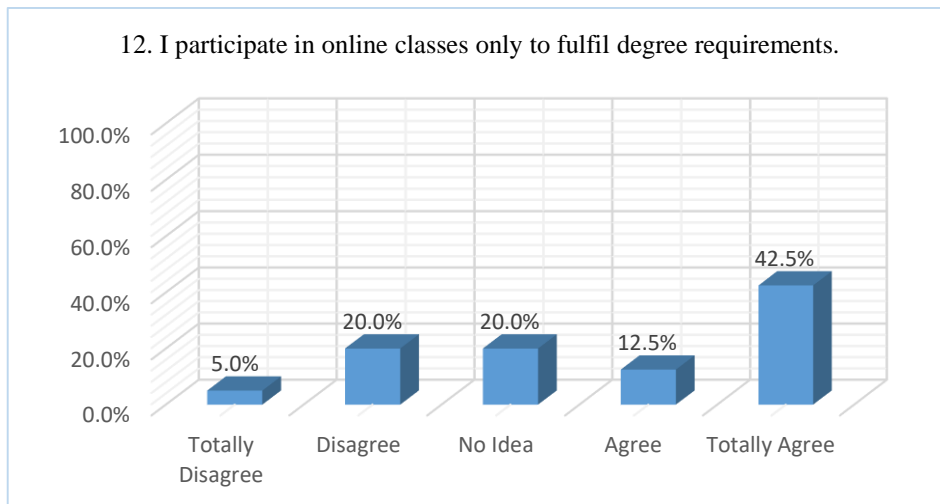
Graph 10. Results for Item 10 stated in the survey.

Motivation and autonomy are known to be correlated. Even if there are different opinions about the direction of the relationship between motivation and learner autonomy, it can be said that the more motivated a learner is, the more autonomous s/he will be or vice versa (Güneş & Alagözlü, 2020). Each learner motivates himself/herself in a different way. This item aims to clarify whether the students reward their progress in terms of what is taught through distance education. This may be a kind of motivating themselves in their learning process. 42, 5 % of the students agree and 30 % of them disagree with this item (see Graph 10).



Graph 11. Results for Item 11 stated in the survey.

This item aims to clarify whether the students are aware of their strengths and weaknesses in terms of their distance learning process; being aware of weaknesses and strengths in a learning process may be helpful for the learners to evaluate their learning. Additionally, this awareness may direct students to get rid of the deficiencies that they have in terms of their learning. As seen in Graph 11, 77, 5 % of the students participated in the current study agree with this item.



Graph 12. Results for Item 12 stated in the survey.

This item was placed in the survey in order to see whether passing the class or fulfilling the degree requirements was only reason of attending the classes regularly or the students attend the classes also for personal development. As shown in Graph 12, for 25% of the participants, fulfilling the degree requirements was not the only reason.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

As stated previously, this study aims to reveal the learner autonomy level of the students taking English Composition as a core class at a public university in Georgia, USA. The statistical results revealed the mean score for the autonomy level of the participants as 43, 20 out of 60. It can be stated that most of the participants included in the current study presented autonomous behaviors in an asynchronous distance education environment. On the other hand, previous research studies that focused on students' autonomy levels in distance education environments clarified low autonomy levels for the students taught at a distance (Altunay, 2013; Güneş, 2018).

Altunay (2013) revealed that the students enrolled in Turkish Open Education system did not present autonomous behaviors while taking English classes through distance education. Similarly, according to the results of Güneş (2018), the mean learner autonomy score for the students who were taught English through asynchronous distance education was found as 22,89 out of 70 which refers to a low learner autonomy level. When the context and the

way of distance education are considered for Güneş (2018), it is seen that the instructor-involvement and interaction among the students and between instructor and students were at the minimum level. As stated in Güneş (2018), the low autonomy level might have resulted from the inadequate involvement of the instructors into the teaching process.

As for the result of the current study, a satisfactory autonomy level was clarified for the students who were taught English Composition class at a distance through frequent instructor-involvement. Both the result of this study and previous studies may be supported by the result of Fotiadou et al. (2017) who revealed a positive and significant correlation between learner autonomy and both student-student and lecturer-students interaction. Thus, the satisfactory autonomy level of the students in the current distance education context which was implemented through frequent instructor-involvement leading interaction among the students and between lecturer and students reveals the importance of instructor-involvement. Similarly, according to the results of Abdelrazek (2018), two-third of the participants included in his study think that learners need instructors' guidance or training to gain learner autonomy.

Another attention-grabbing feature for the current context is the formative assessment implemented by the instructors. The formative assessment may be helpful in terms of keeping students connection with the learning environment and materials (Güneş, 2018). Furthermore, by means of assessment tools implemented periodically, the students may be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and run their learning process accordingly.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The importance of learner autonomy is a nonignorable fact in an educational process; but it gains more importance in a distance education environment as the learners need to manage their own learning process. The guidance of the instructors have great importance for directing students on the way of being autonomous learners. So, the instructors should provide students with the guidance and the opportunities of active participation into the educational process. They should also take adequate time for virtual classes and keep students on track. It should always be considered that distance education is not leaving students alone after providing them with the course materials.

Furthermore, increasing learners' motivation may foster their autonomy as well. To present a content in accordance with the learners' needs, levels and background may be helpful in terms of increasing their motivation which may lead to a better autonomy level. Additionally, assessing students' achievement with a single instrument may decrease students' willingness to participate in the learning environment. Formative assessment may work to keep the connection between learners and learning environment; it also reveals students' strengths and weaknesses in the learning process. As Keller (2000) states students may wish to know what they have achieved; so receiving feedback, a fair grade or a promotion may help them feel the sense of achievement and all these may be possible with the adequate instructor-involvement.

To sum up, the research studies reveal different results in terms of different aspects that are effective in a distance education process. Even if there are many effective factors affecting the quality of distance education, the instructors should be aware of the importance of their roles and run the teaching process accordingly. In any case, instructors' involvement and correct guidance will open new doors for the students to be autonomous learners.

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