

EFL Proficiency in Language Learning and Learner Autonomy Perceptions of Turkish Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the relationships of Turkish-English Language Teaching (ELT) learners' perceptions of learner autonomy with ELT learner's proficiency level in language learning. Particularly, the study aimed at investigating to what extent ELT learners' autonomy perceptions are affected by proficiency level of learners. Participants of the current study were 326 learners in 10 different classes aging from 18 to 23 with different levels varying from beginner, elementary, intermediate, high intermediate to advanced. The proficiency level of the learners is determined by specific exam named ALCPT(American Language Placement Test) which is administered to learners in each term and of which cronbacha alpha level is ,98. The current study was implemented in a public institution offering four-year university education setting where the learners are academically educated on four major engineering departments, i.e. aeronautical, electronics, industrial, and computer. Data from the questionnaire was analyzed with the help of SPSS 22 by applying descriptive statistic and One-Way ANAVO statistic. Data indicated that there isn't a significant difference between learner autonomy perceptions of learners and their proficiency levels. However, data indicated that there are significant differences in the constructs of technical perspectives on learner autonomy, benefits of learner autonomy to language learning, the role of the teacher in promoting autonomy and proficiency and learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, proficiency, perception

1. Introduction

Traditionally, learners were seen as passive learners who expected everything from their traditional teachers. Learning environment was only limited to classrooms. No matter what teachers did, an efficient and effective way of teaching and learning wasn't fulfilled because of lack of learner's involvement and responsibility for their own learning (Dam, 2009).

With the new concepts, these traditional learners have been replaced by new type of learners. They have begun to engage in classroom activities more actively than before by talking, discussing, writing, playing, asking questions and giving feedback to their peers (Dam,2012). The most important aspect of this new type of learning is that learners have started to learn by doing, experiencing, involving, and engaging. (Nunan, 1996). The new concept in which learners are actively involved in the learning process and take charge of their own learning is called as "learner autonomy (Benson, 2009). Learner autonomy has changed the role of learners and teachers greatly (Smith, 2008).Thus, the promotion of learner autonomy has become one of the first dimensions in language learning (Little, 2007). There are various definitions of autonomy in language learning. Holec (1981) defines the term as "taking charge of one's own language learning" (p. 3) asserting that "learner autonomy" is an ability of being responsible for learning, participating in all decision-making related to learning, finding overall objectives of learning process, having a role in the contents and progressions, choosing right methods and techniques which take him to his overall objectives. Holec (1981) also stated that "autonomy is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning" (p. 3).

Benson (2008) suggests that there is a close theoretical connection between the nature of language learning and the development of learner autonomy. Nature of language learning requires learners to be autonomous. Language is only acquired with learners' engaging in the learning process. Language learning has both social and individual dimension. It requires that each learner develop himself and interact with other learners (Lam, 2003). Despite all these various research studies, there are still points unknown or should be supported (Benson, 2008). Not enough qualitative or quantitative research has been conducted on learner autonomy in second/foreign language learning to understand every dimension of learner autonomy such as proficiency and

learner autonomy relationship.

The study examined the learners' perceptions of learner autonomy depending on the proficiency level of learners. The following are the research questions raised for this study:

1. How do Turkish EFL learners perceive learner autonomy?
2. Are there any differences in learner autonomy perceptions of learner from different proficiency level?
3. Are there any differences in learner autonomy perceptions of learner from different proficiency level toward constructs of learner autonomy?

This study will contribute to the field in different aspects. First, not many studies were aimed at determining the learner autonomy perceptions depending on the proficiency level of learners. Second, conducting a research on learner autonomy within a context in which learners have intensive schedule during the week because of their academics and sport education makes this study significant for the literature since this causes them not to have abundant free time. This provides unique feature of this study. Learner autonomy is such a concept that it changes in different context depending on the culture and other factors (Little, 2004). The context and culture of the schools require carrying out this study.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Nature of the present study requires using quantitative techniques. In this research, the researchers used a survey method. Learners were divided into five proficiency levels and learner autonomy questionnaire was administered to learners from five different proficiency levels.

2.2 Setting and Participants

The target population for the study was university learners at a school in Istanbul, Turkey. In this four-year university, learners are enrolled to four major engineering departments, i.e. aeronautical, electronics, industrial, and computer. There is a hierarchy among the personnel and learners in their tasks and assignment. There is also a high respect for the management of the school. Learners graduate with a bachelor degree in engineering.

The number of the learners participating in the study is 326 ELT learners. The participants of study are male because of the unique feature of the school. Purposive sampling method was chosen for the study since the chosen learners were thought to be more appropriate for the purpose. For ethical considerations, all the participants are informed about the purpose of the study. All the participants from learners were between 18 and 23 years old. Learners are from five different proficiency levels. As mentioned before, the proficiency level of learners was determined by institutional exam called ALCPT. They are grouped as beginner, elementary, intermediate, and advanced depending on their score they get from ALCPT. The levels are decided as in follows:

who score between 0-29 are grouped as beginner level for learners,

who score between 30-49 are grouped as elementary ,

who score 50-69 are grouped into intermediate ,

who score between 70-85 are grouped into high intermediate level

who score between 85-100 are grouped into advanced level.

They graduated from different high schools: Anatolian high school, high school, and Anatolian teacher high school, military high school, science high school. Learners studied in four different grades.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Two types of data collection instruments were used in this study. These are ALCPT, and learner autonomy questionnaire (adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012).

2.3.1 American Language Course Placement Test

Learners' proficiency level was determined by an exam called American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT). The United States Ministry of Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLI ELC) Testing and Measurement Branch Staff prepares these tests. The purpose of the test is to assess proficiency in English in two receptive skills of the language: listening and reading; however, it is sometimes used as a placement test which is then entitled as the ALCPT standing for American Language Course Placement Test. But, the content and the format of the two tests are the same. Cronbacha alpha level of this test was found to be 0,98.

2.3.2 Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

The questionnaire developed by Simon Borg (2012) was adapted (Appendix A). Learner Autonomy Questionnaire was a self-reported Likert scale consisting of 37 items covering the following constructs (the numbers in brackets indicate the number of items that addressed each construct), with an evaluation scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. Technical perspectives on learner autonomy (4 items)
2. Psychological perspectives on learner autonomy (5 items)
3. Social perspectives on learner autonomy (5 items)
4. Political perspectives on learner autonomy (5 items)
5. The role of the teacher in learner autonomy (4 items)
6. The cultural universality of learner autonomy (2 items)
7. Age and learner autonomy (3 items)
8. Proficiency and learner autonomy (3 items)
9. Learner-centeredness and learner autonomy (3 items)
10. Benefits of learner autonomy to language learning (3 items)

The questionnaire was adapted and translated into Turkish for the present study. To assure the content validity of the survey, the translated version of the survey was evaluated by four colleagues. According to the feedback from those colleagues, some minor amendments were made to the translation to ensure that it would be understood without any problem. Then, ten learners were chosen randomly and the translated version the questionnaire was administered to these learners. Although there was no major problem with the questionnaire, definition of learner autonomy was given and verbal information about the origin of the term was added. At the beginning of filling in the questionnaire, learners and teachers are given brief verbal information about learner autonomy.

2.4 Validity and Reliability

For reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to examine the internal consistency of the instruments. The measure of Cronbach alpha level was 0,82 which may be accepted good level. Test of normality value is,200 according to Kolmogorov-Smirnova test and it is ,465 according to Shapiro-Wilk test. Test of Homogeneity of Variances was done by applying Levene Statistic and was found as ,316. In the adaptation of the scale to Turkish, the construct validity was investigated via factor analysis whereas internal consistency was tested via item analysis. In construct validity, all items in each construct were found to be in the same construct. None of the items were removed since the load of each item were above 0,45.

2.4 Data Analysis

The study utilized the data gathered by the questionnaire The Likert-type data from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS Version 22 employing descriptive statistic and one-way ANAVO. Learners' responses were numerically coded, recorded and analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistics.

For the research question 1, EFL learners perceptions of learner autonomy; descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviations are computed for all the learner questionnaire items. To analyze the findings , the chart in the following was used as appropriate to the literature.

Strongly disagree	1.00-1.80
Disagree	1.81-2.60
Neutral	2.61-3.40
Agree	3.41-4.20
Strongly Disagree	4.21-5.00

For the research question 2, One-way ANAVO statistic was employed to see whether there are differences in autonomy perceptions of learners depending on the proficiency level of the learners. Scheffe's tests for explanatory data analysis were conducted to determine which groups differed significantly from the others when alpha level was $p < 0.05$.

3. Findings

3.1 Research Question 1

All the responses for learners were compared and analyzed by computing frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. The findings of this research question were presented under the constructs of learner autonomy questionnaires.

Table 1: Comparison of Learners' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy by Category

Category	Number	Mean	of	SD	of	Min.	Max.
		Learners	Learners				
Age and Learner Autonomy	326	4,13		,58		2,00	5,00
Technical Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	326	4,21		,53		2,50	5,00
Social Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	326	4,21		,48		2,40	5,00
Political Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	326	4,32		,52		2,60	5,00
Benefits of Learner Autonomy to Language Learning	326	4,17		,59		2,33	5,00
The Role of the Teacher in Promoting Autonomy	326	3,54		,72		1,50	5,00
Proficiency And Learner Autonomy	326	3,20		,78		1,00	5,00
Psychological Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	326	4,48		,41		2,60	5,00
Cultural Universality of Learner Autonomy	326	3,87		,71		1,50	5,00
Learner –Centerednes and Learner Autonomy	326	3,52		,79		1,67	5,00
Overall	326	3,94		,30		3,00	4,70

According to table 1, it can be concluded that overall perception of the learners towards learner autonomy is favorable and they show a positive attitude towards learner autonomy. When constructs are analyzed, it is seen that attitudes of learners differ for different constructs. The only construct learners stayed neutral is proficiency and learner autonomy. The construct which learners showed positive attitudes and agreed are ordered depending on the average mean from lower to higher ones as Learner –Centerednes and Learner Autonomy, The Role of the Teacher in Promoting Autonomy, Cultural Universality of Learner Autonomy, Age and Learner Autonomy, Benefits of Learner Autonomy to Language Learning. When the constructs which learners showed more favorable attitudes and strongly agreed are ordered depending on the average mean from lower to higher ones, Technical Perspectives on Learner Autonomy, Social Perspectives on Learner Autonomy Political Perspectives on Learner Autonomy and Psychological Perspectives on Learner Autonomy are orders.

3.2 Research Question 2 and 3

Table 2: Learners' proficiency and their perceptions of learner autonomy for each construct.

Category	Beg.	Ele.	Int.	H.int	Adv.	Sum	Std.	Sig.
	(67)	(55)	(65)	(73)	(66)		Dev.	
Age and Learner Autonomy	4,05	4,05	4,18	4,12	4,23	4,13	,58	,325
Technical Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	4,10	4,08	4,21	4,31	4,34	4,21	,53	,010
Social Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	4,20	4,20	4,27	4,18	4,21	4,21	,48	,837
Political Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	4,23	4,24	4,40	4,37	4,37	4,32	,53	,198
Benefits of Learner Autonomy to Language Learning	4,04	4,02	4,17	4,24	4,32	4,17	,59	,020
The Role of the Teacher in Promoting Autonomy	3,69	3,36	3,33	3,66	3,64	3,54	,72	,003
Proficiency And Learner Autonomy	3,41	3,44	3,37	3,15	2,69	3,20	,78	,000
Psychological Perspectives on Learner Autonomy	4,41	4,40	4,51	4,53	4,53	4,48	,41	,165
Cultural Universality of Learner Autonomy	3,37	3,78	3,88	3,47	4,02	3,87	,72	,226
Learner –Centerednes and Learner Autonomy	3,75	3,87	3,97	3,90	3,98	3,94	,30	,006
Overall Proficiency	3,93	3,94	4,03	3,99	4,03	4,01	,79	,087

According to table 2, it can be seen that depending on the proficiency level of the learners, there isn't a significant difference in the learner autonomy perception since the significant level is, 087 for overall autonomy questionnaires. However, when we look at the constructs of the questionnaires, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the following constructs:

Technical perspectives on learner autonomy

Benefits of learner autonomy to language learning

The role of the teacher in promoting autonomy

Proficiency and learner autonomy

Learner –Centeredness and Learner Autonomy

For the technical perspectives on learner autonomy, there is a significant mean gap among the learners from different proficiency levels. It is seen that more favorable learners are towards technical sides of learner autonomy as the proficiency level increases. It means out of class tasks are believed to promote learner autonomy more as the proficiency level increases.

For benefits of learner autonomy to language learning, there is a significant mean gap among the learners from different proficiency levels. As the level of proficiency increases, learners believe that autonomous learner learns a foreign language more efficiently or effectively. In other words, the more autonomous a person is, the more efficient language learner he is when we think about the nature of language learning. For the role of the teacher in promoting autonomy construct; beginner, high-intermediate and advanced learners of English believe teacher is more important in promoting autonomy compared to elementary and intermediate level of learners.

For proficiency and learner autonomy construct, there is a significant difference in the attitudes of learner toward proficiency and learner autonomy items. Since items were seeking a response to statements "It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is for beginners" or "Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners", it can be concluded that advanced learner showed more negative attitudes towards these statements. For the Learner –Centeredness and Learner Autonomy, there is a significant mean increase from beginner to advanced levels. Learners of different proficiency level agree that learner-centered classrooms are needed to develop learner autonomy.

4. Discussion

Although there isn't a significant difference in the overall attitudes towards learner autonomy depending on the proficiency level of learners, data from 5 proficiency levels showed significant differences in out of class activities, benefits of learner autonomy to language learning, the role of the teacher and proficiency level, learner autonomy relationship and learner centered classroom and learner autonomy relationship. Literature supports the finding of the study. For example, in a similar study, language proficiency was found to be not an influential factor in students' motivation and autonomy (Zarei&Zarei, 2015).

However, in some studies, there are significant differences among learners from different proficiency level. Zhang and Li (2004) found that proficiency level of learners significantly affects learner autonomy of learners. Dafei (2007) also concluded that there is a close relationship between the learners' proficiency and their learner autonomy.

Findings of Thanasoulas (2000) are contradicting what we found in our study as well. He found that proficiency level of the learners has one of the most important impacts on the autonomy of the learners. In another study, Sakai&Takagi(2009) found that learners in the lower proficiency level are more dependent compared to learners in higher proficiency level. As the last study, Valadi&Rashidi (2014) found that proficiency of the learner is one of the best predictors of learner autonomy.

5. Conclusions

In this study, it is found that learners showed a positive attitude towards learner autonomy. Although there isn't a significant difference in the overall perceptions of learners depending on the proficiency level they have, there are significant differences in the four constructs of learner autonomy namely technical perspectives on learner autonomy, benefits of learner autonomy to language learning, the role of the teacher in promoting autonomy and proficiency and learner autonomy.

This study is carried out in a public institution offering four-year university education setting where the learners are academically educated on four major engineering departments, i.e. aeronautical, electronics, industrial, and computer, therefore results may not be generalized to the contexts in which university level education is offered.

For further studies, studies may be carried out how to develop learner autonomy. Teachers and learners may be offered a necessary training program to foster learner autonomy, results of developing learner autonomy may be investigated. Usage of technology in fostering learner autonomy may be a good area to study for further research.

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