

AN EVALUATION OF A SELF-ACCESS CENTRE THROUGH EFL LEARNERS' EYES

By

CEM BALCIKANLI

Associate Professor, Department of ELT, Gazi University, Turkey.

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy has become a central concern in the recent history of language learning. Self-Access Centres (SACs) play a critical role in fostering learner autonomy specifically in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. As SACs aim at enabling learning to occur independent of teaching, in these centres, language learners are given more opportunities to control their own learning and gain learning experiences and learning outcomes through collaborative endeavours. This study reports an evaluation of a SAC in the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Ankara, Turkey, where it presents a challenging task to set up a SAC at a state university due to low budget provided to state universities. Using Gardner and Miller's (1999) and Morrison's (2008) frameworks, the study examines the effectiveness of a SAC in terms of learners' attitudes, behaviours, and experiences. Data derived from the interviews conducted with more than 200 EFL learners basically reveal the following points: First, the SAC provides opportunities specifically for learning outside the classrooms. Second, it offers possibilities for learners to reflect on their own learning processes, which is a key to the use of learner strategies. Third, it encourages learners to develop their autonomous skills through the exercise of out-of-class learning because in a collaborative setting, students interact with others in the Vygotskian sense. More importantly, students mention collaborative aspects of language learning, which has been given particular weight in recent years. In spite of the above mentioned findings, there is recognition of the practical problems of a SAC.

Keywords: Self-Access Centres, Autonomy, EFL Learners.

INTRODUCTION

Through a focus on learner reflection and taking responsibility for one's own learning processes, learner autonomy has become a central matter of concern in the recent history of language teaching. Ensuing Holec's report (1981) to the Council of Europe, researchers in the field of language learning/teaching have become more interested in looking at different dimensions of the concept. With the increasing attention given to the role of students in their learning process, there is no doubt that research has significantly contributed to the development of learner autonomy in language education, thereby, producing more autonomous learners who aim to "have the ability to take charge of their own learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). It, then, becomes clearer that when learners become more

autonomous, they are more likely to be willing to work independently and to pursue their own learning goals. In other words, learners may take responsibility for their own learning; planning their learning process, setting goals, selecting necessary methods and techniques, and assessing their own progress.

The increased interest in the establishment of Self-Access Centres (SACs) for the development of autonomy has led to a number of studies that have assessed their functions and contributions to learner autonomy (Yamaguchi, 2011; Cotterall & Reinders, 2001; Croker & Ashurova, 2012). SACs play a key role in developing students' autonomy through learning goals set by students. Palfreyman (2001, p. 12xx) states that SACs are different from the classroom environment in that "[...] the self-access's separation from

the rest of the institution seems to afford it some freedom to present to students an alternative rationality of learner independence [...].” In addition, it is presumed to be believed that SACs can offer a wider and more flexible range of opportunities for students to study foreign languages outside the classroom than those offered in most classrooms. SACs also give a lot of possibilities for students to act as active participants in their learning with peers, who tend to have shared learning goals. In such an environment, where students are expected to expand the boundaries of the classroom walls, they can connect their own learning with places and spaces outside the physical world of the classroom. In line with the social constructivist approach, collaboration and interaction with students tend to offer the ownership of the information they receive, and organize it in individual acts of cognitive processing, for the collaborative dimension of language learning has received growing attention in diverse learning environments. SACs play a critical role in fostering learner autonomy, specifically in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. As SACs aim at enabling learning to occur independent of teaching, in these centres, language learners are given more opportunities to control their learning. Thus, effective use of SACs is of great significance in the development of autonomy, for learners have the liberty of being presented a rationality of learner independence through their reflections in complement to more traditionally accepted modes of language learning and teaching.

This study reports an evaluation of a self-access centre in the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Ankara. It investigates the effectiveness of a SAC in terms of learners' attitudes, behaviours, and experiences. The goals of the research are to evaluate whether (1) the SAC facilitates learning, (2) appropriate learning practices occur in the SAC, (3) the SAC encourages learners to change their approaches to learning, (4) learners value the SAC, (5) the SAC develops autonomy in learners and (6) the SAC plays an important role in enhancing classroom learning (Gardner & Miller, 1999).

1. Literature Review

To start with a better understanding of the relationship

between learner autonomy and self-access centre, it is best to give a clear definition of the term “self-access”. Nonetheless, there is not much consensus on the constituting components of the centre, thereby creating chaos in defining the term properly. According to Cotterall and Reinders, (2001, p.2), a self-access centre consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities, and support), usually located in one place and is designed to accommodate learners of different levels, goals, styles, and interests. This definition accounts for reasons why SACs are established. In a similar vein, Benson, (2013, p.128) defines a self-access centre as “a purpose-designed facility in which learning resources are made directly available to learners”. One of the major reasons for setting the centres is to cater to learners' needs and provide as many possibilities as possible for learners to study English at their own pace. Accordingly, in line with the importance of developing learner autonomy in language education, universities around the globe have greatly focused on the establishment of SACs for their language learners. These centres were established to provide opportunities for self-directed learning through rich sources of second language materials (cf. Riley & Zoppis, 1985).

Increasing attention has been given to the relationship between self-access centre and the development of autonomy. Many institutions in the last twenty years have established language learning resources and self-access centres in which learners can work independently in order to foster out of class learning. Respectively, numerous studies (cf. Klassen, Detaramani, Lui, Patri, & Wu, 1998; Malcolm, 2004; Morrison, 2005) have looked at different dimensions of autonomy in relation to self-access centres across the globe. In making this connection even more discernible, Gardner and Miller (1999) focus on how self-access centres could succeed in providing infrastructure for the development of autonomous learning capacities by presenting a space that lets learners make use of the opportunities to interact with the learning environment in unique ways. More importantly, as it is immensely stressed, this environment is based on students' learning needs, which, in turn, will shape the learning process more effectively. More specifically, SACs provide an efficient and effective

alternative or complement to more traditionally accepted modes of language learning and teaching. Smith (2008) argues that learners tend to display more autonomous tendencies when they are given the power and right to learn for themselves, which is a key point to the use of self-access centres, for these centres are believed to create a learning environment with a rich collection of resources, such as materials, computers, activities, advisory support, and monitoring progress. Likewise, Benson and Huang, (2008) accentuate that autonomy is based on such concepts as independent learning, self-direction, and self-regulation. Cotterall and Reinders, (2001) strongly believe that the manner in which self-access might contribute to the development of autonomy can present itself in several ways. First, learners are encouraged to set their own goals in agreement with their needs and interests by identifying their learning styles and strategies. Second, learners are given the possibility to manage their own learning processes. Third, self-access might serve as a bridge to the teacher-centred learning situation and the real world in which languages are used to communicate. Finally, these centres are highly believed to contribute to learners' autonomy.

A great deal of research on self-access centres in the field of learner autonomy has been carried out. Most scholars in the field assume that self-access centres offer great potential for students to exercise their autonomy. Klassen, et al. (1998) evaluated an independent language learning programme for part-time university students in Hong Kong. Employing an experimental research design, they made the observation that those studying in the self-access mode made more significant improvements in reading, while more significant improvement in writing was seen by students in the classroom mode. All in all, it was decided that students found the self-access mode of learning useful and motivating, thereby increasing their confidence in learning English. Cotterall and Reinders, (2001) analysed learners' perceptions and practice in self-access language learning with a specific focus on the complement to classroom-based learning. The study obtained five important results: positive attitudes to self-access language learning, relationship between level of

proficiency and use of language learning centre, links with classroom learning, out of class little use of English and certain obstacles, such as the lack of materials and lack of time expressed by students. In her study, Malcolm (2004) tried to seek an answer to the question of why learners should contribute to the self-access centre. Giving enough details about the Arab context where the study was conducted, the author summarised students' contributions (in form of a language learning worksheet or other English enhancing activity) to the self-access centre. It was concluded that learner involvement in the SACs was quite beneficial in that it aimed at increasing students' personal investment in developing SAC as a dynamic entity to serve their particular language learning needs. Ortiz (2006) investigated whether the use of a self-access centre contributes to students' autonomy at a private university in Colombia. After looking at the type of strategies used by SAC's users, Ortiz researched if SAC was enhancing autonomy. The results showed that students used indirect strategies, which might show some autonomy since these strategies were related to the management of our own language learning. The results also demonstrated that students needed a small amount of counselling with both the language and technology. Barrs (2010) looked at the factors that encouraged high levels of student participation in a self-access centre in Japan. The students reported that they mostly used this centre to immerse themselves in English speaking situations to get more exposure in English and do real life activities they would do outside the classroom. Yamaguchi (2011) looked at an analysis of narratives of a student staff member who works at a self-access learning centre in Japan. Focusing on the concept of agency in the study, Yamaguchi scrutinised the communities of practice in relation to the development of learner autonomy. It was concluded that learner involvement in self-access centres was a crucial point in providing opportunities to activate both agency and autonomy. Croker and Ashurova (2012) examined Japanese students' experiences in a Self-Access Language Centre (SALC) by using the strategies they call "push-pull" and "materials-light, people-focused". The activities they designed, they claim, could be done with few to no

materials, emphasising interaction with people rather than materials. The results displayed that this strategy served as a bridge between language classroom and a SALC. Hughes, Krug, and Vye (2012) set out to examine why students called on SACs and what kind of things they mostly preferred doing when they were there. The researchers explored factors that encouraged students to make use of the centre on a regular basis. The results simply stated that the most frequently responded reason was to improve individual language skills as well as to socialize and network. In relation to all the studies cited above, Morrison (2008) discussed the role of the self-access centre played in language learning and teaching process. The study suggested that SACs brought together language learning and independent learning, which enabled the learner to improve both linguistic proficiency and independent learning skills, provided the necessary resources and finally offered learner support.

2. Self-Access Centres in Turkey

It was 1984 when the first foundation university was founded in Turkey. According to Higher Education Law Number 2547, foundations are allowed to establish universities that must be accredited periodically. The Council of Higher Education (YOK) supervises and regulates all foundation universities. It is possible for a foundation university to receive public funds if it meets certain criteria. In Turkey, as of March 2017, there are 183 universities, 118 of which are state universities, 57 of which are foundation universities, and 8 of which are foundation vocational colleges. English, being an international language, plays a key role in most of these universities. In order for their students to be proficient enough to follow the courses in their departments, most state and all foundation universities have one-year English language programs for those who do not have the required level of English. This one-year English language program is mostly carried out in the preparatory schools of universities. Depending on the students' proficiency levels, these schools offer 20, 25, or 30 hours of English instruction per week. Since it is an extensive language program, most foundation universities and some state universities in Turkey have recently set up self-access centres.

As far as foundation universities are concerned, it is not very

difficult to establish a centre, for they have enough resources through funding to purchase materials, including DVDs, books, online resources, computers, and earphones. These universities give priority to the establishment of such centres since the managers of the language learning programs understand that these centres contribute greatly to the students' language skills. When it comes to the state universities, it is not an easy task to do so for financial reasons. Even though the state universities receive funding from the Ministry of Finance, setting up a self-access centre might not be an easy thing due to limited financial support. As of March 2017, there are a handful of established self-access centres in Turkish state universities. İskenderoglu (1992) examined Turkish university students' educational and social background and their attitude towards self-directed learning and attendance at self-access centres, which is the first research known of to look at the centres. This study was conducted at Bilkent University, the first foundation university ever to be established in Turkey in 1984. As can be easily seen above, self-access centres are not a widespread occurrence at Turkish universities, even though an increasing attention is being given to studies on learner autonomy. The current study evaluates a self-access centre at a state university by specifically looking at the effectiveness of a SAC in terms of learners' attitudes, behaviours, and experiences.

3. The Context

The research was carried out during a 16-week intensive English course in the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Ankara, Turkey, which lasted from September 15, 2015 to January 9, 2016. The School of Foreign Languages set up a self-access centre on January 15, 2013. The location for the study was located on the ground floor of one of the buildings of the School of Foreign Languages. The entire floor is taken up with resources for language learning. Basically, there are two facilities in the centre. First, there are two multimedia rooms, each of which has 20 computers equipped with a vast amount of entertaining and interactive language learning activities. Based on the theory of social constructivism, students also interact with others via these activities that help them facilitate interaction and collaboration in an informal

setting. In addition, students can make use of an abundance of quizzes that were given to the students at an earlier time. In the SAC, learners can use dictionaries, grammar books, worksheets, magazines or SAC guides, which sheets are containing practical information on how to locate or access resources or advice on learning strategies. Second, there is one study room in which there is a sufficiently large number of graded readers. Students are allowed to borrow the books for two weeks and also read and listen to the audio versions of the books. The multimedia room has 4 computers and 2 television monitors which broadcast satellite TV programmes as well as offers standard video playback facilities and 10 audio booths with recording facilities. This room can be booked by learners for private language practice, discussion or video viewing. The SAC's staff consists of two full-time employees. Additionally, there are four part-time student assistants who are responsible for the management of the centre. One employee works behind the counter issuing cassettes, videos and CD-ROMs, as well as advising learners on learning materials and leading them to appropriate resources and facilities. An on-line catalogue of the SAC resources is available, helping learners make choices about the materials they wish to work on. The SAC is open Monday through Friday from 1.30 pm until 5.15 pm. At the beginning of the semester, one of the staff members gives learners an introductory tour of the SAC that lasts approximately one hour.

The 189 study objects, who were studying in different departments of the university, visited the self-access centre during the first school term. Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of these students. As seen in the table, most of the language learners actually making use of the SAC are female students. Students from various departments go to the centre. However, medical students prefer it to the most. Most of the students participating prefer to use the SAC twice a week and they spend between one and three hours there. Since classes take place in the mornings during the week, all students go there in the afternoons to utilize DVDs, CDs, cassette players, Discmans, audio books, dictionaries, newspapers, periodicals, past mid-term examinations and quizzes, worksheets prepared by material developers and resources for teachers.

Item		Frequency
Gender	Female	122
	Male	67
Age	18	1
	19	102
	20	42
	21	44
Departments	Medicine	61
	Finance	54
	Engineering	40
	Architecture	20
Frequency of SAC use	Science	14
	Once a week	63
	Twice a week	90
Length of stay in the SAC	More than twice	36
	Less than 1 hour	60
	Approximately an hour	56
	1-3 hours	73

Table 1. Demographic Profiles of the Participants

4. Interviews

In the School of Foreign Languages, it was calculated that out of a total of 1,450 students, only three hundred visited the centre in the course of the sixteen week period. In accordance with Gardner and Miller's framework, (1999) on the evaluation of self-access centres, this study focused on six dimensions mentioned in the framework. Bearing these dimensions in mind, the researcher prepared six questions that were asked during the interviews. One hundred and eighty-nine students were interviewed with the help of these six questions. The interviews took place in groups with ten students who were given the questions prior. After the interviews were conducted, there were several steps that needed to be considered for the analysis of this qualitative data. These steps included transcription, coding and description of data, as well as data analysis (cf. Gass & Mackey, 2000). The qualitative data were analysed by the researcher. The constant comparative method, which was derived from the grounded theory (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967), was used for the analysis of qualitative data in this study. After looking at the students' extracts, the researcher focused on the statements most frequently repeated by the students. The following section is concerned with these reiterated statements.

5. Findings and Discussion

Interviews with almost two hundred EFL learners mainly show that the SAC provided opportunities for learning, offered possibilities for learners to think about their own learning processes and encouraged learners to develop their autonomous skills. However, the students also articulated some problems. In this section, those six questions the researcher asked the participating students during the interview will be discussed. As mentioned earlier, the first question relates to whether the SAC facilitates learning. Most of the interviewed learners (80%) strongly believe that the use of the SAC contributed immensely to their language proficiency. This was not only observed in students' comments, but is also evident in the grades they achieved. In other words, they made fewer mistakes in grammar, reading, listening, and vocabulary questions.

S1 (Interview): I can honestly say that I feel I have become better at English, especially listening and reading. This is mostly because I do a lot of extra activities outside the classroom in the centre. Another important aspect is that I interacted with other students in a more collaborative sense. There were students with more language developed skills. Therefore, I got support and help from them, which was a good point. Also, after regular/frequent use of the SAC, I realize that my grades are going up, which is pretty good I think.

As Morrison (2008) states in his study, SACs have a role in developing linguistic knowledge and proficiency and effective learning strategies, which are difficult to achieve in the classroom. On the other hand, it is well-known that those who attend self-access centres are believed to use metacognitive strategies more effectively than those who do not, which may be indicative of the relationship between the use of self-access centres and language achievement. As students mentioned during the interviews, it was concluded that the SAC helped them develop their English. The second question concerns whether or not appropriate learning practices occur in the SAC. In order to make the term 'appropriate' clear, it is wise to mention that the term 'appropriate' means that the activities the students are engaged in help them become autonomous, which is one of the aims of the SAC. More than half of the students

(55%) who spent their time doing various things in the centre note that they were involved in authentic activities (chatting online, watching movies, listening to music, etc.). However, a large majority of them (75%) simply mention that they go to the centres to increase those skills necessary to pass the preparatory examination. In Turkish higher education system, most state and foundation universities have preparatory schools which aim to increase their students' English language skills so that students can follow their courses in English in their own departments. Obviously, the ultimate motivation of the students in the preparatory schools in Turkey is to pass the prep school in order to proceed in their own departments. According to Cooker (2010), as the SAC is concerned with meeting individual needs of learners and working towards offering something close to personal curriculum, activities require an intense amount of one-on-one work with learners.

S2 (Interview): I do feel I am learning here since I do a lot of useful things for my English such as listening to music with lyrics, seeing movies. What is interesting here is that I find it quite enjoyable to study. In other words, I enjoy myself.

Thirdly, students are asked to evaluate whether the SAC encourages learners to change their approaches to learning. Approximately sixty-five per cent of participating students find that frequent use of the SAC is influential in helping them change their approach to learning English. In other words, students who regularly attended the SAC during the term are using different kinds of strategies (Husain, Javed & Munshi, 2015) to make the learning process easier and more meaningful. For instance, what most students mentioned was that they gave more attention to out-of-class learning, since they believed that language learning takes place outside the classroom as well as in the classroom (cf. Gardner & Miller 1999). In line with Aston's research (1993), students consider the use of the SAC quite useful especially in terms of language development.

S3 (Interview): I used to think that I can easily memorize 100 words a day. I am a successful student studying medicine. I thought I could study English like I study Chemistry and Physics. However, it is not the way it is. As I spend more time in the SAC, I come to realize that I have developed various

kinds of strategies that change the way I learn.

Yet another question directed towards the participating students was whether or not they value the SAC. Widely agreed upon, more than seven out of ten (72%) consider their use of the SAC quite invaluable in that it gives them possibilities to discover the place with great enthusiasm in order to make the best use of it for their language development. More than half of the participating students concur that they do not have many opportunities to study English outside of the classroom, which makes it clear that they really enjoyed spending a lot of valuable time there. As can be easily seen in the literature (Morrison, 2008; Barrs, 2010), emotional detachment to the SAC is of great significance, for it enables students to employ the SAC.

S4 (Interview): It is an excellent place for me to study English. I love studying there. I have sufficient amount of materials that I use. I feel there is something missing unless I go there once a week. I review what I learned in class, I do my homework and I do extra listening and reading exercises. I wish I could do speaking & writing more there.

As one of the most critical dimensions of the research, the researcher looked for any evidence showing that the use of the SAC contributes to students' autonomy. Interviews conducted with the students simply display that students' use of the SAC greatly affected their autonomy levels. To be precise, a substantial amount of students (75%) claim that they go to the SAC to study on their own, which can be regarded exercising autonomy in some ways. However, the posed question continues to remain unanswered. Do they go there because they are autonomous? Or do they go in order to become autonomous? Nonetheless, one can observe that students who go there to study English on their own develop reactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1997), because they go there to study regardless of whether or not the underlying initiative stems from inside the student or from the teacher. When typical university students in Turkey are considered, it is not surprising to see that they frequently try to find new and easy ways to learn English (Yumuk, 2002).

S5 (Interview): I do know that learning English is not as easy as it seems. Therefore, I have to study a lot outside the classroom. What's more, as being responsible for my own study, I do believe that I can make progress, I can check

my progress and evaluate whether I need to do something more or not.

In the final question of the interview, the participating students were asked to evaluate whether the SAC plays an important role in enhancing classroom learning. More specifically, the question aimed at revealing whether there was a relationship between the activities at the SAC and those in the classroom. More than seventy-three per cent of the students stated that there was a positive correlation between the activities. That is to say, the activities they did in the classroom were based on the principles of communicative language teaching. Similarly, what they did in the SAC was based on the understanding of communication in the target language. To exemplify, students in the SAC did not do any kind of drill exercises, or structural-based activities. On the contrary, there is a continuum in the flow of the activities done (Cooker, 2010; Rose & Elliott, 2010).

S6 (Interview): I feel that what we do in our classrooms supports what we should do in the SAC. There is a link between these two. I think we are still studying in the classroom when I study in the SAC.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study has provided a rich source of information on EFL students' evaluation of a self-access centre in a Turkish context. It focuses heavily on the six dimensions specified by Gardner and Miller, (1999). In this regard, the study aims to seek answers for the questions of whether or not the SAC facilitates learning, appropriate learning practices occur in the SAC, the SAC encourages learners to change their approaches to learning, learners value the SAC, the SAC develops autonomy in learners, and finally the SAC plays an important role in enhancing classroom learning.

One major finding of this study was that students who used the SAC for a year had a clear insight of the centre and took great advantage of it for their language development. In general, as can easily be seen in the representative excerpts from the interviews, most students participating believe that the use of the SAC facilitates their learning progress in some way. In terms of attitudes the students show towards the SAC, they find it quite useful for their language proficiency. Furthermore, the materials they use

in the centre seem to be a good fit for their studies. In most of the students' responses, they express various kinds of strategies they employ to study on their own in the centre, which can be regarded as a manifestation of the learning strategies through the SAC (Zarei & Baharestani, 2014). As for the emotional sides of the use of SACs, one can easily observe that they are emotionally attached to the centre because they really enjoy spending some time doing various things so as to develop their English. Another important conclusion is that the students tend to display more proactive autonomy as they use the SAC and finally there is a strong link between what they do in the classrooms and in the centre.

Despite the positive effects mentioned above, in the eyes of learners, there are also practical problems of the SAC that need to be recognized. First of all, even though there were more than 1,400 registered students in the School of Foreign Languages, only 300 of them went to the centre. This comes out to be slightly more than twenty per cent and is not an acceptable number for such a big state university. In other words, only one third of the preparatory students use the centre. The institution should consider how to increase the number of students who make use of it. Second, it is necessary that instructors, who are competent enough to guide students on how to study English, and new media are omnipresent in the centre. This is very important because students who are having difficulties studying in such a manner could be assisted more effectively this way. Third, there is not enough staff trained to offer proper counselling. As most of the research indicates, there is a strong correlation between the expertise of the centre's staff and students' gains from it. As can be seen in students' interviews, proper counselling needs to be offered more. Finally, the students address a serious problem. Even though there is an orientation program that is conducted by the academic coordinators at the very beginning of the academic year, not many instructors prefer to encourage their students to go there.

Over the course of collecting the data from students in the SAC, certain observations about how the students make use of the SAC were made, which provided some suggestions. First, as the name suggests, visiting SACs

should be of voluntary nature. In opposition to some institutions that stipulate the use of SACs as part of a course of study, it was discovered that the utilization of SACs can be of utmost importance as long as students are given the choice to decide whether or not they want to use the centres. Second, as can be easily identified in students' observations made in the interviews, they are expected to take on a role in running the centre. Students should have a say over specific issues, such as selecting and trialling materials and promoting the centre. Third, the atmosphere should be relaxing in order for students to spend more time in the SAC. In other words, students need to be excited about the centre, for the centre should be equipped with materials which aim to engage learners in ways that are fun and entertaining. To be more precise, the collaboration and interaction between students and instructors should be aiming at allowing students to see how learning can be related to everyday activity. More importantly, it should entail a lot of fun activities that are not confined to classrooms and traditional textbooks. Finally, the space in which students did a lot of useful and entertaining activities created more opportunities for students to feel like they are using the language in a more natural setting.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cem Balcikanli is working as an Associate Professor in the Department of ELT at Gazi University in Turkey. He taught Turkish in the University of Florida between 2008 and 2009 as a Fulbright scholar. He has been the Editor in Chief of the Journal of Language Learning and Teaching (www.jltl.org) since 2011. His professional interests, include Learner/Teacher Autonomy, The Role of Technology in Language Learning/Teaching, and Second Language Teacher Education.

