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Fostering Learner Autonomy among Pre-Service EFL Teachers: A Mixed-Method Study

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Fostering Learner Autonomy Among Pre-Service EFL Teachers: A Mixed-Method Study

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Abstract

This study reports on the process how pre-service EFL teachers developed as autonomous learners during a 14-week period in a Turkish higher education context. The participants included 25 freshman pre-service teachers, 11 males and 14 females, studying at an English language teacher education program of a state university. A course, specifically designed to improve students' autonomy was taken by the participants and multiple forms of data collection tools were employed throughout the study. The Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) developed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) was used at the beginning and the end of the course, the participants were asked to write reflection reports and they were also interviewed at the end of the process. The findings demonstrated a significant change in the autonomy level of participants, specifically a dramatic change in their independence of learning. Besides, it was found that being more aware of the self, taking charge of their own learning and changing perspectives towards the notion of learning were the biggest gains of the process for the participants. In line with literature, the findings were discussed and several suggestions were made on how to integrate autonomy practices into teacher education programs.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, pre-service teachers, teacher education



Fomento de la Autonomía de los Docentes en Formación Inicial de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: un Estudio de Método Mixto

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Resumen

Este estudio informa sobre el proceso de cómo los docentes en formación inicial de inglés como lengua extranjera se desarrollaron como estudiantes autónomos durante un período de 14 semanas en un contexto de educación superior turco. Los participantes incluyeron a 25 maestros de primer, 11 hombres y 14 mujeres, que estudiaban en un programa de educación docente de inglés de una universidad estatal. Los participantes participaron en un curso, diseñado específicamente para mejorar la autonomía de los estudiantes, y se emplearon múltiples formas de herramientas de recolección de datos durante todo el estudio. La Escala de Aprendizaje Autónomo (ALS) desarrollada por Macaskill y Taylor (2010) se utilizó al principio y al final del curso, se les pidió a los participantes que escribieran informes de reflexión y también se les entrevistó al final del proceso. Los resultados demostraron un cambio significativo en el nivel de autonomía de los participantes, específicamente un cambio dramático en su independencia de aprendizaje. Además, se descubrió que estar más conscientes de sí mismos, hacerse cargo de su propio aprendizaje y cambiar las perspectivas hacia la noción de aprendizaje fueron las mayores ganancias del proceso para los participantes. En línea con la literatura, se discutieron los resultados y se hicieron varias sugerencias sobre cómo integrar las prácticas de autonomía en los programas de formación docente

Palabras clave: Autonomía de los aprendices, docentes en formación inicial, formación del profesorado

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With the advent of communicative approach, learner autonomy has gained a lot of importance and priority in language classrooms (Paiva & Braga, 2008). The emergence of learner autonomy has led to a move from teacher-centered classrooms to learner-centered classrooms (Dam, 1995), and there exist several definitions of learner autonomy in the literature. To begin with, Holec (1981, p. 3), coining the term learner autonomy, defined it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. For Camilleri (1999), learner autonomy is regarded as an important concept that gives learners chances to take responsibility in the learning process, and they also have the opportunity to swap their ideas, feelings and knowledge. They are encouraged to learn to monitor and evaluate their own progress as well. Additionally, Little (1996) voiced that learner autonomy is an indicator of long-term success of learners, and autonomous learners are more involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning. Naizhao and Yanling (2004) also stated that learners’ willingness is also a prerequisite for learner autonomy. Embracing all the definitions mentioned above, Oxford (1999, p. 111) came up with a broader definition of learner autonomy and defined it as “the (a) ability and willingness to perform a language task without assistance, with adaptability related to the situational demands, with transferability to other relevant contexts, and with reflection, accompanied by (b) relevant action (the use, usually conscious and intentional, of appropriate learning strategies) reflecting both ability and willingness”, and further suggested that there exist five A’s for the definition of learner autonomy that are “Ability, attitude, + action = autonomy → achievement”.

As seen in all these definitions, learners have to possess certain features to be accepted as autonomous and to keep up with the required changes communicative approach has brought to language classrooms. Learners, being in the center of learning, are expected to engage in meaningful tasks for long-term learning (Harmer, 2007), and classroom atmosphere has gained utmost importance because learners should feel stress-free when they speak and express their ideas (Holden & Usuki, 1999). Dickinson (1993) came up with three characteristic features that autonomous learners have, which are easily identifying what they have learnt, setting certain objectives and being aware of learning strategies and utilizing them efficiently. As learners take the

responsibility of their own learning and are in the center of their learning processes, their intrinsic motivation increases in turn (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, in formal education, learner autonomy is not enough itself, and teacher autonomy is required as well since there is a strong relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy and the teachers who wish to have autonomous learners should begin from themselves and should reflect their own beliefs and practices as role models (Little, 1991; Tort-Moloney, 1997; McGrath, 2000). In other words, the teachers who are not autonomous themselves may not help their learners be autonomous learners, and autonomous teacher is a prerequisite to autonomous learner. Thus, teachers as role models have great importance for the development of learner autonomy, and teachers should guide their learners how to be more autonomous as autonomy is not inborn, rather it could be developed and improved through formal education with the guidance of teachers as role-models creating the appropriate classroom atmosphere (Clemente, 2001; Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012).

There are several studies investigating learner autonomy with various foci. To start with, Chan (2001) investigated learners' perceptions of learner autonomy. The participants were 20 students in Hong-Kong, and a questionnaire was utilized to gather data from the learners. The findings revealed that they had a positive attitude towards being autonomous learners, and they were really aware of the fact that both they themselves and their teachers had various roles. This study also indicated that learners' involvement and activity type were important factors in fostering learner autonomy. In another study, Chu (2004) looked for how Taiwanese learners and teachers perceived learner autonomy in EFL conversation classrooms. 446 students and eight teachers at a university in Taiwan took part in the study. The results demonstrated that both teachers and students had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. It was also revealed the learners' willingness to take responsibility, low motivation, lack of learning goals of the course, and lack of learner training on learning strategies were found as the factors affecting learners' expectations of learner autonomy.

When it comes to the studies conducted in Turkish setting, Yıldırım (2005) identified the perceptions and behaviors of ELT students as both learners and future teachers related to learner autonomy. The other focus of this study was

to investigate the possible effects of education at ELT department on their perceptions of learner autonomy. The participants were 179 first and fourth year university students, and they were asked to respond to two questionnaires. Follow-up interviews were held as well. The results indicated that they had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy, and they were willing to take responsibility and control of their own learning as learners of English. Next, Barlas (2012) investigated 252 learners' perceptions regarding learner autonomy. The participants were ELT learners at a state university in Turkey, and for the data collection, a learner autonomy questionnaire was utilized to gather data from them. According to the findings, these learners found that certain areas such as finding their own learning methods, formulating their own explanations, interaction pattern, course content, self-assessment and course objectives were regarded as more suitable ones for fostering learner autonomy; on the other hand, record keeping and classroom management were considered as less suitable aspects for learner autonomy. Another study belongs to Demircan Yıldırım (2014) who aimed to find out the beliefs and practices of 64 EFL instructors at a state university in Turkey regarding learner autonomy. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. It was found that the participants' opinions were positive towards learner autonomy, and they were eager to help their learners be more involved in learning process. Thus, they were fond of fostering learner autonomy; however, they thought that the learners did not have many efforts to be more autonomous. Finally, Sofracı (2016) investigated the perceptions of EFL instructors and Turkish EFL pre-service teachers regarding learner autonomy. A questionnaire was given to 123 instructors and third and fourth-year pre-service teachers. The findings indicated that the majority of the participants found themselves supportive in relation to promoting learner autonomy. When in-service and pre-service teachers were compared, it was found that pre-service teachers were more supportive of involving learners in the decision of time, place and pace of the lesson, record keeping, course objectives, course content, selecting course materials, interaction pattern, classroom management and homework tasks.

As seen, studies in the literature mainly focus on the perceptions of learners and teachers regarding autonomy or how autonomous they perceive themselves. However, research examining the term autonomy in pre-service

teacher education is scarce and the impact of any practices or content to foster autonomy among student-teachers is yet to be discovered. For this reason, the study aims to investigate the impact of a course specially designed to foster learner autonomy among pre-service teachers and their opinions regarding this process. The following research questions were addressed throughout the study:

1. Is there a significant difference in the autonomy level of pre-service EFL teachers after getting the course learner autonomy?
2. In what aspects does the course contribute to learner autonomy among pre-service EFL teachers?

Methodology

Research Context

The study was conducted at the English language teacher education department of a state university in Turkey. Pre-service EFL teachers receive a four-year education in these programs which consist of skill courses in the target language, pedagogical courses, subject matter courses and the practicum process. For this study, the learner autonomy course which student-teachers had to take as a must course in their second semester was chosen. This course specifically aimed to train pre-service teachers to become autonomous learners who are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as learners and able to monitor their own learning process through learning skills and strategies. The content of the course included certain topics such as creative/reflective learning, multiple intelligence, learning styles and strategies, time management, motivation/anxiety, and critical thinking, and this content are covered through certain methods such as lecturing, student-oriented tasks, reflective writings and presentations.

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design in which both qualitative and quantitative data collection elements were utilized. According to Creswell (2012), the combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods provides a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For this reason,

examining the development of learner autonomy among freshmen pre-service teachers through the combination of these methods was thought to provide a deeper perspective.

Considering the sequence and the dominance of data collection elements throughout the study, the mixed-method design was based on the QUAN → qual combination among the nine types proposed by Dörnyei (2007). This design is also labelled as sequential exploratory design which is easy to implement, analyse and enrich the final finding of the research matter (Creswell, 2012). Based on this, first the quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire and based on the findings derived from the quantitative data, qualitative data collection tools were employed to get a richer understanding of the participants' learner autonomy.

Participants

The participants of the study included 25 pre-service EFL teachers, 11 males and 14 females, and their age ranged between 18-21. Pre-service EFL teachers are appointed to English language teacher education programs based on their scores in a nation-wide university entrance exam which includes multiple-choice questions mainly measuring the grammar, vocabulary and comprehension level of students in the target language, and at university, they receive a four-year program. The participants were in their second semester in the program and taking several skills courses such as academic reading, listening and note-taking, a course on educational psychology and the learner autonomy course.

Data Collection Tools

The quantitative data for this study were collected through the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS) developed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) with a satisfactory inner consistency of .81. The scale is a 12-item measure composed of two factors, independence of learning and study habits. The responses on the scale are recorded on a 5-graded Likert format ranging from 1 (very unlike me) to 5 (very like me), "with higher scores indicating greater levels of autonomy, more independence and more positive attitudes to learning" (Macaskill and Taylor, 2010, p. 355).

The qualitative data, on the other hand, were collected through reflection reports and semi-structured interviews. The reflection reports, which included

their general opinions on the effect the learner autonomy course and in what aspects the course contributed to their development were written by all the participants. In addition to this, five participants were also interviewed to get more specific and detailed information regarding their opinions on how they developed their learner autonomy throughout the process.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the beginning of the semester, in the first session of the Learner Autonomy course, the ALS was administered as a pre-test to get the initial learner autonomy level of the participant pre-service teachers. The course lasted 14 weeks, 3-hours weekly, in which students were taught the content of the course through in-class tasks and discussions, lecturing, presentations and assignments based on them. The topics in the course included learning strategies, learning styles and multiple intelligences, time management, reflective and critical thinking etc, which were supposed to create awareness among learners to take charge of and monitor their own learning processes. At the end of the 13th week, the ALS was administered again as a post-test to see whether there occurred a significant change in their autonomy level. On the last week of the semester, the student teachers were asked to write reflection reports stating their general opinions regarding the effectiveness of the course, and five students were also interviewed through face-to-face interviews based on the findings derived from ALS.

The quantitative data were analyzed through a statistical package program. Since the quantitative data were based on a pre-test and post-test sequence, the paired samples t-test was administered to identify the difference between the initial and final autonomy levels of the participants. Besides, the qualitative data derived from the reflection reports and interviews were analyzed based on the qualitative content analysis scheme of Creswell (2012). First, the data were transcribed and checked if there were any missing points. Then, the familiar chunks were code labelled initially and concurrent codes were emerged as themes at the end of the analysis. This process was assisted by a colleague with a PhD in English language teaching to ensure the inter-rater reliability of the data.

Findings

The first research question of the study examined whether there was a significant difference in the autonomy level of the participant pre-service teachers after taking the course learner autonomy. The following table presents the findings derived from the paired samples t-test.

Table 1. *The change in the autonomy level of the participants*

	M	N	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 pre_total	39,52	25	3,29292	-4,933	24	,000*
post_total	44,32	25	3,56745			
Pair 2 pre_independence_of_learning	22,72	25	2,42418	-6,231	24	,000*
post_independence_of_learning	26,60	25	1,77951			
Pair 3 pre_study_habits	16,80	25	2,69258	-1,426	24	,167
post_study_habits	17,72	25	2,47521			

* $p < .05$

The statistical findings revealed that when their pre and post answers were taken into consideration, the learner autonomy level of the participant pre-service teachers significantly changed at the end of the semester after taking the course learner autonomy. When their total mean score was 39,52 at the beginning of the semester, it was increased to 44,32 leading to a significant increase. Besides, it can be seen that the course was also influential on changing their independence of learning significantly whereas no significant change was identified in their study habits at the end of the semester.

After getting those findings based on the ALS, all the participants were asked to write reflection reports and five of them were also interviewed to get in-depth data on what aspects their autonomy level changed and how the learner autonomy course contributed to their understanding. Reflection

reports and the transcription of the interviews were analyzed through the qualitative content analysis scheme (Creswell, 2012) and the findings revealed that this process contributed to the learner autonomy of the pre-service teachers in three main aspects; awareness of the self, taking charge of his/her own learning and changing perspectives towards learning. The following table presents the frequency of the codes and themes at the end of the analysis process.

Table 2. Findings derived from the reflection reports and interviews

Themes	Codes	Frequency
Awareness of the self	*Awareness of his/her weaknesses	17
	*Awareness of his/her strengths	14
	*Discovering his/her learning style	12
	*Being informed about the appropriate techniques for learning	11
	*Awareness of his/her own potential	11
Taking charge of his/her own learning	*Setting learning goals	8
	*A critical eye on the performance	6
	*Evaluating his/her own learning	3
Changing perspectives on learning	* Learning as a multidimensional process	5
	* Misconception as the transmission of knowledge	3

The first issue emerged as the main aspect on which the course contributed to pre-service teachers was about their self-awareness. Based on their reflection reports and the interviews, it was revealed that the student-teachers got more aware of their weaknesses and strengths as learners, discovered their learning styles, got informed about the ways and techniques that would make them better learners, and became more aware regarding their potentials as

individuals. The sentences from one of the interviews below demonstrates how this contributed to the student teachers' awareness of their weaknesses:

Honestly, I have always been a good student, you know a hardworking one, but I have never questioned myself in terms of my weak or strong sides.....For instance, my anxiety, it has always been a problem for me but at the end of this process, now I know how to cope with it. (ST-12, interview)

Another point regarding their self-awareness was the participants' discovery of their learning styles. Most of them expressed that they learnt a lot about their own learning styles during the course and this process helped them discover the ways in which they learnt better. One of the participants touched upon this point in her reflection report:

Visual things have always attracted my attention and even during my high school years, I learnt better through mappings, or charts or with visual staff..... Thanks to this course, now I know that, there is something as visual learners and there are certain ways through which they learn better. This is something very important for myself, to know myself better.” (ST-4, reflection report)

In addition to this, some of the participants thought that the course was beneficial for them in terms of their discovery of their own potential. In other words, it was revealed that some of the student teachers were able to see their own capacity after learning about their anxiety, motivation types, learning style, dominant intelligence type etc. The following opinions of ST-3 in his reflection report presents a good summary regarding their thoughts.

“The course motivated me a lot, I mean, in general, it helped me know myself better and taught me the things which I might be good at or bad at. So far, I have been quite introvert in terms of these issues, but now I am more conscious, I feel much better and I believe in my potential thanks to such a content and the help of my instructor” (ST-3, reflection)

The second important theme derived from the reflections and interviews was that student teachers gained the awareness on how to take charge of their own learning. It was revealed that the learner autonomy course helped the participants set their own learning goals, have a critical eye on their own performance throughout the semester and evaluate their own performance at the end of the process. During the interviews, one of the student-teachers elaborated on how this process was beneficial for her in setting learning goals:

It was probably one of my biggest problems as a learner, not being able to create a purpose for myself. I was always studying, but for what, I never questioned it..... That was probably the biggest benefit for me, to learn how to set clear and rational goals for myself, in accordance with my strong sides and capacity (ST-6, interview)

Having a critical eye on their performance was expressed as another important gain of this process related with the student-teachers' taking charge of their own learning. With the help of the learner autonomy course, the participants learned the importance of monitoring their performance and gained this attitude with the help of a critical eye as learners. The following sentences taken from the reflection report of a participant show how the course was influential in terms of this critical eye.

The biggest impact on me was that I started to monitor own learning, not only in this course but also in the others. I constantly think about my performance, make self-criticism about my mistakes and try not to do them again, and if something goes wrong, I can take instant decisions to change.....I hope I will keep on doing this because I believe that this monitoring eye will help me a lot from now on till my graduation (ST-17, reflection)

The last finding of the qualitative part was about the participants' changing perspectives on learning. It was found out that at the end of this process, some of the participants' perspectives on learning considerably changed and they began to conceptualize a different perspective towards the nature of learning. The utterances below illustrate this new conceptualization of learning in the eyes of student-teachers:

I will be a teacher in the future and I am very happy to learn that much information about the nature of learning. I mean I have never thought that it includes so many things, so many variables connected with each other, or learning styles, intelligences etc. I benefited a lot from this course and now I know what real learning is. (ST-4, reflection)

In some of the reflection reports, it was also seen that the participants had developed the conception of learning as the transmission of knowledge based on their previous learning experiences, and this conception changed with the course learner autonomy:

May be it is because of our education system but I used to think that learning is something transferred. I mean, there is a teacher who is more knowledgeable, he/she teaches and we simply learn. However, with this course, I see that learning is more than this. It is not a simple transition from teachers to students, but a more detailed process with its own elements (ST-7, interview)

Based on these excerpts and the findings of the qualitative data, it can be clearly seen that the learner autonomy course had a considerably positive impact on student-teachers' awareness of their selves as learners, especially their weaknesses and strengths, their monitoring of the learning process with a critical eye and changing their perspective on the nature of learning.

Discussion

The current study examined the impact of the learner autonomy course on pre-service EFL teachers and aimed to find out in what aspects the participant student-teachers benefited during the course process. The quantitative findings revealed that the autonomy level of the participants increased significantly at the end of the course which lasted 14 weeks. More specifically, they got more aware regarding their independence of learning and gained this skill. In this regard, this finding shows parallelism with the literature since it was also demonstrated by previous research that pre-service EFL teachers had positive attitude and perception regarding the concept of autonomy. For instance, in his study with 112 student-teachers in an English Language

teaching department, Balçıkanlı (2010) found out the participants were enthusiastic and positive about integrating autonomy principles into their current learning and future teaching practices. In another study with a similar context, Çakır and Balçıkanlı (2012) examined the impact of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) on 25 participants and they also revealed that such applications had a positive effect on student-teachers' self-awareness and initial attempts towards being more autonomous. Similarly, as stated by Manzano Vázquez (2018), initiatives that intend to create familiarity among the per-service teachers with the concept of autonomy lead positive attitudes and improvement of autonomy, which is also demonstrated with the current study.

In the second phase of the study, the participants were asked to write reflection reports and some of them were also interviewed to find out in what aspects they benefited from the learner autonomy course. Their responses showed that they became more aware of themselves, their perspectives towards learning changed and they began to take charge of their own learning. Such a positive change among the perspectives and attitudes of teachers or teacher candidates towards being more autonomous were also demonstrated by research in the field. For instance, Fabela-Cárdenas (2012) reported the positive effect of a training course on in-service teachers' perspectives towards learner autonomy derived from a mixed-method study. In another context, Kojima (2008) implemented certain collaborative and reflective tasks to promote autonomy among teacher trainees and observed that the participants tended to be more self-directed and autonomous towards the end of the process and such applications were perceived quite positively by teacher candidates. Parallel to these findings, Gabryś-Barker (2017) came up with the conclusion that pre-service teachers' perceptions towards autonomy is quite positive and creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to help them be responsible for their own learning experiences and being alert about their own selves will contribute to the quality of teacher education practices.

Autonomy is currently regarded a sine qua non of any educational context. However, it is hard to say that the term can actually be realized in real life due to the paucity of teacher education or training programs that will address to both teacher and learner autonomy as valid constructs (Manzano Vázquez, 2018). However, the findings of the current study put forward that integrating

autonomy-related elements into pre-service teacher education programs to promote learner autonomy among teacher candidates might be practically achievable. Developing instructional content or courses specifically for learner autonomy, integrating certain documents and procedures such as European profile for language teacher education (EPLTE) or The European portfolio for student teachers of languages (EPOSTL) that will foster learner and teacher autonomy among pre-service teachers might positively influence their perceptions and attitudes toward this phenomenon as well.

Conclusion

Investigating the effect of a course content aiming to promote learner autonomy among pre-service EFL teachers in a Turkish higher education context, the current study found that the participants' level of autonomy significantly changed at the end of the course. A significant difference was identified in their independence of learning whereas their study habits revealed no statistically significant difference at the end of the semester. As for the main aspects the participants benefited, they expressed that being more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners, a positive perspective change towards the notion of learning and taking more responsibilities during the learning process were the biggest gains.

The study was conducted in a specific context with a limited number of participants, which can relatively be regarded as a limitation. However, it is believed that the findings derived from the study provide a unique understanding of autonomy in the eyes of pre-service teachers and the aspects it is built on. It not only employs multiple forms of data collection tools getting in-depth data regarding the inner voices of participants and but also presents how a course content specifically designed to promote learner autonomy became influential of pre-service teachers' development.

As research so far mainly focused on exploring the perceptions of learners of pre-service teachers on autonomy or measuring their autonomy levels in a descriptive way, it is needless to say that more research revealing the short-term and long-term effects of trainings or course content on teacher candidates, just like the current study, is urgently needed. In that way, it might be easier to determine a pathway, informed by empirical studies, to integrate

autonomy practices into teacher education programs and increase the quality of teacher training.

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