

## Learner Autonomy (LA) in EFL Settings

### İngilizce'nin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenildiği Ortamlarda Öğrenen Özerkliği

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#### ABSTRACT

*There has been a considerable growth of interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning as a consequence of the innovations that have taken place in recent years. Focusing on the studies carried out on learner autonomy since the 1980s, this review paper examines the origins of autonomy, the definitions of learner autonomy and the characteristics of autonomous learners. The review also covers the practical ways that foster learner autonomy in the actual classroom atmosphere. It concludes by discussing learner autonomy in the context of European Language Portfolio (ELP) and by making suggestions on learner autonomy in the EFL settings.*

**Key Words:** Learner Autonomy, Language Learning and Teaching, EFL, European Language Portfolio.

#### ÖZET

*Son yıllarda, dil öğrenimi/öğretiminde meydana gelen yeniliklerin bir sonucu olarak özerklik kavramına hatırı sayılır bir ilgi oluşmuştur. 1980'li yıllardan itibaren yapılan çalışmalara odaklanarak, bu derleme makalesi özerklik kavramının kökenini, öğrenen özerkliğinin tanımlarını ve özerk öğrencilerin özelliklerini incelemektedir. Çalışma ayrıca sınıf ortamında öğrenen özerkliğini geliştirecek yolları da içermektedir. Avrupa*

*Dil Portfolyosu bağlamında öğrenen özerkliği tartışarak İngilizce'nin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği ortamlara ilişkin önerilerde bulunmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Öğrenen Özerkliği, Dil Öğrenimi ve Öğretimi, Yabancı Dil olarak İngilizce, Avrupa Dil Portfolyosu.

#### SUMMARY

There has been a considerable growth of interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning as a consequence of the innovations that have taken place in recent years. The innovations such as learner centered approaches and notions, resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches and communicative approaches make the point clear that learners should be able to take responsibility for their own learning in foreign language classrooms, specifically in EFL settings so as to fulfill the necessary conditions of effective language learning. Along with those, the tremendous shift over learner and teacher roles in foreign language classrooms inevitably brings some new perspectives toward the understanding of learning process in many aspects. The deconstruction of traditional language classrooms and courses has underlined the growing interest in autonomy over the last two decades, which indicates that in lieu of foreign language classrooms where teacher is the main authority, the classrooms where learners are at the centre of learning process have been gaining importance. No doubt that those learners face great difficulty in studying a foreign language on their own just as they do not know “how to diagnose their own needs for learning, formulate their own learning objectives, identify learning resources and planning strategies for taking the initiative in using those resources, assess their own learning, and have their assessments validated” (Knowles, 1980:44).

The origin of autonomy goes back to some centuries. Over the years, many great thinkers such as Galileo, Rousseau, Dewey, Kilpatrick, Marcel, Jacotot, Payne and Quick have pondered over the importance of autonomy by explaining their ideas on education in different times. Henri Holec introduced learner autonomy in language learning, and he still remains an eminent figure in this field (Benson 2001). With the development of learner-centered approaches, learner autonomy became crucial

throughout the 1980 and 1990s. The pertinent literature hosts a significant number of definitions on learner autonomy starting with Holec's one "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981:3). In these definitions, "ability" sometimes is replaced by "capacity" or "independent" becomes "autonomy". However, Holec's definition has proved remarkably robust and remains the most widely cited one in the field. Like definitions of autonomy, what an autonomous learner looks like has been concern of very researchers since the first time the term showed up. Each and every scholar takes the term from different perspectives and come up with various features that describe autonomous learners. A lot of researchers who contributed to the development of learner autonomy believe that learner autonomy is a must for the following three reasons. First, autonomous learning is indispensable since education should aim at helping the people how to think, act and learn independently in their lives. Second, there has been a shift in focus from the teacher to the learner, from exclusive focus on how to improve teaching to an inclusive concern for how individual learners go through their learning. Third, "students who take on greater responsibility for their own learning are more likely to take a deep approach to learning, which in turn leads to greater achievement" (Marton and Saljo, 1976, cited in Ade-Ojo, 2005: 192). In order to respond to this existing situation and to help learners become autonomous, it is not that difficult to bump into several ways to enhance learner autonomy in the EFL literature. , Brajcich (2000: 1) suggests various practical ways to develop learner autonomy in EFL settings. However, since autonomy does not develop overnight, language teachers should be patient enough to take care of this process. It is likely that we can easily observe a possible relationship between learner autonomy and ELP when looking at the objectives of ELP projects as all these projects illustrate "a communicative, action-based, learner-centered view of language learning, similar to that in other Council of Europe projects on needs analysis and learner autonomy and self-assessment" (Richterich and Chancerel, 1980, cited in Heyworth, 2006: 181).

## Introduction

Most adult learners have difficulties in carrying out learning by themselves due to the insufficient knowledge of how to learn or study a foreign language and the lack of knowledge and skills on how to develop their language competencies. Therefore, learners ought to be trained in such a way that they should be able to take control over their own learning processes. This current situation has urged the theoreticians and language teachers to focus on the key role of learner autonomy (LA) in the EFL setting.

Learner autonomy has become a crucial issue on which language educators and teachers have concentrated in recent years (Benson, 2001; Little, 2007; Benson, 2007). With the advent of the communicative approaches, the focus in the classroom has considerably shifted from the teacher to the learners. Through this shift, learner autonomy has doubled its importance since the learners have taken active role in their own learning. In lieu of the language classrooms where the teacher is the main authority, the learner has become the center of the learning process during which the learners may take charge of their own learning process, which, without question, brings some new understanding towards language teaching/learning.

As Yumuk (2002: 143) describes, Turkish educational system has some points that inhibit autonomous language learning.

*“In Turkey recitation is a common mode of teaching in both the primary and secondary educational systems. The majority of learners undergo the process of learning through traditional educational methods in which the teacher is the ‘authority’ rather than the ‘facilitator’.”*

Educational system in Turkey is regarded as being teacher-centered in which the traditional teaching methods are widely utilized. Furthermore, schools are formed in a structure where the authority is not shared, individuality and creativity are less encouraged. As a result of this system, learners do not tend to take responsibility for

their own learning during their educational processes. Thus, learner autonomy is a vital element to be improved in the context of language learning/teaching in the Turkish context.

### **A brief history**

The origin of autonomy goes back to some centuries. The concept of individual autonomy has been central to European liberal-democratic and liberal-humanist thought since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and “was identified by Kant as the foundation of human dignity” (Hill, 1991: 48). Applied into learning environment, autonomy is an issue over which many great thinkers have pondered throughout the ages. According to Benson (2001: 22), thinkers such as Galileo, Rousseau, Dewey, and Kilpatrick highlighted the importance of autonomy in the paradigm of education in different times. For instance, Galileo believes that “you can not teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself”. In Rousseau’s ‘Model Learning’, learners are responsible for their own actions and learn by enjoying or suffering from their consequences. Dewey emphasized the importance of autonomy in learning by mentioning that “the starting points of activities must be the learner’s own felt needs so that educational aims must be those of the learners rather than those of the teachers”. Kilpatrick, yet another thinker who underlines the importance of autonomy, designs the project method. In this method, learners are expected to plan, construct and perform their learning projects. Likewise, Smith (2002: 3-5) provides the ideas on autonomy of other twentieth-century educationalists, including Marcel, Jacotot, Payne and Quick. As discerned in all thinkers mentioned, the concept of autonomy has not been neglected in terms of education in history.

The term of autonomy first entered the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project, which was established in 1971. This project aimed to establish “the Centre de Recherches et d’ Applications en Langues (CRAPEL)” at the University of Nancy, in France. It was Yves Chalon, regarded as the

father of the autonomy in language learning, who founded CRAPEL. After his death, Henri Holec kept studying on learner autonomy in language learning, and he still remains an eminent figure in this field. Holec published his first report on autonomy in 1981, emphasizing the social and ideological contexts on which learner autonomy has been based (Benson, 2001: 8). In the following years, learner autonomy became quite important with the development of learner centered approaches and notions, like resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches, learner-based approaches, classroom-based approaches, curriculum-based approaches and teacher-based approaches throughout the 1980 and 1990s (Benson, 2001). In referring to this importance, the numerous educators have produced a great many works on learner autonomy in the field of foreign language learning (Barfield and Brown, 2007; Benson, 2007; Jiménez, Lamb, and Vieira, 2007; Lamb and Reinders, 2007).

### **Definitions and Autonomous learners**

When it comes to define what learner autonomy exactly stands for in the field of foreign language learning/teaching, a great many problems occur possibly due to the fact that many of the definitions have not lived up to the expectations of the term properly. Benson (2001: 47) believes that it is important to describe autonomy for the following two reasons. First, construct validity is an important precondition for effective learning process. Second, programmes or innovations designed to foster autonomy are more likely to be more effective if they are based on a clear understanding of the behavioral changes they aim to promote. “The literature on autonomy is replete with definitions ranging from the simplistic to the extremely complex” (Ade-Ojo, 2005: 193).

Some of the most well-known definitions in the current literature are as follows:

▼ “Autonomy is an adaptive ability, allowing learners to develop supportive structures within themselves rather than to have them erected around them” (Trim, 1976, cited in Esch, 1996: 37).

▼“Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning” (Holec, 1981: 3).

▼“Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions” (Dickinson, 1987: 11).

▼“Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 1991: 4).

▼“Autonomy is recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems” (Benson, 1997: 29).

Looking at all these definitions at first glance, we abruptly come up with several important features that are common in all above. Benson and Voller (1997: 1) point out five ways the term autonomy is used for.

Autonomy is used for;

- a. situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- b. a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- c. an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- d. the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- e. for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

Before focusing on the attitudes of an autonomous learner, it is significantly vital to mention who an autonomous person is. Kupfer (1990: 2) defines an autonomous person as “the one who chooses for himself what to think and what to do.” Like the definitions of autonomy discussed previously, the question as to who an autonomous learner is varies to different authors and views. Out of these authors and views, Dickinson (1993: 41) seems best to provide the profile of autonomous language learners.

#### Autonomous learners

1. understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices.
2. are able to formulate their own learning objectives.
3. are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies.
4. are able to monitor their use of strategies.
5. are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

#### **Necessity of Autonomy**

As Dewey (1916) argues, the primary purpose of education should be to prepare students to take an active part in both social and political life by having them gain the skills and attitudes they need for democratic and social participation. “The capacity to think, learn and behave autonomously is often claimed as an outcome for students in higher education” (Stephenson and Laycock, 1993: 5). Thus, developing autonomous learning is indispensable since education should aim at helping the people how to think, act and learn independently in their lives.

According to Gremmo and Riley (1995: 154), in the field of second/foreign language education there has been “a shift in focus from the teacher to the learner, from exclusive focus on how to improve teaching to an inclusive concern for how individual learners go through their learning”. It has been widely accepted that autonomous learners are generally good language learners. It becomes apparent to infer that the characteristics of the autonomous learners (Rubin and Thompson 1982, cited in Brown, 1994: 209) are very similar to those of good language learners, as Marton and Saljo (1976, cited in Ade-Ojo, 2005: 192) assert, “students who take on greater responsibility for their own learning are more likely to take a deep approach to learning, which in turn leads to greater achievement”. This will, without doubt, have the foreign language teachers make use of learner autonomy in foreign language classrooms because their aim is to help learners achieve the target language in a more efficient and concrete sense.

## **Ways and Views to Enhance LA in EFL**

With the tendency to the individualized instruction, learning how to learn has become a very exhilarating concept to focus and study in the field of foreign language teaching/learning (Benson, 2006; Lamb and Reinders, 2007; Little, forthcoming). The promotion of learner autonomy is an important explicit goal of the language programme within the courses as a consequence of this tendency. It is not that difficult to bump into several ways to enhance learner autonomy in the EFL literature. However, Brajcih (2000: 1) suggests various practical ways.

1. Encourage students to be interdependent and to work collectively. The less students depend on their teacher, the more autonomy is being developed
2. Ask students to keep a diary of their learning experiences so that they may become more aware of their learning preferences.
3. Explain teacher/student roles from the outset.
4. Progress gradually from interdependence to independence. Give the students time to adjust to new learning strategies and do not expect too much too soon.
5. Have the students do projects outside the classroom to increase motivation and non-lesson classroom duties to perform (taking roll, writing instructions, notices, etc.).
6. Emphasize the importance of peer-editing, corrections, and follow-up questioning in the classroom.

Little (1994: 431) believes that “learner autonomy does not arise spontaneously from within the learner but develops out of the learner’s dialogue with the world to which he or she belongs”. Therefore, we, as teachers and educators, ought to be patient enough if we desire to help our learners become autonomous learners as it does not happen over night. Conversely, autonomy is a process that enables learners to be responsible for their own learning through strategies and techniques applied in the learning process in time.

Nunan (1996: 21) gives a picture of how an autonomous classroom looks like. Generally, in a non-autonomous classroom, the teacher or the institution makes all the decisions about what and when will be taught. On the contrary, in an autonomous classroom, the decisions regarding the content and classroom norms will be made with much reference to the learners, so learners will be involved in the selection, modification and adaptation on both issues, which gives the learners a sense of belonging. In an autonomy-focused classroom, the teacher will introduce a range of learning activities and tasks by taking into consideration the learners' needs and interests whereas the learners are exposed to which activities they are going to perform in a non-autonomous classroom. In terms of evaluation and assessment, classrooms which have the development of autonomy allow the learners to reflect, assess and evaluate themselves, which is very essential of being able to aware of their own learning process while the assessment and evaluation part is structured in a traditional manner in a way that tests and exams are carried out in non-autonomous classrooms

### **The Role of ELP for Learner Autonomy**

Schneider and Lenz (2001) mention the aims of the COE about the languages as in the followings:

- The deepening of mutual understanding among citizens in Europe;
- Respect for diversity of cultures and ways of life;
- The protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- The development of plurilingualism as a life-long process;
- The development of language learner;
- The development of the capacity for independent language learning;
- Transparency and coherence in language learning programmes.

Up to 2000, there were a lot of European Language Portfolio Projects carried out in 16 organizations and European countries including Austria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany NRW, France CAEN, France CIEP, Finland, UK CILT, Hungary, Italy UMBRIA, Ireland, Holland, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Slovenia, Turkey, CERCLES, EAQUALS and the European Language Council so as to fulfill these aforementioned aims (Demirel, 2005: 81). “All these projects illustrate a communicative, action-based, learner-centered view of language learning, similar to that in other Council of Europe projects on needs analysis and learner autonomy and self-assessment” (Richterich and Chancerel, 1980, cited in Heyworth, 2006: 181). It is clear that ELP makes the language learning process clearer to learners, develops their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and enables them to get more responsibility for their own learning (Little, 2002; 2007; forthcoming). In addition, the ELP offers a helpful tool for self-assessment in that ELP includes a) language passport which provides assessment by periodically reviewing the learners’ language proficiency according to their grades and achievements and b) language biography where the learners set learning aims, check their learning progress, and evaluate learning outcomes during the learning process which provides formative assessment; and c) dossier including up-to-date overview of the learners’ proficiency and experience, which supplies both formative and summative assessment (Schärer 2000; Little and Perclov, 2001; Koyuncu, 2006). In order to have a better understanding of the role of the ELP for improving learners’ autonomy, some studies have been carried out all over the world (Ferrero, 2002; cited in Little, 2002; Vosicki, n.d.; Egel, 2003). One can easily see from the findings of these studies that learner autonomy is a must for effective language learning in accordance with the principles of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It seems probable that “much of the research relevant to learner autonomy will be prompted by the desire to explore the impact of the ELP on learners, teachers and educational systems” (Little, 2002). Thus, the central role of self-assessment and self-assessment instruments provided for ELP should be highly encouraged these days when heated arguments about the membership of European Union (EU) are being carried out.

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of what we have discussed so far, it is no doubt that learner autonomy is a prerequisite for effective language learning in that it enables learners to develop a sense of responsibility, awareness and self-reflection where they can manage to study on their own more efficiently. As is mentioned above, it is hardly possible for the learners to become together with their teachers all the time, which makes the point clear that autonomous skills should be developed at any time.

It is generally recognized that students arrive at university with different experiential backgrounds and learning achievements, but we know little about students' autonomous dispositions at entry therefore the extent to which higher education develops or constrains autonomy in learning (Fazey and Fazey, 2001; Mozzon-McPherson and Dantec, 2006). Learners need metacognitive skills such as power of reflection, decision-making and independent action since learners are required to take responsibility and find their own methods of gathering, synthesizing and evaluating information called high-order thinking skills at university (Long and Agyekum, 2004; Huang, 2006; Lam, 2007; Gao, 2007). The learners have a very intensive English language program at preparatory schools where the instruction is generally held each day a week. It seems to be a great opportunity to develop learning strategies, autonomous skills, self-reflection and responsibility when the learners are taking this such an extensive program. Thus, learner autonomy should be developed at preparatory schools for the learners who have just commenced their academic education.

Autonomy, which gives the learners the ability to study more efficiently on their own, should be taken into consideration at Primary Schools as it will lead the learners to take their own responsibility for their own learning from the scratch. Based on the proverb "You can't teach an old dog a new trick", the learners who study at primary school should be trained to be responsible for their own learning so that they could do better in their future education. As a response to the lack knowledge of the teachers at primary

schools, pre-service training may be held so as to inform them about the basic principles of autonomy and how they can apply them into their own teaching environment.

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