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Prospective EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

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1. What is learner autonomy?

In common use, the term *autonomy* denotes a significant measure of independence from the control of others. In general educational settings we can define *autonomy* as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (Little, 1991). In this study, I refer to 'learner autonomy' as the capacity to take control over, or responsibility for,

one's own learning; that control or responsibility may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process (Benson, 2001). However, learner autonomy does not mean learning in isolation. Autonomous learners do not learn language without a teacher and without peers. Instead they develop a sense of interdependence and they work together with teachers and other learners towards shared goals (Little, 1991; Benson and Voller, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001).

2. Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate Turkish prospective EFL teachers' perceptions related to learner autonomy. It was hoped that the results of such a study would provide guidance for EFL/ESL teacher education programs. In order to reach the aim of the study, a group of 1st and 4th year Turkish EFL teacher education program students' perceptions were investigated. The focus was on the differences and/or similarities between 1st and 4th year students' perceptions related to learner autonomy. Investigating those differences and/or similarities, I hoped to gain information about whether the teacher training provided to those students makes any difference in their perceptions. The reason for choosing especially the 1st and 4th year students was that we can accept 1st year students as future teachers who have not taken any formal instruction about how to teach English, whereas we can accept 4th year students as future teachers who were educated on how to teach English.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 1st and 4th year students of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of a state university in Turkey. 179 students in total participated in

the study. 90 of the participants were 1st year students and 89 of the participants were 4th year students.

The EFL teacher education program that the participants of this study attended provides learners with a four-year program on teaching English as a foreign language. The first year of the program focuses on teaching English language skills and grammar to the students. 1st year students take reading, listening, speaking and writing skills, and grammar courses. First year of the program provides no courses related to teaching English as a foreign language. Starting from the second year of the program, students take 'methodology' courses which specifically focus on how to teach English. When students come the last term of the program in their 4th year, they have already taken seven 'methodology' courses: *Approaches in ELT, Methodology in the Area of Specialization I, Methodology in the Area of Specialization II, Teaching Foreign Language to Children, Testing and Evaluation in English, Material Evaluation and Adaptation, and Evaluation of Subject Area Course Books*. The students of the program are also required to take applied courses such as *School Experience I and II, and Teaching Practicum*. In *School Experience I* students are required to make observations related to different aspects of language teaching. In the courses of *School Experience II* and *Teaching Practicum* students are required to put their theoretical knowledge into practice by conducting micro-teaching and full-teaching sessions in public schools. In addition to the courses mentioned above, from their 1st to 4th year in the program students take linguistics courses, general education courses and literature courses.

3.2. Instruments

The data of the study was collected via a questionnaire adapted from Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002) and via interview sessions based on the results from the questionnaire. There

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were two sections and twenty-five items in the questionnaire. The first section consisted of eleven items asking on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) about the prospective EFL teachers perceptions of EFL learners' abilities to act autonomously. The second section of the questionnaire consisted of 14 items asking on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (very often) about how often the prospective EFL teachers would encourage some learner autonomy related outside class learning activities in their future classrooms.

In order to support the questionnaire data with qualitative data, follow up interview sessions were conducted after the analysis of the questionnaire data. Interviews were conducted with 50 randomly selected participants. During the interview sessions, each interviewee was reminded his / her answers referring to the questionnaire s/he answered, and then s/he was asked for the reasons of giving those answers. Interview sessions were tape recorded, and then the recordings were transcribed.

3.3. Data Analysis

In the data analysis procedure, first of all descriptive statistics (percentages) were calculated for each question. In addition to descriptive statistics, Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical analysis test was applied to each question in order to see whether there is a significant relationship between the participants' year of study in the teacher education program and their answers to each question in each section in the questionnaire. The relationship was regarded as statistically significant when the p value was ≤ 0.01.

4. Results

4.1. 1ˢᵗ Year Participants' Perceptions of EFL Learners' Abilities Related to Learner Autonomy

Table 1 presents the percentages of answers related to each question. To aid interpretation, the 'very poor' and 'poor' categories have been combined in the table, and similarly the 'good' and 'very good' categories.

Table 1. 1ˢᵗ year participants' perceptions of students' abilities - % of respondents

Section 1 items How would you rate students' ability to:	Very poor / Poor %	OK %	Very good / Good %
1. choose learning activities in class?	21.6	**39.8**	38.6
2. choose learning activities outside class?	29.2	**40.5**	30.3
3. choose learning objectives in class?	20.5	**42**	37.5
4. choose learning objectives outside class?	30.3	**42.7**	27
5. choose learning materials in class?	21.4	34.8	**43.8**
6. choose learning materials outside class?	25	**42**	33
7. evaluate their learning?	14.6	32.6	**52.8**
8. evaluate the course?	14.6	32.6	**52.8**
9. identify their weaknesses in English?	19.3	33	**47.7**
10. decide what they should learn next in their English lessons?	**40.5**	29.1	30.4
11. decide how long to spend on each activity?	**37.1**	**37.1**	25.8

Results in the table indicate that generally respondents' perceptions of language learners' abilities to operate in various aspects of learning are not very negative. For nine out of eleven items, highest percentages of the respondents think that the students are 'OK' or 'Good / Very Good'. This means that generally respondents think that their students would be 'OK' or 'Good /

Very Good' if they were given the chance of taking more control over their learning. Interviews indicated that participants generally answered the questions in this section considering the general language learner profile in their minds. They reported that this profile was mainly shaped by their past experiences as language learners, and their observations throughout their own language learning process. To conclude, results for this section generally indicate that the 1st year students are not so pessimistic about language learners' abilities to take more control over their learning. They generally think that language learners would be OK if they were given the chance of taking charge of their own learning.

4.2. 4th Year Participants' Perceptions of EFL Learners' Abilities Related to Learner Autonomy

Results of this section (Table 2) indicate that the 4th year students seem pessimistic about language learners' abilities in learning. In eight out of eleven items, majority of the participants think that students are 'poor / very poor' in abilities related to taking more control in their own learning. These items are choosing learning activities in class (58.3 %) and outside class (63.1 %), choosing learning objectives in class (65.5 %) and outside class (76.2 %), choosing learning materials in class (51.8 %) and outside class (51.8 %), deciding what to learn next in English lessons (72.6 %) and deciding how long to spend in each activity (57.1 %).

Table 2. 4th year participants' perceptions of students' abilities - % of respondents

Section 1 items How would you rate students' ability to:	Very poor / Poor %	OK %	Very good / Good %
1. choose learning activities in class?	**58.3**	28.6	13.1
2. choose learning activities outside class?	**63.1**	22.6	14.3

3. choose learning objectives in class?	**66.3**	22.9	10.8
4. choose learning objectives outside class?	**77.1**	14.5	8.4
5. choose learning materials in class?	**51.2**	34.5	14.3
6. choose learning materials outside class?	**51.2**	35.7	13.1
7. evaluate their learning?	**44**	34.5	21.5
8. evaluate the course?	**42.9**	32.1	25
9. identify their weaknesses in English?	40.5	**42.9**	16.6
10. decide what they should learn next in their English lessons?	**72.6**	17.8	9.6
11. decide how long to spend on each activity?	**57.1**	28.6	14.3

The 4th year participants are not so optimistic and positive about other three items as well. For students' abilities of evaluating their own learning, 44.1 % percent of the participants, and for students' abilities of evaluating the course, 42.9 % of the participants stated that they perceive students as 'poor / very poor.' Item 9 (identifying weaknesses in English) was the only item whose highest percentage was in the 'OK' category.

When participants were asked for their reasons of considering students' abilities so low, they stated that the student profile they see in their teaching practicum schools affect their perceptions a lot. The following are two examples from the interviews, two different participants were asked the reason why they considered the students abilities so low, here are the answers:

We go our teaching practicum schools, and we always see this. Students are not

so proficient about these issues. That's why I think so.

I answered these questions considering all the students I observe in my teaching

practicum school. The students I saw there were really like that.

4.3. The Comparison of 1ˢᵗ and 4ᵗʰ Year Participants' Perceptions of EFL Learners' Abilities Related to Learner Autonomy

When we compare the 4ᵗʰ year participants' answers to the 1ˢᵗ year participants' answers, we see that the 4ᵗʰ year students are much more negative and pessimistic about students' abilities in taking more control over learning. Based on the follow-up interviews, the reason for 4ᵗʰ year students' negative views of students' abilities can be explained by their teaching experiences in their practice teaching courses.

The difference between the 1ˢᵗ and 4ᵗʰ year students' perceptions of language learners' abilities in taking more control over their learning can also be seen in the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Results (Table 3) for this statistical analysis test revealed that, for ten out of eleven items, there is a statistically significant difference between the 1ˢᵗ or 4ᵗʰ year participants' answers to the questions.

Table 3. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Section 1 Items of the Questionnaire

Items	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	p value
1. choose learning activities in class?	2.409	**0.00 ≤ 0.01**
2. choose learning activities outside class?	2.227	**0.00 ≤ 0.01**
3. choose learning objectives in class?	2.994	**0.00 ≤ 0.01**
4. choose learning objectives outside class?	3.065	**0.00 ≤ 0.01**

5. choose learning materials in class?	1.942	**0.001 ≤ 0.01**
6. choose learning materials outside class?	1.561	**0.015 ≤ 0.01**
7. evaluate their learning?	2.063	**0.00 ≤ 0.01**
8. evaluate the course?	1.857	**0.02 ≤ 0.01**
9. identify their weaknesses in English?	2.036	**0.001 ≤ 0.01**
10. decide what they should learn next in their English lessons?	2.115	**0.00 ≤ 0.01**
11. decide how long to spend on each activity?	1.319	0.062 > 0.01

4.4. 1st Year Participants' Opinions about the Encouragement of Outside Class Learning Activities

Table 4 gives the percentages of answers related to each activity. To aid interpretation, the 'Never' and 'Rarely' categories have been combined in the table, and similarly the 'Frequently' and 'Very Often' categories.

The table shows that for all the items in this section majority of the students said that they would 'frequently / very often' encourage their students to do these activities. This means that if these students were teachers, they would encourage their students very frequently to engage in outside class activities which are considered as signs of acting autonomously in the language learning.

Table 4. 1st year participants' encouragement of outside class learning activities - % of respondents

Section 2 items **When you teach English, how often would you encourage your students to:**	Never & Rarely %	Sometimes %	Frequently & Very Often %
12. read grammar books on their own?	18	29.2	**52.8**
13. read newspapers in English?	2.2	16.9	**80.9**

14. send e-mails in English?	11.2	33.7	**55.1**
15. read books or magazines in English?	1.1	13.5	**85.4**
16. watch English TV programs?	1.1	13.7	**85.2**
17. listen to English radio?	4.5	6.7	**88.8**
18. listen to English songs?		6.7	**93.3**
19. practice using English with friends?	5.6	12.4	**82**
20. do English self-study in a group?	4.5	30.7	**64.8**
21. do grammar exercises on their own?	10.2	34.1	**55.7**
22. watch English movies?	1.1	12.5	**86.4**
23. write a dairy in English?	19.1	25.9	**55**
24. use the Internet in English?	4.5	12.5	**83**
25. use English with a native speaker?	4.5	22.5	**73**

In the interviews, when the participants were asked for the reasons of encouraging students so frequently, they stated that they are aware of the benefits of these kinds of activities, and they would encourage these activities in order to help their students improve their English because classroom time is not enough to improve it. In addition, most of the participants reported that they were not encouraged to participate in such activities during their high school years, and now, at the university, they understand their value better. The following is an extract from the interviews:

Classroom time is not enough for learning something. I would suggest my students to read a book or a magazine, to listen to music. We weren't told in our high school years to improve our listening. Now, we are having difficulties. If we had been suggested to do so, I would be better now.

4.5. 4th Year Participants' Opinions about the Encouragement of Outside Class Learning Activities

As Table 5 indicates, for all the items in this section, majority of the students said that they would 'frequently / very often' encourage their students to do the activities. This means that if these students were teachers, they would encourage their students very frequently to engage in outside class activities which are considered as signs of acting autonomously in the language learning process.

Table 5. 4th year participants' encouragement of outside class learning activities - % of respondents

Section 2 items **When you teach English, how often would you encourage your students to:**	Never & Rarely %	Sometimes %	Frequently & Very Often %
12. read grammar books on their own?	19.5	29.3	**51.2**
13. read newspapers in English?	13.1	25	**61.9**
14. send e-mails in English?	13.1	23.8	**63.1**
15. read books or magazines in English?	6	14.3	**79.7**
16. watch English TV programs?	3.6	15.5	**82.9**
17. listen to English radio?	8.3	14.3	**77.4**
18. listen to English songs?	1.2	11.9	**86.9**
19. practice using English with friends?	3.6	20.2	**76.2**
20. do English self-study in a group?	6	31	**63**
21. do grammar exercises on their own?	8.4	32.5	**59.1**
22. watch English movies?	2.4	13.1	**84.5**
23. write a dairy in English?	10.7	19	**70.3**
24. use the Internet in English?	8.3	14.3	**77.4**
25. use English with a native speaker?	19	16.7	**64.3**

When the participants were asked for their reasons of encouraging these activities so frequently, they generally stated that they believe the positive effects of these activities on a students' language learning process. Following is an example:

I think these activities are important because success in general English depends on them, not only on the grammar subjects learned in the classroom, grammar helps students to a certain extent only.

4.6. Comparison of 1st and 4th Year Participants' Opinions about the Encouragement of Outside Class Learning Activities

For this section of the questionnaire both the 1st year students and the 4th year students reported high frequency of encouragement of outside class learning activities. Both groups' answers cluster under 'frequently / very often' category. In this respect we can say that 1st and 4th year students think the same in terms of encouraging students to engage in outside class learning activities.

Statistical analysis of the data has also revealed the same result. Table 6 shows that the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests applied to each item in Section 2 of the questionnaire. According to these results, for each item in the questionnaire, there is not a statistically significant difference between 1st or 4th year participants' answers.

Table 6. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Section 2 Items of the Questionnaire

Items	Kolmogorov -Smirnov	*p* value
12. read grammar books on their own?	0.662	$0.774 > 0.01$
13. read newspapers in English?	1.249	$0.88 > 0.01$
14. send e-mails in English?	0.528	$0.943 > 0.01$
15. read books or magazines in English?	0.428	$0.993 > 0.01$
16. watch English TV programs?	0.280	$1.00 > 0.01$

17. listen to English radio?	0.748	0.630 > 0.01
18. listen to English songs?	0.906	0.385 > 0.01
19. practice using English with friends?	0.383	0.999 > 0.01
20. do English self-study in a group?	0.227	1.00 > 0.01
21. do grammar exercises on their own?	0.219	1.00 > 0.01
22. watch English movies?	0.156	1.00 > 0.01
23. write a dairy in English?	0.998	0.272 > 0.01
24. use the Internet in English?	0.365	0.999 > 0.01
25. use English with a native speaker?	0.957	0.319 > 0.01

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Although there were many limitations to this study and the results are not so easy to generalize, overall, information gathered through this study might yield to the following conclusions:

a. Turkish prospective EFL teachers come to their teacher training programs with positive perceptions and attitudes about EFL learners' abilities to act autonomously. However, at the end of their four-year program, their perceptions change severely from positive to negative. One of the possible reasons for this change might be the professional knowledge and teaching experiences they have at the end of four year.

b. When it comes to encouraging outside class learning activities in their future classrooms, both the first year and the fourth year prospective EFL teachers report that they would encourage those activities very frequently.

c. One explanation to discrepancy between conclusion (a) and conclusion (b) might be the fact that the questionnaire items which yielded to conclusion (a) were generally involving the formal and professional matters and decisions of teaching English whereas

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questionnaire items that yielded conclusion (b) were involving out-of-class, unprofessional decisions. Therefore, we may conclude that when it comes to formal and professional instructional matters, last year students of the EFL teacher education program are much more pessimistic than first year students about their future students' abilities to act autonomously.

d. Consequently, we can argue that there is a potential risk of teacher training programs that the teacher trainers should take more seriously. Some prospective teachers' positive perceptions about and attitudes towards some rewarding concepts of language teaching might turn into negative during the teacher training process due to gaining more professional knowledge and experience.

e. One possible way of addressing this risk, in the context of learner autonomy, might be to better equip prospective teachers about the potential benefits of promoting learner autonomy.

f. Another important tool the teacher trainers could use to help their trainees to develop positive attitudes towards learner autonomy might be to create more autonomous learning environment during the teacher training process. Trainees who have the first-hand positive experience of learner autonomy would be more likely to promote it in their future classrooms.

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