EFL Teachers’ Perceptions on Learner Autonomy in Online Instruction during the Lockdown Period

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Abstract
Teaching English has been one of the subjects deeply affected by the lockdown and physical isolation period caused by COVID-19, and schools around the world had to switch to online instruction at short notice. Students engaged in this distance learning process with different autonomy levels; some adapted to the new learning system easily, while others felt lost and depended solely on what the teachers said. This descriptive study aims to discover the perception of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers on learner autonomy levels of Turkish EFL learners during online instruction throughout the lockdown period; what the biggest barriers that blocked their students’ autonomous study habits were; and what strategies teachers/ instructors followed to enhance the students’ autonomy levels. In order to analyse the data collected through an online questionnaire from 66 teacher participants, a descriptive study design with a mixed method approach was adopted. Correlational analysis was performed on the quantitative data,
and qualitative data was open coded with content analysis. Findings showed that Turkish EFL learners were perceived to be autonomous at a rate of 55% by their teachers during the online instruction period, and self-access materials, technology, motivation, and the affective factors played a significant role in the development, degree, and perception of autonomy in online learning.

**Key Words:** English language learning, learner autonomy, self-directed learning, lockdown, pandemic, online instruction

**Introduction**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges in the educational field as well as many others. Once the WHO announced the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic, school closure was one of the measures taken in almost all countries as it was found effective to stop the spread of the virus. Therefore, for the continuation of formal education, an excessive reliance on the use of technology through synchronous and/or asynchronous digital platforms was adapted for K-12 and tertiary level education. Educational institutions had to resort to synchronous or asynchronous ways of online teaching and assessment in order to complete their annual curricula as face-to-face education was seen as a threat, and online learning was found to be the only way of protecting the community from the highly infectious novel coronavirus (Murphy, 2020).

This urgent shift from face to face to online instruction made it almost impossible to measure the efficiency of online instruction as well as the readiness, or an overall evaluation of the new system. Educators and students were familiar with the integration of online components to face to face instruction to some extent; however, teaching, testing, and assessing the quality of learning fully online was unexpected for all parties in the educational setting. This relatively new way of instruction was unplanned, so it caused stress and anxiety at different levels among teachers and students. As Cao et al. (2020) stated, economic effects, effects of daily life, and delays related to academic activities were positively related to anxiety symptoms, while social support was found related only negatively.

It is also important to consider the unforeseen circumstances for teachers and students especially those who needed technical support or lacked technical equipment. It is only natural for most teachers to feel reluctant and unmotivated for this new way of instruction, since expertise and being updated with advances in educational technologies is not a must for teaching in developing countries. Moreover, this unexpected change has also created a disadvantageous situation for most students as they share neither similar educational backgrounds nor online opportunities. Online instruction has rather been counterproductive for individuals dwelling in rural areas for several reasons including lack of internet connection, low level of motivation, unfavourable physical environment, or inadequate technical knowledge. Countries with similar technical problems have possibly been adversely affected during the lockdown period, and the period had a negative impact on learner performance (Sintema, 2020).
As similar problems were experienced in different countries, instant solutions were proposed and put into effect to normalize the pandemic and take measures in case of a similar situation. Raising awareness and preparing all parties for a state of readiness could be an opportunity to lower the anxiety level, and thus, increase the efficiency of online instruction. Unique teaching platforms were also needed to be created for educational purposes in the future as well as methodologies and quality assurance (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). It was also necessary to develop open educational platforms for access to high-quality learning resources, increase the professional and staff-teacher capacity to support teachers in online platforms as well as cooperation with stakeholders for financial support and research in the area to evaluate the online instruction period with a focus on long-term sustainability (Zhu & Liu, 2020). In the Philippine context, for instance, higher education was kept responsible for integrating environment and health courses into their curriculum in the future, and suggestions related to adjusting the tertiary level education to the requirements of changing circumstances were proposed (Toquero, 2020).

Language teaching, in a way, has never been completely isolated from online instruction. Based on the necessity of learning English as a foreign language, there are already plenty of applications, websites, online lesson opportunities, as well as online exams or the alternatives of distance, blended or overseas education. Distance education carried out in two major directions; the individual flexible teaching model with more self-paced, asynchronous content with a minimum level of communication and the extended classroom model done through video-conferencing and interactive technologies (Rekkedal & Dye, 2007). Today, English teaching is done with the assistance of both models, and related research about their efficiency on language skills development and technological assisting tools, is available (Bahari, 2020; Howlett, 2019; Lee, 2018; Wang et al, 2009; Watkins, 2019).

In this respect, as teachers that are a part of the continuous online education system during the lockdown period, we would like to seek answers to the rising questions related to autonomy of the learners perceived by the teachers. We set out to conduct this research with a considerable amount of first-hand experience from our own online lessons that we taught during the ten-week online instruction period. We have had lots of opportunities to observe our students and have an idea of various types of difficulties they had to face. It was rather difficult to create a homogenous classroom environment since the independence level of students varied a lot in terms of motivation depending on the learner characteristics, time spared on online instruction, and psychological effects of the increasing number of cases of coronavirus.

Therefore, the current study will be of significant help to understand the autonomy level of students during the lockdown period from the point of teachers as well as highlighting the importance of stance in a similar situation in the future. Our research can also shed light on factors that affected learner autonomy in such a difficult period, and how different teachers followed different strategies to increase their students’ autonomy levels. We did not want to isolate ourselves from the study by referring to ourselves as “the researchers” because what led us to this study in the first place was the
struggles we faced as teachers of English. Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014, p. 234) emphasise that “research should lead to permanent criticality, confusion, perplexity, and complexity. This means that researchers should move away from God-like positions (pseudo-objectivity), take responsibility for their actions, and question and criticize systematically what they say and do.”

**Literature Review**

Sociocultural theory, proposed by Vygotsky (1978), has brought new perspectives to the field of language learning in addition to psychology. A shift of focus from teaching to learning has increased the number of studies related to learners and the process of learning itself in recent years. Learner autonomy, as a focal point, derived from this shift and has been studied comprehensively in educational context since the 1980s. In his report to Council of Europe, Holec (1981) first coined the term “learner autonomy” and defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” and added, “it is rather a skill to be acquired rather than having an inborn capacity”. From the definition of learner autonomy, teaching in a formal context by professionals such as teachers or instructors may not suffice to be equivalent to learning.

Studies related to learner autonomy are entitled to provide a deeper content for the link between inner processes of the learner and the learning process itself to provide a better understanding of the nature of learning. According to Little (1995), learner autonomy is extensively supported by learning strategies and learner training as well as pedagogical dialogue which could be defined by learning through interdependence. Benson (2011b) summarized the studies that have been carried out on learner autonomy by analysing them with respect to their originality. Benson (2011b) found that autonomy has been recently studied from a sociocultural perspective, technological advances and its interrelation with autonomy and teachers’ perspective.

Several scholars have defined learner autonomy in educational settings since the term showed up and became popular. Besides Holec’s fundamental definition of learner autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’, there are numerous other definitions of learner autonomy provided by different scholars as a result of the process of relating it to other variables such as quality of motivation (Vansteenkiste Lens, & Deci, 2006), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2002), self-regulated learning (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). Learner autonomy was also defined as a ‘capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action’ by Little (1995). He also added that autonomy uniquely entitles a different type of psychology in which the learner is able to make quite a difference both in the way of learning and synthesizing once acquired knowledge. Dam (1995) took the concept of autonomy from a more different perspective, and proposed that autonomy is ‘principle-driven’ rather than ‘activity-driven’.

Ryan and Deci (2002) associated the term autonomy with motivation in their theory of self-determination. According to the self-determination theory, autonomy is one of the three major components of motivation along with relatedness and competence. Autonomy could be held responsible
for activities to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated in different circumstances including learning. In this respect, autonomy might as well be interconnected with motivation. Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) related learning behaviour with the term ‘quality of motivation’ by distinguishing it from other related variables such as quantity, level or amount of motivation. According to Vansteenkiste et al. (2006), intrinsic goal framing supports task orientation, both short-term and long-term persistence and deeper processing of learning materials, which increases the overall quality of motivation. Zimmerman (2002) defined self-regulated learning as a process of transformation of cognitive abilities. Self-regulation theory focuses on the learning process in contrast to self-determination and quality of motivation theories focusing on the learner. In the three main stages of cycles of self-regulation, the learner set goals, use strategies and monitor themselves, and reflect and adapt to new strategies as a result of monitoring if necessary.

According to Little (1991), autonomous learning within the language classroom is built on three principles: learner empowerment, reflexivity, and appropriate target language use. Najeeb (2012) also refers to autonomy in language classroom with three fundamental grounds, and these are involvement, which is related to the degree to which the learners see themselves responsible for their learning; reflection, which is a way enabling them to critically analyse the process by organising, observing, evaluating their learning; and, finally, appropriate use of target language, which is the authentic or expressive use of the language learned. Learner empowerment or involvement takes place in the correct sense when the language learner is eager (competent) to take responsibility for their own learning. On the other hand, the reflection process is an opportunity for language learners to think back on what materials they use and how they implement them, and according to Turoiu and Stefansdottir (2011) this kind of awareness can contribute to learners’ autonomy levels. Finally, Najeeb (2012, p. 1240) defines the appropriate use of the target language as “using the target language as the principal medium of language learning.”

Technology can today be considered as a factor in the scope of learner autonomy, and as facilities such as learning management systems, online resources, and language learning applications are integrated more into education, self-directed learning becomes even more significant. There are several studies conducted in online learning environments to assess autonomy levels, student and teacher perception, and possible factors affecting autonomy. Zhong (2018), for instance, aimed to analyse the way learners manipulated the technology-mediated classroom in accordance with their goals and needs, and results of the study suggested that in the case of his participant, he benefited from the opportunities the class offered, and learned through decision-making, goal setting, and material setting. Another study by Collins (2008) aimed to approach problems connected with learner autonomy in the distance teaching context in an online professional development course for EFL teachers, and it was concluded that activities set up on inadequate interaction might bring about an ineffective formation of socially oriented autonomy.

Among studies relating learner autonomy and online learning, in the study of Nielson (2011)
on self-study attitudes towards language learning in the workplace, it was suggested that the high rate of participants’ attrition may be related to the lack of technological support and self-study guidelines as research related to online learners shows the need for support, guidance and access to wide range of materials and resources to achieve self-study process. It was also found in another study about the effects of storytelling on learner autonomy among highly proficient ESL learners that self-study resources build self-confidence in oral proficiency and increases learner autonomy when it is learner-centred (Kim, 2014).

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) delivered by Malaysian Ministry of Education through a platform to 5.5 million children is a web-based communication platform that contains a variety of synchronous/asynchronous course content, teacher assistance, document sharing options and learning resources to create an innovative Malaysian young generation (Van Raaij & Schepers, 2008). A study with a theoretical background of two theories - Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (a macro theory of motivation), and Channel Expansion Theory (CET) (media richness and social influence theory) - was carried out in order to measure the frequency of using VLE among teachers (Hew & Kadir, 2016). According to the results of the study, an autonomy-supporting environment and need fulfilment for competency as well as knowledge sharing attitude of teachers among their colleagues increase the intention to use the online platform.

Another paper by Ribbe and Bezanilla (2013) investigated how university students could be supported to develop autonomy in online lessons. The theoretical framework of the study was built on three principles of scaffolding autonomy in learners, which were presented with discussions concerning the difficulties caused by the online learning environment. Mentioning several conditions and reasons that channel people towards online learning, they concluded that not all students enrolled in an online course might be self-sufficient and experienced enough. Therefore, they tried to go over the reasons for dropouts to better figure out the needs for scaffolding for these learners. The researchers listed the three fundamental steps to scaffold the enhancement of autonomy in learners as 1) involvement of learners in setting their own learning goals and choosing their own methods to achieve these goals, 2) encouraging learners to reflect on their learning processes to maintain self-assessment, and 3) directing learners into authentic environments and learning communities. Then they provided some suggestions to apply these scaffolds on online university contexts.

All these theoretical frameworks and studies conducted led us to investigate certain aspects such as developing learning strategies, motivation, goal setting, achievement track, learning material organisation, reflection, and collaboration as these could be considered components of learner autonomy. The items in the questionnaire used in the study were collated by us keeping these components and different definitions of autonomy (Benson, 2011a; Everhard, 2015; Holec, 1981; Lamb, 2017; Little, 2007) in consideration.
Methodology

The study was carried out with 66 (N=66) non-native English teachers working in K-12 and tertiary levels in Turkey. The participants were selected randomly via an online questionnaire. Of the 66 participants, 44 (66.7%) were female, 20 (30.3%) were male. Only two (3%) participants preferred not to state their gender. The age of the participants ranged from under 25 to over 50. One half of the participants had an undergraduate degree, while the rest had a graduate degree. Only two participants (3%) were holding a doctoral degree among the ones with a graduate degree. Again, during the online instruction period 46 teachers (69.7%) were teaching at a university, whereas 20 teachers (30.3%) were teaching at the K-12 level (primary, elementary, middle, or high school). Most of the participants, 41 (62.1%), also stated that they had taken a special training on learner autonomy.

The study sought answers for the three main research questions:

1. What was the perception of EFL teachers/instructors on learner autonomy levels of Turkish EFL learners during online instruction throughout the lockdown period?
2. What were the biggest barriers that blocked the students’ autonomous study habits?
3. What strategies did teachers/instructors follow to enhance their students’ autonomy levels?

In this scope, a questionnaire link was sent to different schools and other formal educational institutions with the help of colleagues and contacts, as well as several social networking platforms including Facebook and LinkedIn. All the participants attended the questionnaire with a pseudonym, and were categorized into groups according to gender, the degree they completed, experience, and the level and weekly hours they taught online during the lockdown period. The participants were also asked which online platforms they used synchronously/ asynchronously during the same period. All the participants were briefly informed about the study and joined the study by expressing their willingness to participate in the study and with awareness that they can withdraw from the process at any moment. No identity-related or personal information that would threaten the anonymity of the participants, was reported in any phase of the study, and the participants were openly offered the opportunity to ask for the results of the study via our contact addresses. Some of the completed data were excluded from the study as the answers were incomplete and/or participants misunderstood the questions.

The current descriptive study follows a mixed method approach shaped around both quantitative and qualitative data. We created an online questionnaire (see appendix A) including the demographic information of the participants, and the items were collated by categorising the most referred factors that seem to have an impact on learner autonomy, such as self-access materials, technology, motivation, and self-regulation. Items with similar variables were mixed in the online version of the questionnaire. All items in the questionnaire were answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale. (1 point for strongly disagree, 2 points for disagree, 3 points for neither agree nor disagree, 4 points for agree, and 5 points for strongly agree). The questionnaire included different sub-components of autonomy such as responsibility, reflection, time efficiency, cooperation, and motivation. To measure
the adaptation to the online instruction, items such as benefitting from a variety of online tools and creating self-opportunities to practice were also added to the online questionnaire. Regarding the reliability of the items, overall Cronbach alpha (α) was found .93. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was utilized to analyse and interpret the quantitative data. The quantitative data analysis included descriptive statistics for each variable, and a correlational analysis. As the data were normally distributed, parametric tests were performed in the study. In the first place, factor analysis method was applied “to examine how underlying constructs influence the responses on a number of measured variables …” by examining the pattern of correlations (or covariances) between the observed measures (DeCoster, 1998, p. 1).

The online questionnaire also involved four open-ended written interview questions (see appendix A) that participants were free to answer at their own wills, and there was also no minimum or maximum amount limit in the length of their answers. To analyse the qualitative data collected through these questions, open coding was used and by looking at the frequency and correspondence of the codes, some categories which the participant teachers believe had an impact on their students’ autonomy levels were determined. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the related literature was significant in order to create codes and themes. This content analysis of the written open-ended questions was carried out as follows: (1) organize data, (2) explore and code data, (3) construct descriptions, (4) identify the qualitative findings, and (5) interpret the findings. The findings from the open coding process were also used to support and affirm the statistical results obtained from the questionnaire. The qualitative data was analysed through content analysis, and a directed approach of content analysis with open coding was applied.

Findings & Discussion

The Questionnaire

First, a factor analysis was applied to find out possible relationships among the questionnaire items and categorise them under certain titles. The statements in the questionnaire were categorized into four subheadings according to the results of the factor analysis: ‘perception of learner autonomy, perception of autonomy in online context, external language practice, and dependency on teacher support’.

The statements in the first category, perception of learner autonomy, included terms and keywords such as cooperation, shaping the lesson flow or content, time efficiency, enjoyment, reflection, belief in self-improvement (metacognition) and high level of motivation.

Keywords and terms in the second subcategory, ‘perception of autonomy in online context’ were a combination of autonomy perception of learners and online instruction. This category included keywords related to autonomy with an emphasis of integration of online components into the learning process. Using online tools, creating their own studying methods during online classes, utilizing online dictionaries, applications and websites, taking responsibility of their own learning, and finding their
own materials to use outside the class were some keywords used in this subcategory.

The third subcategory we created was named ‘external language practice’. Most keywords in this subcategory are about using online tools, however, only a few elements related to the perception of autonomy were added. Watching online movies, listening to online videos and songs are some keywords from this subcategory as well as asking for recommendation of similar materials, studying grammar on their own but not skills, and asking advice from the teachers.

The last subcategory was named ‘dependency on teacher support’ in line with the content analysis of the qualitative data. Some keywords from this category are ‘in need of constant orientation, feeling of learning only when the teacher teaches, completing assignments only when they are graded and asking for explanation of every little detail through the online instruction, statements that highlight dependency on teachers during online classes in the lockdown period.

Descriptive statistics- means and standard variations- of the total score for all the items on the questionnaire and these four variables, detected via factor analysis, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Measured Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All the items on the questionnaire</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of learner autonomy</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of autonomy in online context</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External language practice</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency on teacher support</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*N*: number of participants for each variable; *M*: mean; *SD*: Standard Deviation)

The participant EFL teachers’ perception of their students’ learner autonomy level was 55% (*M*=2.75, *SD*=.69) in total. When we analysed the four different variables, the rate at which EFL teachers perceived their students as autonomous learners was 52% (*M*=2.60, *SD*=.89). When this perception was reconsidered within the online context, the rate slightly increased to 58% (*M*=2.90, *SD*=.80). The rate was the highest at 59.8% (*M*=2.99, *SD*=.84) when teachers evaluated their students’ autonomy levels in the scope of external language practice. Lastly, in terms of dependency on teacher support, the level at which the teachers perceived their students as autonomous was the lowest with 47.6% (*M*=2.38, *SD*=1.00). The results revealed that students with the lowest perceived autonomy were in the need of teacher guidance (Nielson, 2011), and had a lower quality of motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006)

Then a correlational analysis was applied to prove the relationship between perception of EFL teachers on the autonomy level of their students and online instruction as well as other external variables. Table 2 presents the findings from this analysis.
Table 2. Correlation of variables and sub-categories

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>G</th>
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<th>ELP</th>
<th>TS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.79</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>-.60</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Grade</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.75**</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomy Training</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Load</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of learner autonomy</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of autonomy in online context</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External language practice</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.75**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency on teacher support</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01

The results of the data analysis showed that there are statistically significant and positive correlations between the four subcategories. According to the results of the correlational analysis, there is a statistically significant and positive correlation between perception of learner autonomy and perception of autonomy in online context of the teachers participating in the study (r = .74, p< .01). This result indicated that the students perceived as autonomous in general were also perceived as autonomous during online classes. As stated by Tsai (2019), the use of technology creates an environment supporting learning by its flexibility and freedom, as it is interrelated with monitoring and evaluating the learning process.

In line with the subcategorization, there was a statistically significant and positive correlation between the subcategories of perception of autonomy in online context and external language practice (r = .75, p < .01). This showed that there is a high positive relation between the two subcategories in an
online content. In line with the qualitative analysis of the study, it is possible that the teachers perceived that the online period affected the students either in a positive way or had no significant impact on the students. As autonomy is a step leading to becoming a life-long learner, what students do outside the classroom is significant for their learning processes. According to Lee (1998), creating an awareness in learners about the necessity of learning independently out of the classroom is crucial to foster continuous learning habits and sustain these habits even after their formal instruction. Other studies also point out that providing learners with suitable resources both inside and outside the classroom has a key role in promoting autonomy (Benson, 2011b & Richards, 2015).

Learner autonomy perception and external language practices were also significantly related in a positive way ($r = .56$, $p< .01$), however, the correlation between the two subcategories was lower than the correlation between the learner autonomy perception and learner autonomy in online context. This also supports the assumption that there is a bigger discrepancy between the autonomy components and the components including only use of external practices. According to Reinders and White (2016, p. 143), “the use of technology for learning often requires a degree of autonomy”. In this respect, this discrepancy may result from lack of technology use, organizational skills or low level of autonomy as autonomy requires resource management as well. Nemetz, Eager, and Limpaphayom (2017) also suggested that adapting an unorganized approach of online learning may not be as effective as well-organized class materials organized beforehand.

There was a statistically significant and positive correlation between perception of learner autonomy and dependency on teacher support ($r = .33$, $p< .01$), though lower when compared with other correlational values. This shows that perceptions of teachers on learner autonomy does include dependency of teacher support as well. Based on this, we can conclude that either teachers still see their learners as autonomous to some extent, or they assume their guidance is only online support and is a type of assistance in the way of being more competent with technological tools in line with their results of content analysis. Such a conclusion is also in line with the previous literature suggesting that online learners are in need of support and guidance on the way of achieving self-study process (Kim, 2014). Teachers have constructive roles in helping their learners become autonomous through creating awareness of learning strategies and resources (Camilleri, 1999), but learners with inadequate motivation have the possibility of turning this teacher support into teacher control (Deci et al., 1991).

**The written interview questions**

The first interview question asked participant teachers if they thought their students were able to study independently during online instruction, along with any relevant examples. 14 teachers ($n=14$) directly answered this question with a “YES” while 25 of them openly said “NO”. One of the categories that was quite visible on teachers’ answers were “Self -access Material” with codes such as *self-study material, optional assignment, extra writing tasks, extracurricular readings, and different publishing material*, and the word *material* was the most frequent code (9). Teachers who stated their learners were
independent emphasised how their learners benefited from outer learning resources, whereas teachers who observed dependency on their students stated that they did not refer to any extra material. One of the teachers remarked:

I don’t think they studied independently. They asked for constant help and guidance. In one case, they asked for similar exercises to the ones they were tasked to complete as homework. They don’t intend to look for materials for themselves.

The result points to the importance of self-access material in fostering learner autonomy, and Tomlinson (1998) says self-access materials bring along many advantages such as being specific to learner’s context including proficiency, purpose, age, and interests.

“Online Resources” was another category that recurred throughout the answers to the first question, and the codes were mobile apps, grammar videos, online homework, electronic media, online games, online native speakers, with video (5) and application (3) being the most frequent codes. Several teachers mentioned access to these online resources had a positive impact on their learners’ autonomy levels. Zhong (2018) stresses that learning technologies might enable students to transform their traditional, inactive learner roles to more active, autonomous roles on condition that the correct technology-based atmosphere is facilitated.

The second interview question aimed to discover what the biggest challenges that hindered the independence of the participant teachers’ students were. The biggest two of the most visible categories were “Problems with Technology” and “Lack of Motivation”. Apparently, the participant teachers believe that technology can be a barrier on the way leading to learner autonomy, as well as proving an effective factor fostering it. Teacher remarks from the fourth interview question also supported this detection. The codes collated around this category are inadequate devices, lack of technological facilities, no smartphone, and no internet, and the most frequent codes were internet connection (6), technological problems (5), and platform (3). One teacher replied to the second question as follows:

Students having enough opportunities and facilities in terms of technology, their independence was affected positively. They were able to search many materials, or they selected the useful ones for their assignments. Maybe, they may have encountered their friends, they discussed, and they may have decided together. Therefore, their autonomy levels together with their critical thinking skills could be developed. However, the ones who didn't have any computers, internet were not able to make use of the advantages of online teaching / learning.

Another participant teacher observed the similar issue from a different angle. Some of the students had the technological facilities, but they did not know how to benefit from those in a proper way.

… Also, I strongly believe that one of the biggest challenges that hindered students’ independence was their lack of capabilities in using technological devices, internet. Some of my students did not know how to send an email. Digital literacy? Unfortunately, no!
The fourth interview question was closely linked to the second one, and it explored if the participants think that the heavy use of technology had an impact on their students’ dependence/independence levels. Overall, 17 teachers (n=17) replied to this positively stating that no access to the teacher, access to lots of technological facilities, enjoyment, understanding the necessity of studying on their own, and increased amount of homework were the factors they believed rendered their learners more independent, while 15 teachers (n=15) claimed that technology had no effect on their students as they were still too dependent on the teacher, did not know how to use it, had to undertake too much responsibility, and experienced problems with internet connection. The third group, composed of seven teachers (n=7), implied their students became more dependent owing to technology because they did not know how to use it, did not want to leave their comfort zones, lacked computer skills, face too many distractors, started to ask more questions more often, were not ready, and had low proficiency levels.

While it is true that the student generations today can experience the integration of technology into learning like no other generation before did, learner access to technological tools and services such as the internet is not equal for each student. If used in an efficient way, technology can create numerous opportunities in the education context such as access to more learning resources, communication, and collaboration in a larger network, and addressing multiple intelligences. However, Warschauer (2010) points to the fact that technology is not a tool but rather a sociotechnical network, and students face a significant inequality in possession and use of technological facilities. Just as its presence in the learning environment can contribute to learner autonomy, its absence or not knowing how to properly benefit from it might delay learners’ development of autonomy.

Another category that appeared under the second question as a challenge to learner autonomy was “Affective Factor” with the codes lack of confidence, isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem, no eagerness, and self-thought, self-confidence (7) being the most frequent code. According to Dörnyei (2001), affective factor is what learners might go through during learning and these experiences might include emotions, feelings, and attitudes that have an impact on motivation. Benson (2001) and Hurd (2008) emphasise that if regulated, affect could enable learners to become cognitively aware and take control of their learning processes.

With the third interview question, we tried to find out if there were any strategies to which they referred to make their students more independent. In addition to more expectable strategies such as sharing more learning materials, providing more teacher support and feedback, or avoiding spoon feeding in every need, one strategy that was prominent in 5 participant teachers’ (n=5) similar answers was providing learners with more personalised materials, assignments, or tasks.

One teacher remarked:

I provided them with a long list of online sources where they could find all relevant learning materials to develop their academic and English skills. These resources were rich in genre, scope, complexity level, etc. One of the major criteria I followed in selecting learning
resources was getting my students motivated and interested, making them want to find out more on their own, ask for more, seek more. Some of the resources were sequenced and related to them personally and professionally.

These teachers’ endeavours to provide their students with more personalised self-access material could be an effective strategy to transform our students into more autonomous learners as Grow (1996) emphasises that many determinants such as family background and personality might affect a learner’s ability in self-directing their learner processes. According to Bishop (2006), goals set by learners can enhance their economy only if they have an awareness of their individual context.

**Limitations and Implications**

The first limitation was the sampling of the study. Number of the participants attending the study was limited, therefore, the findings were not sufficient to generalize the results of the study nationwide. The rate of participants teaching at higher education and K-12 levels were not balanced, either, which was another limitation of the current study. Both these limitations stemmed from time constraints. Due to the changing curricula of the educational institutions at both K-12 and higher education levels and the approach of adapting relatively simpler and remedial syllabi, the process of data collection and analysis was limited for the research. Another limitation was the lack of an intercoder reliability. We had to leave out the process of analysing the qualitative data individually aside due to the time constraints.

The findings of the study point to the fact that regardless of the educational setting, whether it is delivered online or face-to-face, language learners with autonomous learning habits seem to perform similarly in real classroom and virtual classroom contexts according to their teachers’ observations. Therefore, the struggles to orient language learners into online instruction could be easily turned into autonomy training as a subsidiary goal. Students who have been able embed autonomous habits (e.g. using mobile devices to organise their learning, evaluating their own learning through online tools, and being able to select relevant self-access materials) into their learning processes are likely to keep those habits even during their face-to-face education in real classrooms after the pandemic, and become lifelong learners.

The research also highlights the importance of self-access materials and external language practice for autonomous language learning. Therefore, curriculum designers, institutions, or individual teachers who would like to instil autonomous learning habits in their students cannot only integrate elements in the syllabus that will encourage students to benefit more from these out-of-classroom experiences, but also provide these students with guidance on how to achieve this. It is also possible to facilitate these advertisements and guidance through leaflets or pamphlets similar to those prepared by self-access centres to advertise cognitive strategies (Barnett & Jordan, 1991).

Lastly, the findings call attention to the concept of “teacher support” which is one of the biggest factors that enables learning in the classroom. A language teacher can provide this support in many
different roles such as the facilitator, the mentor, the manager, the observer, or the assessor. However, what matters in terms of teacher support, as the study shows, is to what amount it is provided and how it is perceived by the language learners. Therefore, the qualitative analysis in this research can enable language teachers who are teaching English online to reflect on their interactions with their learners and decide if they are providing guidance on becoming autonomous learners or just spoon-feeding their learners may render them too dependent on teacher support.

For further research, similar studies with a higher number and balance of participants could be carried out in order to generalize the results nationwide. Also, we set out to explore the perceptions of autonomy of students by the teachers during the lockdown period, so we had no underlying assumptions on our mind to reach based on the existent circumstances. However, the results of the study were in line with the existing literature and prominent studies in the field. Therefore, a more comprehensive study with assumptions and hypotheses with cause effect relationships could be conducted in the future. In the current study, no correlation between the lockdown period and before was investigated, so possible future research could focus on that aspect of the process as well.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of the teachers of English in Turkey on students’ level of autonomy, and to what degree the teachers believed that their students were autonomous, as well as exploring the challenges faced and strategies followed in the face of encouraging autonomy during the online instruction in the lockdown period. The data was collected through an online questionnaire and correlational analysis was performed on the quantitative data, while a content analysis method was adapted for the qualitative data. The findings showed that the perceived student autonomy level of English teachers in Turkey was 55% during the online instruction. There were also statistically significant correlations between the perception of learner autonomy, the perception of autonomy in online context, external language practice, and dependency on teacher support. The written interview also provided insightful findings in line with the statistics, and teachers who perceived their students as autonomous underlined the importance of self-access materials and online resources. Additionally, lack of motivation, technological problems, and the affective factor were barriers to autonomy in the eyes of teachers who thought their students were relatively dependent.

**References**


**Appendices**

*Appendix A*

**PART A. EFL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS ON LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ONLINE INSTRUCTION QUESTIONNAIRE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>During the online instruction period, most of my students ...</th>
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<td>set goals for themselves.</td>
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<td>used extra books and resources other than the ones used during online instruction.</td>
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<td>studied grammar topics on their own.</td>
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<td>created opportunities to practice writing/speaking outside the online lessons.</td>
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<td>tried new software, applications, or websites to enhance their learning.</td>
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<td>felt they learned only when I taught during online lessons.</td>
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<td>formed their own studying methods during online instruction.</td>
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<td>needed constant orientation and redirection during online instruction.</td>
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<td>wanted me to explain everything in detail in online lessons.</td>
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<td>were eager to cooperate with their peers to enhance their online learning.</td>
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<td>were able to use online dictionaries to look up and learn new words by themselves.</td>
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<td>benefited from their smartphones, tablets, or computers (to a great extent) adequately in this period.</td>
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<td>watched English movies/series to improve their listening skills.</td>
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<td>listened to English songs to improve their listening skills.</td>
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<td>chose their own materials to use outside the classroom.</td>
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<td>were eager to shape the lesson flow or content during online instruction.</td>
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<td>took responsibility of their own learning process.</td>
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<td>asked me to recommend similar materials to the ones in class to evaluate their online learning.</td>
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<td>enjoyed the online learning process.</td>
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<td>believed that they improved their English level at the end of online instruction.</td>
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<td>preferred to complete assignments only if they were graded.</td>
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<td>were interested in learning the cultural aspects of English during online lessons.</td>
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<td>used their time efficiently during the online instruction period.</td>
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<td>asked my advice on certain language learning issues when necessary.</td>
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<td>were able to reflect on what was effective and what was not in terms of self-study during online instruction.</td>
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<td>were motivated to learn English during the online period.</td>
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<td>were eager to do extra assignments even if they were not graded.</td>
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**PART B. WRITTEN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Do you think your students were able to study independently during online instruction? How? Can you specify with examples?

2. What were the biggest challenges that hindered your students’ independency in their studies?

3. Were there any strategies to which you referred to make your students more independent? What were these?

4. Do you think the heavy use of technology had an impact on your students’ dependency/independency levels? How? Why not?