A Comparative Study of Learner Autonomy in Terms of Gender and Learning Contexts

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Abstract: *This paper aims at investigating learner autonomy of students at university level in terms of learning environment and gender. The participants were 100 university students, 43 of whom were male and 57 were female. An equal number of traditional (n=50) and distance education students (n=50) participated the study. In the study, Likert type Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) developed by Egel (2003) was used to evaluate the learner autonomy in different dimensions. SPSS 20 was used to analyze the data. The results showed that there was a significant correlation between learner autonomy and education type of the students. Students getting conventional education were of the opinion that they were more autonomous. Results also indicated that some dimensions regarding learner autonomy such as readiness for self-direction and importance of class teacher changed according to gender type and there was a positive correlation between all the dimensions in questionnaire and learner autonomy.*

Keywords: *learner autonomy, distance education, conventional educational.*

Öğrenme Ortamları ve Cinsiyet Açısından Öğrenen Özerkliğinin Karşılaştırmalı bir Çalışması

Öz: *Bu çalışma üniversite düzeyinde öğrenme ortamı ve cinsiyet açısından öğrenen özerkliğini incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Katılımcıları 43'ü erkek ve 57'si kadın olmak üzere 100 üniversite öğrencisidir. Çalışmaya eşit sayıda örgün eğitim (n=50) ve uzaktan eğitim öğrencisi (n=50) katılmıştır. Çalışmada, öğrenen özerkliğini farklı açılardan ölçmek için Eagel (2013) tarafından geliştirilmiş olan Likert tipi Öğrenen Özerkliği Anketi (ÖÖA) kullanılmıştır. Verileri analiz etmek için SPSS 20 programı kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar öğrenen özerkliği ile öğrenme ortamı arasında bir korelasyon olduğunu göstermiştir. Örgün eğitimdeki öğrenciler daha özerk olduklarını düşünmektedirler. Sonuçlar aynı zamanda öğrenen özerkliğinin kendini yönlendirme hazırbulunuşluğu gibi açılardan cinsiyete göre değiştiğini ve anketteki öğrenen özerkliği altboyutlarının hepsi arasında olumlu bir korelasyon olduğunu göstermektedir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *öğrenen özerkliği, uzaktan eğitim, örgün eğitim*

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I. Introduction

Conventional education and distance education are radically different in terms of the physical environment they both present to the learners. Whereas in conventional language education, there is one necessary teacher, classroom and students, in distance education it is not possible to mention the existence of a classroom or classmates. In distance education, there is" a physical separation of teacher and learner" (Rumble, 1989, p.33). Therefore, it is highly different from the traditional classroom learning environment. Due to the fact that there is not an actual classroom environment, there is no way to mention collaborative work or cooperative learning environment in distance education. According to Hokanson (2000), "the distance language learning environment is far superior to the traditional classroom in the number of pedagogically sound choices it can comfortably present to each student (p.86)." The independent learning mode without formal constraints namely "distance learning" (Joshi, 2011, p.16) or distance education provides much opportunity for individual learners in this respect.

Learner autonomy is a fundamental term in educational contexts and studies. Literature abounds in studies that focus on learners, strategy use, learner perceptions, self-regulated learning and motivation including learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy has been defined by different authors in similar ways during the years. Autonomy has been argued for more than twenty years in related language concepts. (Chen, 2012, p.1). Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987), Little (1995), Benson (2001) and Chen (2012) made significant contribution to" learner autonomy" concept. According to Little (1995), "although much that has been written on the subject in recent years might seem to indicate the contrary, there is nothing new or mysterious about learner autonomy" (p.175). Hence, it is possible to see a number of "learner autonomy" definitions in literature which is based on Holec's (1981) study.

Apart from Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy which is "someone who is taking charge of his own learning is autonomous", learning autonomy also includes taking the active role in language learning process. Autonomous learner is someone who is responsible for his/her actions not in only school environment but in real world as well. (Busaidi and Maaammari, 2014, p.2052) On the other hand, owing to the fact that all education is in the hands of learners in learner autonomy; the mission of teachers is a question of debate. Some authors are of the opinion that some type of reinforcement by teachers is vital (McLoughin and Lee, 2010, p. 33) for learner autonomy. To realize this reinforcement; "teachers need to experience autonomous skills in their initial teacher training" (Balçıkanlı, 2010, p.91). At that point, it is possible to define learner autonomy as a cycle from teachers to learners and from future teachers to future learners.

There is a consideration that learners' knowledge about learner autonomy is mainly depend on their teachers. In autonomous learning environment "teachers do not control the whole learning procedure like a commander but take many other roles like directors or advisors" (Zuhuang, 2010, p.592). Thus, according to some authors, teachers should give a hand to their students to have autonomous awareness.

It is a common view that there is a link between distance education and learner autonomy. The consideration that distance learners are more autonomous than the conventional language learners has been stated by a number of authors during years. (Moore, 1977, Hokanson, 2000, Joshi, 2011) According to White (1995), "distance learners need to manage the learning process for themselves since their learning context does not provide the kind of regular direction and guidance which are normally furnished by the classroom environment" (p.216). A number of studies have been carried out by different institutions to observe the learning behaviour of the students. While in some studies there is a strong correlation between language autonomy and distance education, in some of them there is a "varying degrees of learner autonomy" (Vanijdee, 2003, p.81). Therefore, to look into the causes of these differences, more research should be carried out.

II. Literature Review

Learner autonomy has been studied by a number of qualified researchers and explained in different ways. However, most of the definitions are based on the one that was made by Holec (1981). According to Holec (1981), "to say of a learner that he is autonomous is therefore to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning and nothing more" (p.3).

Dickinson's (1987) definition included Holec's and also it covered the role of teacher and material use. He described autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (p.15). He also contributed that "in learner autonomy there is no involvement of a teacher and or an institution. And a learner is also independent of specially prepared materials" (p.15).

Wenden (1991) focused on the features of the learners and the reasons of some learners to be called "autonomous". According to Wenden (1991) "some learners are autonomous because they have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly appropriately and independently of a teacher"(p.15).Furthermore, Littlewood (1996) claimed that "ability and willingness" are also important factors for a learner to be autonomous.(p.428)

What is more, Voller's (1997) description included a classification of learner autonomy. He combined some of the earliest definitions and by adding his own, and classified learner autonomy as:

> "(1) situations in which learners study entirely on their own; (2) a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; (3) an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; (4) the exercise of learners 'responsibility for their own learning; and (5) the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning and education;

(4) the exercise of learners 'responsibility for their own learning; and (5) the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning." (p.2)

In addition to various definitions of learner autonomy, in most studies, similar terms are used. (Joshi, 2011, p.15) In literature, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning and independent learning are some terms used instead of learner autonomy. Researches concerning self-regulation strategies and self-direction parallel to the ones about learner autonomy.

Some other studies emphasized the role of teacher in autonomous learning. Teachers do not necessarily provide information in autonomous learning but "they also have the roles of consultant and facilitator who provide psychological, social and technical support for their learners" (Zhuang, 2010, p.593).

Motivation is a regarding term with learner autonomy. It is generally admitted that motivation is a positive reinforcement for learning. What is more, in some studies the relationship between motivation and autonomy has been examined. Ushioda (1996) noted that "autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners" (p.12).

The fact that autonomous learners do nott stay passive in language learning process has been repeated in a number of studies. Besides, Najeeb (2013) asserted that "autonomous learners realize their learning program goals, take the responsibility for their learning, take part in the process of activity planning and monitor and evaluate its effectiveness" (p.1239). Therefore, it might be possible to claim that autonomous learners are proficient in self-motivation, self-regulation, self-direction self-evaluation, and self-assessment.

Both Holec (1981) makes a distinction between a desirable learning situation or behaviour (self-directed learning) and the competence to get or create such learning (learner autonomy). According to Smith (2008), based on this distinction learner autonomy is particularly relevant for CALL or distance education settings where the decision-making processes depend on learners to a certain extent. Therefore, learner autonomy should be studied in relation to distance education settings. The present study focuses on the comparison of students in traditional settings and distance education in terms of views and perceptions of leaner autonomy. The study aims at answering the following research questions:

1) Are there any correlation between the learning environment and learner autonomy?

2) What is the relationship between the gender and learner autonomy?

3) Are there any correlation between the learner autonomy and (a) readiness for self-direction, (b) independent work in language learning, (c) importance of class/teacher, (d) role of teacher, (e) language learning activities, (f) selection of content, (g) objectives/evaluation, (h) assessment/motivation?

III.METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The study was implemented with 100 students who are enrolled in conventional and distance education sections of a state university preparatory school. The participants were in equal numbers in each group. The study was conducted at a state university in Turkey. Of the participants, 43 are female and 57 are male. The participants are at similar ages.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographics Profile		f	%
GENDER	Male	43	43,0
	Female	57	57,0
EDUCATION TYPE	Conventional	50	50,0
	Distance Education	50	50,0

As shown in Table 1, 43% of the participants are male (f=43) and 57% of them are female. (f=57). 50% of the participants consist of conventional education students (f=50) while 50% of them are distance education students. (f=50)

B. Data Collection Tool

This a comparative study based on Likert type survey questionnaires. In this research, quantitative data was collected. In the study, Autonomy Learner Questionnaire (ALQ) was used to measure the learner autonomy in different dimensions. The Autonomy Learner Questionnaire was enhanced by Egel (2003, in Karagöl, 2008). In this questionnaire, the respondents are presented with forty-four statements, and the statements have five options to circle "always true", "mostly true", "sometimes true", "rarely true", and "never true". The option "Always true" symbolizes number 5, "mostly true" symbolizes number 4, "sometimes" symbolizes number 3, "rarely true" symbolizes number 2 and "never" symbolizes number 1.

C.Data Analysis

In the data analysis, SPSS 20 program was used. In order to test whether there was a significant correlation among the reliability analysis, factor analysis and the demographic information, T test was applied for the gender and education type. The analysis was administered on the basis of 0, 05 significance level. The reliability analysis was carried out on the survey dimensions and Cronbach alpha value was found as .759. The scale might be admitted as reliable because of the alpha value ($\alpha \geq 0, 70$) Therefore, it can be argued that the reliability level of the surveys which were used as data collection instrument in the study is quite high.

Construct validity of the scale was realized with explanatory factor analysis. The suitability of data set for the factor analysis was evaluated with Barlett's Test of Sphericity and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.

Table 2: Factor Analysis

KMO andBartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-OlkinMeasure of SamplingAdequacy.		,730
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4030,096
	df	153
	Sig.	,000

The fact that Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is more than 60% and p value is significant signals that factor analysis can be administered (Nakip, 2003). The total variance explanation power of the factors is 62,638%. A total of 44 questions that students can explain learning autonomy are collected in 9 dimensions. There are totally 44 questions which can explain the learner autonomy of the students.

IV.RESULTS

Table 3: The comparison of 9 variables with the gender (n=100)

Variables	Gender	n	X	s.s	t/F	P
Readiness for self-direction	Male	43	24,2400	2,86826	4,162	0,000
	Female	57	20,9400	4,81668		
Independent work in language learning	Male	43	24,4880	5,45626	0,475	0,636
	Female	57	23,8800	6,76452		
Importance of Class/teacher	Male	43	25,1000	4,46871	0,240	0,591
	Female	57	25,5100	3,81369		
Role of teacher: explanation/supervision	Male	43	17,7200	3,94369	0,499	0,619
	Female	57	17,3000	4,45041		
Language learning activities	Male	43	13,2400	3,22338	1,278	0,204
	Female	57	12,3673	3,56309		
Selection of content	Male	43	9,1200	2,76745	0,385	0,701
	Female	57	9,3400	2,93890		
Objectives/evaluation	Male	43	7,0400	1,98936	0,569	0,834
	Female	57	7,1200	1,82544		
Assessment/motivation	Male	43	13,9800	3,68389	0,577	0,118
	Female	57	12,7400	4,16403		
Other cultures	Male	43	13,0800	4,46684	0,105	0,489
	Female	57	12,4200	5,01870		

As shown in Table 3, there is a significant difference between the gender types on the variable "readiness for self-direction." (t=4,162; p<0, 05). Accordingly, male students show the image that "readiness for self-direction" is more important for them compared to female students.

There is not a significant difference between the variable "independent work in language learning" and the gender on the 0, 05 significance level. (t=0,475; p<0,05) Both groups are in the opinion that independent work in language learning is important on the same level. According to findings on Table3, there is a significant difference between the variable "importance of class/teacher" and the gender type. (t=o,475; p<0,05) Female students claim that the variable "importance of class/teacher" is more important compared to male students.

What is more, when it comes to the variable "role of teacher: explanation/supervision", the views of the students do not show any significant difference according to gender type. (t=0,499; p<0,05). The variable "language learning activities" does not show any significant difference between the male and female students (t=1,278; p<0,05). Additionally, the dimension of "selection of content "does not show any significant difference between both of the gender types (t=0,701; p<0, 05). Besides, there is not a significant difference between the variable "objectives/evaluation" and the gender on the 0, 05 significance level. (t=0,834; p<0, 05)

Table 4: The comparison of 9 variables with the education type (n=100)

Variables	Education type	n	X	s.s	t/F	P
Readiness for self-direction	Conventional	50	24,4154	2,22361		
	Distance	50	20,5734	4,29341	2,818	0,000
Independent work in language learning	Conventional	50	27,9000	3,56428	7,311	0,000
	Distance	50	20,4600	6,25058		
Importance of class/teacher	Conventional	50	25,2245	3,76533	0,654	0,816
	Distance	50	25,4200	4,51795		
Role of teacher: Explanation/supervision	Conventional	50	16,6400	3,63520	0,332	0,037
	Distance	50	18,3800	4,54856		
Language learning activities	Conventional	50	14,2857	2,44097	4,730	0,000
	Distance	50	11,3600	3,61268		
Selection of content	Conventional	50	10,1800	2,63175	3,531	0,001
	Distance	50	8,2800	2,74821		
Objectives/evaluation	Conventional	50	7,8600	1,26184	4,489	0,000
	Distance	50	6,3000	2,11168		

Assessment /motivation						
	Conventional	50	13,0200	3,44928	0,857	0,000
	Distance	50	13,7000	4,42281		
Other cultures						
	Conventional	50	15,2200	3,43624	6,089	0,000
	Distance	50	10,2800	4,59387		

As shown in Table 4, there is not any significant difference between the education types on the variable "readiness for self-direction."(t=2,818; p<0, 05). Hence, the students in both education types has the same view on the variable "readiness for self-direction." When the views of the students about the "independent work in language learning" are compared according to education type; a significant difference on the level of 0, 05 is seen (t=7,311; p<0, 05). Therefore, the students who are subjected to conventional language education are in the opinion that independent work in language learning is more important.

Table 4 reports that there is a significant difference on the level of 0, 05 on the variable "importance of class/teacher" and the education type of the students. (t=0,654; p<0,005). According to this, the students who have distance language education classes assert that the variable "importance of class/teacher" is more important compared to the ones who have conventional language classes.

The views of the students on the variable "role of teacher: explanation/supervision "show a significant difference on the 0, 05 importance level according to education type (t=0,332; p<0, 05). Therefore, it is appropriate to suggest that the students who have distance education think that the variable "role of teacher: explanation/supervision" is more important compared to the students who have conventional language classes.

Furthermore, the answers of the students about the variable "language learning activities" show a significant difference. (t=4,730; p<0, 05) Conventional education students maintain that the dimension" language learning activities" is more important compared to distance education students.

Additionally, the dimension of "selection of content" shows an important difference on 0, 05 significance level. (t=3,531; p<0, 05). Therefore, students of conventional education assert that the dimension "selection of content" is more important compared to students of distance education.

Besides, there is a significant difference between the variable "objectives/evaluation" and the education type. (t=4,489; p<0, 05). Hence, students who are subjected to conventional education claim that the variable "objectives/evaluation" is more important compared to students who are subjected to distance education.

Students views regarding the dimension of assessment and motivation show significant difference according to education type on 0.05 significance level (t=4,730; p<0,05). This shows that, distance education students think that A / M dimension is more important compared to students' subject to conventional education.

When the students' opinions about the "other cultures" dimension are compared according to the educational status of the students, there is a significant difference at the significance level of 0,05 (t = 4,730, p <0,05). According to this, compared to distance education students. Students getting conventional education think that "other cultures "dimension is more important.

Table 5: Correlation Table of Learner Autonomy

	Read	IW	IC/T	RT	LLA	SC	O/E	A/M	OC
Read	1								
IW	,593**	1							
IC/T	-	-	1						
RT	,026**	,025**	0,352	1					
LLA	,000**	,001	-	,041**	1				
SC	,000**	,099	-	,419**	,000**	1			
O/E	,000**	,028	-	,098**	,000**	,263*	1		
A/M	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,461	1	
OC	,000**	,014	-	,200	,000**	,000**	,000**	-	1

** Correlation is significant on ,001 level.
* Correlation is significant on ,005 level.

Read=Readiness for self-direction, IW=Independent work in language learning, IC/T=Importance of class/teacher, RT=Role of teacher: explanation/ supervision, LLA=Language learning activities, SC=Selection of content, O/E=Objectives/ evaluations, A/M=Assessment/motivation, OC= Other cultures

According to results which are shown on Table 5, there is a significant positive correlation among the learner autonomy, readiness for self-direction and independent work in language learning. (r=, 593) Furthermore; there is a significant correlation between learner autonomy and importance of class/teacher and role of teacher: explanation/supervision variables. (r=,352) Lastly, there is a positive correlation between objectives/evaluation, assessment/motivation and learner autonomy. (r=, 461)

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study has focused on the investigation of learner autonomy in relation to education contexts, namely traditional and distance, and gender. Another focus of the study was to find out the correlation between and among the 9 subdimensions employed

in the study. In the first place, it can be said that both groups have moderately high levels of self-reported learner autonomy for all the sub-dimensions.

In terms of the gender, in general no statistically significant differences were found in the following subdimensions: independent work in language learning, role of teacher: explanation/supervision, language learning activities, selection of content, and objectives/evaluation. On the other hand, statistically significant differences were found in relation to *readiness for self-direction*. Male students seem to value *readiness for self-direction* more than female students.

Another focus of the study was to compare students in traditional learning context and distance education in terms of the dimensions of learner autonomy. The study found that there are no statistically significant differences between traditional and distance education students in terms of *readiness for self-direction*. On the other hand, statistically significant differences were observed in all the other variables, namely independent work in language learning, importance of class/teacher, role of teacher: *explanation/supervision, language learning activities, selection of content, objectives/evaluation, assessment and motivation,* and *other cultures.* Students in conventional classes seem to value the following variables more than distance education students: *independent work in language learning, language learning activities, selection of content, and objectives/evaluation.* In contrast, distance education students value *importance of class/teacher, role of teacher: explanation/supervision,* and *assessment and motivation.*

The final aim of the study was to see which variables of learner autonomy correlate with or among each other. The findings indicated that there is a significant positive correlation among the *learner autonomy*, *readiness for self-direction* and *independent work in language learning*. In addition, there is a significant correlation between *learner autonomy and importance of class/teacher* and *role of teacher*: explanation/supervision variables. Lastly, a positive correlation was also observed between *objectives/evaluation, assessment/motivation* and *learner autonomy.* It can be speculated that most sub-dimensions of learner autonomy correlate between or among each other.

The present study found that learner autonomy is particularly important for distance education programs. However, distance education programs may not have the capacity to develop learner autonomy. It is well-established in literature that teachers can enhance learner autonomy both by classroom practices or verbal encouragements (Nunan, 1997; Littlewood, 1997; Hurd, Beaven, & Ortega, 2001). As such, teachers are supposed to play a role in promoting psychological attributes and practical abilities on the part of students.

Literature offers studies that focus on fostering learner autonomy. Luke (2006), for example, conducted a study on inquiry-based learning and improvement of learner autonomy. The results of this study indicated that learner autonomy can be promoted in terms of *choices of activities and content*, *student-directed free time in class*, where students were allowed to choose what they would like to study how, and *opportunities*

to negotiate the curriculum. The present study also found that *choices of activities and content* and *student-directed free time in class* are particularly important for both traditional and distance education students. In the present study, *choices of activities and content* and *student-directed free time in class* was conceptualized as *independent work in language learning* and the findings indicated that it is directly related to the improvement of learner autonomy. Therefore, it can be asserted that students must be given opportunities to select the content, negotiate the curriculum and spare time for independent work in class time. To do this, an important instructional strategy would be to stick to inquiry-based approach.

Finally, although the present study reached a number of precious conclusions as regards learner autonomy, it is a cross-sectional study and may have failed to provide insights into how learner autonomy develops or what factors play a role in improving learner autonomy. Therefore, more longitudinal and experimental studies are needed in order to investigate the "how" of learner autonomy rather than "what" of it. Another suggestion would be to conduct domain-specific studies on learner autonomy. As is indicated by Yeung (2016), there is a paucity of studies that focus on domain-specific aspects of learner autonomy. For example, the construct can be studies in terms of learner autonomy in writing, speaking, listening or any other language skill, or in terms of ESP or EAP.

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