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## **Fostering Learner Autonomy through Extensive Reading: The Case of Oral Book Reports**

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### **Abstract**

For the English as a foreign language context, one of the prevalent challenges faced is that the learners come to the class, wait to be taught and stop thinking about English as soon as they leave the classroom at the end of the school day. Extensive reading in many studies is suggested as a way to overcome this obstacle. Yet, how to foster learner autonomy through extensive reading is still a matter of discussion. Additionally, an extensive reading program, which does not include learner's choice in selecting the material, will likely to be inconclusive. Having this in mind, this paper will report on foreign language learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding oral book report, a medium to promote learner autonomy in extensive reading courses across the English curriculum. This paper will also present the results of a case study where learners chose the graded reader and prepared an oral book report presentation to share their ideas with their peers. Data came from reflection papers, which foreign language learners kept for the purpose of this study, and semi-structured interviews carried out with learners and teachers of a language preparatory program at an English-medium private university located in Istanbul, Turkey. Findings and implications will be discussed in detail.

**Keywords:** *learner autonomy, extensive reading, oral book report*

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## Introduction

Autonomy is defined as the ability of the individual to take control of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). Accepting this responsibility for the learning process is significant since the learner will be ready to learn to reflect, plan, monitor and evaluate the learning process systematically and deliberately. Autonomous learners, then, can freely apply these strategies throughout their learning process. It is noted that this ability is not inborn and therefore must be acquired either naturally or through the formal learning (Holec, 1981).

In a similar line with Holec (1981), Little (1991) defines autonomy as the capacity for critical reflection, decision making, and independent action. Specifically, about the concept of autonomy, Benson (2001) emphasizes that learners should be free when determining the content of learning. Autonomy is, therefore, regarded as a part of an individual process in which the teacher becomes only an observer or a guide (Leon, 2010). Sinclair (2000), in terms of the aspects of learner autonomy states that developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. conscious reflection and decision-making.

As it is clear from the above discussion, learner autonomy is a slippery concept since it is difficult to define the term in an exact way (Benson, 2001). However, there appears to be a definition, on which there is a broad consensus, explaining that autonomous learners know the goal and take charge of their learning, feel free to take initiative in planning and applying learning activities, evaluate their learning regularly and interact with the others (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Specifically speaking, learners interact with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of language learning. This interaction is significant for learners' effective learning.

In addition to this benefit, learner autonomy is also suggested as a way to solve the learner motivation problem. If the learner is motivated to complete a task, this motivation is argued to be positively correlated with high autonomy of students (Zarei & Gahremani, 2010). Moreover, according to Little (1991), autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning process and then develop the skills of being reflective learners and as a result, the sense of achievement in learning nourishes their intrinsic motivation. Little continues with three basic pedagogical norms to foster learner autonomy especially in foreign language classrooms:

- *Learner involvement*: Making learners share responsibility for the learning process (affective and metacognitive dimensions);
- *Learner reflection*: Assisting learners to think critically in the process of planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning (metacognitive dimensions);
- *Appropriate target language use*: Using the target language as the primary medium of language learning (communicative and metacognitive dimensions).

In a foreign language classroom are many different students with different personalities, backgrounds, previous language learning experiences and learning styles. Consequently, classroom settings may not always cater for learners' needs. So, it is normal if students feel frustrated, confused and unmotivated. Therefore, learner autonomy in this situation may serve as a vehicle to wipe out all the negative senses as it gives the learners the opportunity to decide on the sort of the activity that they most prefer to reach their own learning goals (Leon, 2010). Moreover, teacher has also an undeniable role in fostering learner autonomy. For this reason, teachers in foreign language classrooms are suggested to use the target language as the principal medium of classroom communication and expect the same from their learners. They should also help their students set their learning goals creating a friendly atmosphere in the classroom which leads to discussion, analysis and evaluation; encouraging them to work collaboratively in small groups; asking the learners to keep a

record of their learning and evaluate their progress both as individual learners and as a class again in the target language are among the tasks (Little, 1991).

On the other hand, Leon (2010) believes that some teachers may be reluctant to implement practices which improve learner autonomy since they think that they will not be the one and only authority figure. However, Little (1991) puts forward that learner autonomy does not simply exclude the teacher's existence, or remove his/her responsibility in the learning process. In sum, it can be stated that learner autonomy demonstrates a change in the learner and teacher roles to a path where both parties work together to the advantage of the learner.

In this study, learner autonomy is operationalized as the one's ability to learn in a more autonomous manner and also his/her preparedness to learn in an autonomous way (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). In relation to the direction followed to foster learner autonomy, the present study applied a more social-constructivist perspective assuming that the learner autonomy could be improved in a setting where the meaning of learning is constructed in a social way in which learners interact with peers and teacher continuously in the learning process. Thus, present study will focus on the relationship between the extensive reading and learner autonomy. Therefore, before elaborating more on why a relation could be constituted between extensive reading and learner autonomy, it would be a wise idea to define what an extensive reading program is in the field of foreign language teaching.

Brown (2012) explains that extensive reading refers to the reading of large amounts of material, the level of which is convenient for the reader, and more importantly, which they choose themselves. On the importance of extensive reading programs, Grabe (1986), suggests that integrating extensive reading material into the curriculum is an effective way to make a reading program more complete. Specifically, Dickinson (1995) puts forward that successful individualized reading experiences foster learner autonomy and this leads to learning success and enhanced motivation.

Nation (2009) states that reading should be the main activity and other activities should occupy only a very little amount of time in a reading program. Having this in mind, most extensive reading programs should not require learners to do comprehension tests or exercises on the books read. Instead, students are simply asked to complete a short record form including the title of the book its level, the date, how long it took to read, and brief information on the quality of the book. Oral book reporting is one of the activities that can be implemented in a foreign language reading program.

Nation (2009) asserts that oral book reports as an extensive reading activity engage learners in presenting a commentary on a book to the class or a reading group. The underlying idea for such presentations is not to tell the story of the book in a complete way but to encourage others to read. Nation (2009) suggests that these reports can follow a set format answering questions about the name of the book, the type of story (e.g., a thriller, a love story), time and setting. Students even can answer if they enjoyed reading the book or whether or not they would recommend the story.

It is apparent that learner autonomy has strong links with extensive reading (Brown, 2012). All things considered, the importance of learner autonomy is crystal clear in the domain of foreign language learning and therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of learner autonomy in the field of English language teaching has been well-reported. However, the number of the studies dealing with the relationship between extensive reading and learner autonomy are relatively few and this study aims to fill this gap.

In order to integrate extensive reading in the language learning process, there are various suggestions which might in turn increase learner autonomy. To illustrate, Imrie (2007) used a delivery system library of graded readers to promote individualization and learner autonomy across the English curriculum at a Japan university. In the delivery system, books were brought to the classroom by the teacher in a 'shopping' cart. Students borrowed two or three books to take home on a weekly or bi-weekly basis over a 13-week semester. The students then wrote their name on the card and handed it to the teacher. In this manner, the teacher had a record of books taken from the library. Most teachers in the project encouraged the students to read on voluntary basis. The only unchanging requirement was that the students kept a report of books they read. It was important because participants had the sense of accomplishment and the reports assisted the teachers in monitoring the progress. The number of the students reading graded readers rapidly increased from 285 students reading 1275 books to 1470 students with 11230 books in four years. The English classed used the library included English oral communication, Test of English as a Foreign Language (known as TOEFL), discussion and presentation, listening and English seminar classes. Imrie, at the end of this longitudinal project, suggested that extensive reading with graded readers is an effective way to foster learner autonomy.

Despite the high number of studies investigated the role of autonomous learning in language learning process (Bayat, 2011; Dişlen, 2011; Tok, 2011; Tütüniş, 2011), there is no specific study conducted to investigate the relation between learner autonomy and extensive reading (with specific attention to oral book reporting) in the process of language learning .

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to report on foreign language learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding oral book report, which is accepted as a medium to promote learner autonomy in extensive reading courses across the English curriculum. In doing so, it is also aimed to present the results of a case study where learners chose the graded reader and prepared an oral book report presentation to share their ideas with their peers. Data came from reflection papers, which foreign language learners kept for the purpose of this study, and semi-structured interviews carried out with learners and teachers of a language preparatory program at an English-medium private university located in Istanbul, Turkey.

Specifically speaking, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions in relation to oral book reporting?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions in relation to oral book reporting with specific attention to learner autonomy?

## **Setting and Participants**

In 2008, with the aim of engaging students, who are going to major in English Language Teaching, into a skills based language learning process, a new curriculum was designed and started to be implemented for the preparatory program at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. Since the main purpose of the program is to improve students' language skills, each course has been based on skills based syllabus (Mede, 2012).

Within the study, five randomly selected preparatory program students and two reading instructors of the program were interviewed to elicit their perceptions related to oral book reporting and its role to foster students' autonomy.

## **Procedure**

As for the reading skill, the students studying in the above mentioned program have been required to do extensive reading through the readers selected by the program instructors and asked to write book reports. However, for the purposes of the present study, during the spring term in 2011-2012 academic year, the students attending preparatory program were asked to choose another reader themselves according to their interests and to prepare an oral book report individually.

After the book reports were presented orally, five of the students were selected randomly and asked to write a reflective paper by following the guideline provided by the researchers. They were also interviewed to explore their perceptions about oral book reporting to strengthen the data gathered from reflective papers. As another purpose, the reading instructors of the program were also interviewed to learn the views of teachers on oral book reporting and if it fostered the students' autonomy or not.

## **Results and Discussion**

In order to find out the perceptions of the foreign language learners' and teachers' in relation to preparing the oral book report, data obtained through the reflective papers written by the language learners and semi-structured interviews carried out with the learners and teachers of a language preparatory program were analyzed according to pattern-coding identified in Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) framework. For the purpose of inter-rater reliability, the transcriptions were coded by each researcher and the codes on which every researcher agreed extracted. Specifically, the qualitative data were first transcribed, and then by reading each participant's transcript the contextual themes were identified by the researchers according to the recurring words and ideas. These conceptual categories were used to create a matrix of major themes which were sorted under specific headings. Finally, the supporting quotes from each participant were listed and discussed under each heading.

### ***The Findings of the Reflective Papers Written by the Foreign Language Learners***

Data from reflective papers were analyzed under the following two assertions: presentation and reading skills.

#### ***Presentation skills***

##### **a. Fluency in Speaking**

'Preparing oral book reports helps language learners to use the language effectively. It provides them with the opportunity to exchange their own ideas and feelings, and get immediate reaction or feedback after discussing them with other peers which triggers language fluency.'

In their reflective papers, the language learners particularly emphasized the importance of improving their fluency while presenting their oral book reports. Rather than just writing their ideas and feelings on a piece of paper, they find a chance to express them orally, and discuss them with their peers as shown in the excerpts below:

*Preparing oral book reports helps us learn how to express ourselves in the classroom effectively. We can exchange our feelings and ideas with other peers and also discuss them. In other words, we learn how to use the language effectively which promotes language fluency (Reflective Journal)*

*Oral book reports are one of the major tools which help us to use the language effectively. We share our thoughts and ideas, and get immediate reaction or feedback from other peers ( Reflective Journal)*

As it is clear in the above stated assertion and the quotations, the students are using their capacity for decision making and self-monitoring. This result is in line with the definition of autonomy given by Little (1991) in which he defines autonomy as the capacity of language learners for independent and immediate action. Additionally, these are the specific characteristics of autonomous learners demonstrating high level use of metacognitive strategies.

#### b. Body Language

‘Preparing oral book reports has positive impact on the language learners’ use of the body language by freeing them from formatting their reports. Using gestures and having direct eye contact are crucial factors help the language learner have control over the audience and make sure that his/her messages has not been misunderstood.’

Language learners stated that preparing a book orally aided them with their use of the body language. To put it simply, by using gestures and having direct eye contact, they could get the attention of the audience and have better control over the audience which made them feel more comfortable while presenting their book reports. One of the participants made the following comment:

*Oral book presentation is very helpful not just for improving your speaking, but also it gives us the chance to use your body language effectively. Eye contact and gestures help the presenter have direct contact with the audience which makes him/her feel more comfortable (Reflective Journal)*

Since the students are active while doing their presentations, they have a great opportunity to improve their skills related to their body language. This is also important to make them feel autonomous during the language learning process. As Leon (2001) states, the activities in which the student is active and the teacher is the observer, it has a positive impact on the student’s awareness of his responsibility as the learner. Thus, doing oral book reporting adds to language learners’ autonomy by freeing them from structured activities done with the teacher. In addition, due to being free and comfortable, they can improve their presentation skills under the supervision of the teacher. Moreover, in relation to the improvement in speaking skills, Little (1991) mentions the role of using appropriate target language as the primary medium of learning as one of the pedagogical norms to foster learner autonomy especially in foreign language classroom. Therefore, oral book reporting is a significant activity to promote learners’ use of target language through which they also increase autonomy.

#### *Reading skills*

##### a. Critical Reading

‘Preparing oral book reports helps the foreign language learners become more critical readers. They have to find out the most important information from the book and reflect on slides using key terms. In this way, they learn how to read between lines, synthesize information and become responsible for their own learning.’

Apart from the presentation skills, the foreign language learners argued that in oral book reports, they learned how to deduce the most important information from what they

read. In other words, they have become more critical readers who could identify the key terms related to the content of the book. Rather than getting the information as it is, they could read between lines and synthesize the information more effectively. Shortly, they learn how to become responsible for their own learning. Considering this issue, the following comments were extracted:

*In order to prepare an oral book report, you have to be able to find the most important information and identify the key items to be included in your presentation. Therefore, oral book reports help us read more critically, synthesize the given information and become more responsible for our own learning (Reflective Journal)*

*While writing book reports we usually try to write long pages and get lost in details. However, with oral book reports, we have to read between lines to identify the key terms while preparing our presentations. This improves our critical thinking skills and also makes us become more independent learners (Reflective Journal)*

Holec (1981) asserted that, autonomy is very much related to the ability of the learner to take control of his own learning. Parallel to what Holec (1981) asserted, it is clear that the students have the responsibility of their own learning process by reflecting, planning and monitoring. Therefore, it will not be wrong to claim that oral book reporting helps learners to be reflective learners who are planning their own learning which makes them autonomous in their language learning process.

#### b. React and Respond Critically

‘Oral book reports provide the foreign language learners with the opportunity to get immediate reaction and respond from the audience which promotes learner reflection.’

Participated students indicated that via oral book reports they have strong interaction with audience which helps them become reflective. They share their ideas about the book and this improves their reflective skills in terms of planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning as reported in the following statement:

*‘Presenting a book orally helps us get immediate reaction and respond from the audience. We exchange our ideas and learn how to become more reflective learners who plan and assess their own learning.’ (Reflective Journal)*

This result is in line with the statements of Holec (1981) and Little (1991). As they claimed, the students who have prepared oral book reports increased their capacities for critical reflection. Not only did they reflect on their own reports in the process of preparation, but also they reflected critically on their friends’ work. Thus, as Thanasolous (2000) and Sinclair (2000) pointed out, the learners’ capacity to control their own learning has a positive impact on learners’ being autonomous.

#### ***The Findings of the Semi-Structured Interviews Carried out with Foreign Language Learners and Course Instructors***

Foreign language learners and teachers of a language preparatory program stated their perceptions in terms of preparing oral book reports and its effects on learner autonomy.

First, when asked about the difficulties the foreign language learners had while preparing oral book reports, the students reported that although the learners experienced some problems at the beginning of preparing their reports; however, they overcame these problems once they received guidance on identifying the key points and supporting them. This idea was also stated by the teachers. In this way, learners have learned how to become autonomous learners. One of the teachers and learners said:

*'Although I believe that it was hard to prepare an oral book report at the beginning, I changed my mind once I have been introduced to certain guidelines showing how to identify the key points and support them with my own ideas. I feel more comfortable and motivated now while presenting in front of my peers.'* (Student Interview)

*'Even if the language learners had some difficulties while preparing their oral book report, with our guidance they could easily figure out the key points to be emphasized which has positively affected their individual performance and motivation, and helped them become more autonomous learners.'* (Teacher Interview)

Furthermore, both teachers and the foreign language learners stated that they liked the idea of preparing oral book reports and they would prefer it rather than written book reports. Learners also argued that oral book reports did not just help them improve their speaking skills but also made them become more reflective and active users of English, who could express their ideas, elaborate on them and discuss them with their peers as indicated below:

*'I would prefer to prepare an oral book report rather than a written one because apart from improving my speaking skills, I think that presenting a book orally helps me become more reflective. I can express my ideas, elaborate on them and discuss them with my friends effectively.'* (Student Interview)

*'I think the language learners have started to enjoy the idea of preparing oral book reports rather than written ones, because they had the opportunity to become more reflective while sharing their ideas and exchanging them with their peers.'* (Teacher Interview)

Moreover, the language learners stressed the importance of taking the responsibility of choosing the book that they like since this has given them the chance to be responsible for their own learning. It also increased their motivation and made the process of preparing and presenting the oral book reports more enjoyable. One of the participants made the following comments on the issue:

*'Preparing and presenting the book I like is really one. I enjoy my learning and feel more responsible since I am the one who has chosen to work on that particular book'* (Student Interview)

Parallel to the learners' comments, the teachers also agreed that asking learners' to choose their own books had a positive effect on students which increased their motivation by sharing the knowledge they searched and discussing it with their peers in the classroom as shown below:

*'It undoubtedly has a positive effect on students because the students again told me that they were lacking the feeling of motivation for most of the time when it came to reading. However, in this manner, they were motivated to read and they enjoyed the process of preparation a project to share the knowledge they searched and discuss their ideas with their peers in the classroom.'* (Teacher Interview)

The teachers and the foreign language learners stated that preparing oral book reports is more effective particularly of the improvement of the speaking and listening skills of the learner. In other words, the learners learn how to become effective speakers and listeners during the presentation apart from just reading and writing a book report as emphasized in the following excerpts:

*'I think that with oral book reports I have learned how to use the language more effectively. I have particularly learned how to become more effective speaker and listener which is hard to improve in written reports.'* (Student Interview)



*'Oral book reports are more effective since the language learners not only have to read and write the relevant information, but also present it. This helps them become both effective speakers and listeners.'* (Teacher Interview)

The foreign language learners stated that they did not cooperate with their friends while preparing their book reports because they chose their favorite books and wanted to work individually which promoted individual learning and responsibility.

Finally, the teachers argued that preparing a book report also had longitudinal effects on learners' reading achievement particularly in relation to vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. One of the teachers made the following comment:

*'I think, vocabulary and even the grammar can be recalled in the long term. Pronunciation will eventually be better thanks to oral book reports since the students are also studying how the words, particularly the unfamiliar ones, are pronounced. Other students watching the presentation usually wonder and may want to read the book that is being reported by their friend and this is of course another benefit. It should be noted that the presentations do not include how the story ends.'* (Teacher Interview)

As the most striking result of the interviews done with the students and the instructors is the agreement on its role of enhancing motivation in learning which is closely related to learner autonomy as also claimed by Little (1991) and Dickinson (1995). Furthermore, Little (1991) suggests increasing learner autonomy as a way to solve motivation problems of language learners. This is because, when taking the control and responsibility of their own learning, learners draw on their intrinsic motivation, an aspect which is very difficult for teachers to realize.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to investigate foreign language learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding oral book reporting, which is accepted as a medium to promote learner autonomy in extensive reading courses across the English curriculum. The results gathered through students' reflective papers and interviews done with selected students and teachers demonstrated a clear cut positive effect of oral book reporting on fostering language learners' autonomy. This result was derived from the learners' and teachers' responses in relation to the role of learner autonomy in raising awareness, taking the responsibility of learning, improving reading and speaking skills and enhancing motivation in the language learning process.

That is to say, this study fills the gap about oral book reporting in the field of English language teaching, of which effects have to be researched more by providing some significant evidence related to its place in fostering learner autonomy in an EFL classroom. Additionally, by fostering learner autonomy, this way of extensive reading helps language teachers find a solution to increase their students' intrinsic motivation which can be challenging task for foreign language teachers.

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