

**1<sup>st</sup> International Black Sea Conference on Language and Language Education  
September 22-23, 2017, Ondokuz Mayıs University, SAMSUN**

**TEACHER AUTONOMY IN EFL CONTEXT**

*Assist. Prof. Dr. Dilek Çakıcı, Ondokuz Mayıs University, Education Faculty, Foreign Language Teaching Department, dcakici@omu.edu.tr*

**ABSTRACT**

With the advent of learner autonomy concept, teacher autonomy is of great interest to researchers as a new construct in the field of language learning. In recent years, there has been a blooming trend to analyze teacher autonomy from a variety of dimensions. The notion of teacher autonomy offers an opportunity to understand the nature of autonomous teacher and its relationship to learner autonomy. Teacher autonomy is conceptualized as teachers' ability to develop proper skills, knowledge, and attitudes. It is widely claimed that language teachers are more likely to succeed in enhancing learner autonomy if their own teaching practises has encouraged them to be autonomous. Language teachers play a crucial role in promoting autonomy in their learners. From this perspective, it is of vital importance to elucidate teacher autonomy so as to engage learners in autonomous learning, and also to foster a better understanding of language learning autonomy process. A growing body of research has been carried out to search the learner autonomy but few have dealt with the teacher autonomy in EFL context. Therefore, the researcher aimed to review comprehensively different dimensions of teacher autonomy in a learner-centered pedagogy. A review of literature reveals that teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interrelated and interactive. Hence, this study is an attempt to sketch the the dynamic relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. Besides, the typical characteristics of autonomous language teachers are put forth, and certain practical suggestions will be made to promote teacher autonomy in foreign language teaching process.

Key Words: Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy, Foreign Language Learning.

**INTRODUCTION**

The concept of "teacher autonomy" was first framed by Little (1995) in the mid-1990s. He conceptualized teacher autonomy as the "teachers' capacity to engage in self-directed teaching" in foreign language education (1995, p. 176). Different definitions have been put forward for teacher autonomy so far by many scholars and researchers from a wide range of dimensions. Teacher autonomy by definition is "teacher's willingness, capacity, and freedom to take control of his own teaching and learning". The three terms—"willingness", "capacity", and "freedom"—refer to the three broad dimensions of teacher autonomy: social-motivational, technical-psychological, and critical-political. Aoki (2000, p. 19) defined teacher autonomy as "the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching". Benson (2000, p. 111) follows the similar path stating that autonomy is "a right to freedom from control (or an ability to exercise this right) as well as actual freedom from control". According to the influential definition by Smith (2000, p. 89), teacher autonomy refers to "the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others." Nevertheless, Yan (2010, p. 67) argues that certain definitions given above focus on the ability of teachers, ignoring the dynamic relationship between the teacher and learners. To her, teacher autonomy means the capacity of teachers in managing knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the students' acquisition of a language with regard to learners" (2010, p. 67). Teacher autonomy requires both an individual and a social dimension. This "social-interactive" dimension to the teacher's life (Little, 2000, p. 1).

**Characteristics of Teacher Autonomy**

The concept of teacher autonomy has been analyzed from different perspectives and dimensions. McGrath (2000) represents the characteristics of teacher autonomy from two

interrelated dimensions, “as self-directed action or development; as freedom from control by others.” On the other hand, Smith (2001, p. 5) illustrates the characteristics of teacher autonomy as follows:

- A. Self-directed professional action
- B. Capacity for self-directed professional action
- C. Freedom from control over professional action
- D. Self-directed professional development
- E. Capacity for self-directed professional development
- F. Freedom from control over professional development

On the other hand, Yan (2010) contended that this set neglects the attitudes of teachers towards teacher autonomy. Therefore, she puts forward her point of view on teacher autonomy from three dimensions that is the capacity and freedom in knowledge, skills and attitudes. Clearly positive attitudes held is the prerequisite to the adoption of teacher autonomy, the capacity and freedom of knowledge is the basis, and the of skills are essential tools in order to be autonomous teacher. Burk and Fry (1997) explain the notion of “autonomous teaching beliefs” in view of teachers’ attitudes towards the development of their students’ autonomy. As for the components of teacher autonomy, Smith (2003) proposes two independent but interrelated domains of teacher autonomy as follows: domains of teaching and teacher-learning, which expands the notion of teacher autonomy and reflects the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy. Additionally, Smith and Erdögan (2008, pp. 84-85) interpret the previous discussions regarding the concept of teacher autonomy and highlighted the conceptual dimensions of teacher autonomy from different perspectives:

In relation to professional action, domains of teaching include

- A. Self-directed professional action (Self-directed teaching).
- B. Capacity for self-directed professional action (Teacher autonomy)
- C. Freedom from control over professional action (Teacher autonomy)

In relation to professional development, domains of teacher-learning include

- D. Self-directed professional development (“Self-directed teacher-learning)
- E. Capacity for self-directed professional development (Teacher-learner autonomy )
- F. Freedom from control over professional development (Teacher-learner autonomy).

Finally, Benson and Huang (2007) represented the most comprehensive definition of teacher autonomy with the three terms as “teachers’ willingness, capacity, and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning”. “Willingness”, “capacity”, and “freedom” correspond to the three broad dimensions of teacher autonomy: social-motivational, technical-psychological, and critical-political.

### **Learner and Teacher Autonomy**

A plethora of research in language education realm indicated the dynamic relationship between teacher and learner autonomy. As Lamb (2007, p.270) “ learner autonomy is bound up not only with the learners’ but also the teachers’ own learning and teaching experiences and their beliefs about autonomy. In essence, learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy. In other words, teachers never foster the autonomy of their learners if they do not themselves know what it is to be an autonomous learner. Additionally, teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously in all teaching practises (Little 1995). Teacher autonomy is now recognized as a prominent factor that affects the development of learner autonomy in foreign language education. Holec (1981) was the first person taking the concept of autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”. In a similar vein, Dickinson (1987) defined 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. 11). In the language teaching literature, the notion of the teacher autonomy refers principally to the freedom and the power of the teachers in their teaching environments. Both language teachers and learners need to collaborate with each other in the process of learning autonomy. The teacher autonomy and

learner autonomy are interacting with each other. The mutual relationship between teachers and learners are inevitable in the classroom context. Still, the interrelationships between the concepts are largely unclear (Lamb, 2007). Learner autonomy requires the freedom of learners from educational and linguistic barriers. As a result, it is teachers' autonomy to create a good environment for learners so that learners to acquire and practice the knowledge autonomously (Mollaei and Riasati, 2013). Learner autonomy also refers to the right of teachers to develop as human beings. It is personal development being constantly in negotiation with learners. Teacher autonomy has largely been viewed as a professional attribute to be developed through teacher education processes and, more recently, through processes of self-directed professional development. It has also been closely linked to a commitment on the part of teachers to the principle of learner autonomy (Benson and Huang, 2008). Little averred that teachers should conduct such a pedagogical dialogue effectively, teachers would need to engage in a "probably protracted process of negotiation by which learners can be brought to accept responsibility for their learning" (1995, p.178). In a similar way, Littlewood (1996) argued that the most important factor will always be "the nature of the pedagogical dialogue" in fostering autonomy in language learning (p. 175).

From this perspective, teacher autonomy is analogous to learner autonomy, differing from it mainly with respect to the object of responsibility and control. Although, learner autonomy entails responsibility for learning and control over the learning process, teacher autonomy requires responsibility for teaching and control over the teaching process (Benson and Huang, 2008). In that sense, Little (1995) posits that "language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous" (p. 179), suggesting that "teacher education should be subject to the same processes of negotiation as are required for the promotion of learner autonomy in the language classroom" (p.180). The teacher as a learner of the craft of teaching focused on the developmental aspects of teacher autonomy. For example, Thavenius (1999, p. 160) noted that the autonomous teacher as one "who reflects on her teacher role and who can change it, who can help her learners become autonomous, and who is independent enough to let her learners become independent". Promoting learner autonomy is prerequisite to teacher autonomy. It is teacher's responsibility to work autonomously with learners. Teachers should "become autonomous regarding curricular demands, pedagogical material and discourses, as well as in research, by being able to acknowledge the virtues and limitations of these areas" so as to promote autonomy in their learners (Tort-Moloney, 1997, p. 50). In that sense, Benson and Huang (2008) conceptualised teacher autonomy as a professional attribute connected two interrelated perspectives. Teacher autonomy is the capacity to control the processes involved in teaching process and also to a capacity to control one's own development as a teacher. Teacher autonomy is a parallel notion to learner autonomy; while autonomous learners control learning, autonomous teachers control teaching. In the second sense, it requires the teacher's own autonomy as a learner; autonomous teachers control the process of learning how to teach, which may include ongoing learning of their subject matter. It also seems significant that these processes of self-directed development are oriented towards the goal of learner autonomy. Barfield, et al. (2002, p. 220), for example, stated that teacher autonomy is "a continual process of inquiry into how teaching can best promote autonomous learning for learners". There are close connections between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy and teachers never develop the skills to be able to foster learner autonomy in their own classrooms without sufficient knowledge (Reinders and Balcikanli, 2011). Therefore, it could be argued that there are three key components which are required in any teacher autonomy-learner autonomy relationship:

1. The teacher learns how to foster autonomously as a professional, through critical reflection
2. The teacher has a commitment to empowering his/her learners by creating appropriate learning spaces and developing their capacity for autonomy

3. The teacher introduces interventions which support the principles and values which underpin their own and their learners' autonomy. So as to make the link between these components, the teacher needs to reflect on his/her own autonomous learning behaviour and consider its implications for his/her learners' learning. The teacher's autonomous learning behaviour takes the form of his/her own language learning or his/her teaching-learning, and this teaching-learning relates particularly to his/her development of his/her learners' autonomy. This cause a cyclical link between teacher autonomy and the development of learner autonomy (Lamb, 2007).

An autonomous teacher is selfdirected, reflective and collaborative in the community as well as at the workplace in a "life plan" or "strategy for life" (Al-Mansoori, 2008, pp. 36-37). Teacher autonomy requires the teacher's ability to make decisions about both teaching and their own professional development. Additionally, teacher autonomy entails the ability to understand the students' needs and the ability to support them in their development towards autonomy (Reinders and Balçıkanlı, 2011). According to Smith (2001), teachers need to continuously think deeply and carefully about their own role in the classroom, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behavior, in order to engage students in autonomous and effective learning. As Voller maintained that "the teacher's role in autonomous learning can be characterized essentially as one of negotiation, both with learners and external authorities" (1997, p.109). Breen and Mann (1997, p. 148) also identified three attributes of teachers who engage in a pedagogy for autonomy (self-awareness, belief and trust in learners, and the desire to foster learner autonomy) and six corresponding forms of classroom action (being a resource, decision sharing, facilitating collaborative action, managing risks, being a patient opportunist and getting support).

All in all, Little (1995) argued that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent then the development of learner autonomy depends on the development of teacher autonomy. In that sense, learner autonomy becomes a matter for teacher education in two separate but related senses. Therefore, it is worth providing trainee teachers with the skills to promote autonomy in the learners. As Higgs (1988, p. 41) has maintained, "the teacher should act as a manager of the learning programme and a resource person" in autonomous learning in which the learner works on a learning task or activity and is largely independent of the teacher."

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It is suggested to define teacher autonomy partially in terms of the teacher autonomy as a learner, teacher-learner autonomy. In line with that assumption, the possible interdependent relations between learner and teacher autonomy deserve to be clarified from many diverse aspects critically. Apparently, the awareness of this developmental and influential link is interpreted by prominent scholars in the literature. As Yan (2010, p. 68) declared that learner autonomy refers to the freedom of learners from educational and linguistic barriers. As a result, it is teachers' autonomy to promote a good environment for learners so that learners to acquire and practice the knowledge autonomously. In that sense, the autonomous teacher is "one who is aware of why, when, where and how pedagogical skills can be acquired in the self-conscious awareness of teaching practice itself (Tort-Moloney, 1997, p. 51). The autonomous teacher as a person with capacity for self-directed teacher learning or for professional development (Ramos, 2006). Teacher autonomy has been defined as the capacity to help students develop learner autonomy. Indeed, it has been accepted as a parallel capacity to learner autonomy, concerned with control over teaching, as opposed to control over learning. In other words, a capacity grounded in teachers' own autonomous learning (Benson and Huang, 2008). It is expected initial negotiation process between teacher and students. "The basis of this negotiation must be a recognition that in the pedagogical process teachers as well as students can learn, and students as well as teachers can teach" (Little, 1995, pp. 178-180). Therefore, teaching and promoting negotiation skills should be an indispensable component of teacher professional development. Also, Ramos (2006) suggested the ways to develop teacher autonomy as follows: Self

awareness, awareness of what happens around us, responsibility, challenges, participation and collaboration are also key elements to the development of autonomy.

These questions listed below proposed by Thavenius (1999, p. 161) may help to develop teacher autonomy:

What do I do to reconsider my teacher role?

What do I do for my students that they can and should do themselves?

What do I do to encourage independence and responsibility?

What do I do to help my students understand their learning processes and strategies?

The autonomous teacher should also:

\*create new spaces and tasks to provide students with opportunities for the promoting of autonomy.

\*provide constant opportunities for conscious reflection on classroom and out-of the classroom tasks.

\*provide spaces for students' personal expression and decision making.

\*provide as much guidance as required. Some students may not be ready for or interested in embracing autonomous work.

\*discover autonomous students and try to make them influence others, through project work, tasks and other types of group work where they would interact.

\*provide opportunities for self-assessment, peer-correction and feedback as integral parts of evaluation processes.

\*carry out strategy instruction, after determining what the students have, what they need and what works out for them.

\*increase awareness about facts in language acquisition through reflection and discussion.

\*increase awareness about what it means to be an autonomous student.

\*create opportunities to discuss theories, ideologies and beliefs, models of society, models of education and their relations and implications.

\*respect students' opinions and ask them to justify or give evidence for the positions they adopt, to help them foresee the possible consequences.

\*reflect constantly upon the importance of doing extra work (Ramos, 2006).

\*conduct action research.

\*implement team-teaching.

\*carry out the practice of reflective teaching.

\*develop teachers' self-efficacy.

\*promote teachers' metacognition and self-awareness about the sense of autonomy (Jiang and Ma, 2012). In a nutshell, teacher education should be subject to the same processes of negotiation as are required for the development of learner autonomy in the language classroom. Aims and learning targets, course content, the ways in which course content is mediated, learning tasks, and the assessment of learner achievement needs to be negotiated (Little, 1995).

## REFERENCES

- Al-Mansoori, K. (2008). Symposium on learner autonomy. In Beaven, B. (Ed.), *IATEFL Exeter Conference Selections*. (pp. 34- 37), Canterbury: IATEFL.
- Aoki, N. (2000). Aspects of teacher autonomy: Capacity, freedom and responsibility. Paper presented at 2000 Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Language Centre Conference.
- Barfield, A., Ashwell, T., Carroll, M., Collins, K., Cowie, N., Critchley, M., Head, E., Nix, M., Obermeier, A. & Robertson, M.C. (2002). Exploring and defining teacher autonomy: A collaborative discussion. In: A.S. Mackenzie & E.
- McCafferty (Eds.). Developing Autonomy. Proceedings of the JALT CUE Conference 2001 (pp. 217-222). Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching College and University Educators Special Interest Group.
- Barfield, A., et al. (2001). Exploring and defining teacher autonomy. *Proceedings of the College and University Educators. Conference*, Shizuoka, Japan. Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching.
- Benson, P. & Huang, J. (2008). Autonomy in the transition from foreign language learning to foreign language teaching. *D.E.L.T.A.*, 24:esp., 421-439.
- Benson, P. (2000). Autonomy as a learners' and teachers' right. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 111-117.
- Breen, M. and S. Mann (1997) Shooting arrows at the sun: Perspectives on a pedagogy for autonomy. In P. Benson and P. Voller (eds.) *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman. 132-149.
- Burk, D.I. & Fry, P.G. (1997). Autonomy for democracy in a primary classroom: A first year teacher's struggle. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13(6): 645-658.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Higgs, J. (1988). Planning learning experiences to promote autonomous learning [A]. In Boud, D. (ed.), *Developing student autonomy in learning* (2nd ed) (pp. 59-76). Kogan Page, London.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Jiang, Y. & MA, T. (2012). A comparative study of teacher autonomy between novice teachers and proficient teachers in the context of university English teaching reform in China. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 9 (3), 963-974.
- Lamb, T. E. (2007). Learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, synthesising an agenda. Lamb T.E. and Reinders, H. (Eds.), *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, Realities and Responses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Little, D (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System* 23/2. 175-182.
- Little, D. (2000). Learner autonomy and human interdependence: some theoretical and practical consequences of a social-interactive view of cognition, learning and language. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds), *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions*, 15-23. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Little, D. (2004). Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy and the European Language Portfolio. *UNTELE, Université de Compiègne*, 17-20 March 2004.
- Littlewood, D. (1996). 'Autonomy': An anatomy and framework. *System* 24,(4), 427-435.
- McGrath, I. (2000). Teacher autonomy. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 100-110. UNTELE, Université de Compiègne, 17-20 March 2004.

- Mollaei, F. & Riasati, M. J. (2013). Autonomous learning and teaching in foreign language education. *Journal of Studies in Learning and Teaching English*, 1(3), 105-120.
- Ramos, R. C. (2006). Considerations on the role of teacher autonomy. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 8, 183-202.
- Reinders, H., & Balcikanli, C. (2011). Learning to foster autonomy: The role of teacher education materials. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 2 (1), 15-25.
- Smith, R.C. (2000) Starting with ourselves: Teacher-learner autonomy in language learning. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 89-99.
- Smith, R.C. (2001). Learner and teacher development: Connections and constraints. *The Language Teacher* 25(6), 43-44.
- Smith, R. C. (2003). Teacher education for teacher-learner autonomy. In J. Gollinet al. (Eds.), *Symposium for language teacher educators: Papers from Three IALS Symposia (CD-ROM)*. Edinburgh: IALS, University of Edinburgh.
- Smith, R.C. & Erdoğan, S. (2008). Teacher-learner autonomy: Programme goals and student teacher constructs. In T. Lamb & H. Reinders (eds), *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, realities and responses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Thavenius, C. (1999). Teacher autonomy for learner autonomy. In Catterall, S. and D. Crabbe. *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Tort-Moloney, D. (1997). Teacher autonomy: a Vygotskian theoretical framework. CLCS Occasional Paper No. 48. Dublin: Trinity College.
- Voller, P. (1997). Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning?. In Benson P. & Voller P. (Eds.). *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Yan, H. (2010). A brief analysis of teacher autonomy in second language acquisition. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(2). 175-176,
- Yan, H. (2010). Teacher-learner autonomy in second language acquisition. *Canadian Social Science*, 6(1), 66-69.