

## An Investigation Into EFL Teachers' Autonomy Supportive Behaviors in Turkish Context

Cevdet Yılmaz<sup>1</sup>, Serdar Arcagök<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language Teaching, Onsekiz Mart University, Çanakkale, Turkey

<sup>2</sup>Department of Elementary Education, Onsekiz Mart University, Çanakkale, Turkey

Correspondence: Department of Elementary Education, Onsekiz Mart University, Çanakkale, Turkey.

Received: August 16, 2018

Accepted: October 14, 2018

Online Published: October 17, 2018

doi:10.11114/jets.v6i12.3697

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v6i12.3697>

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the autonomy supportive behaviors exhibited by EFL teachers. The population of the study is composed of EFL teachers working in Çanakkale city center and districts in the 2017-2018 academic year. The sample of the research consists of 80 English teachers at state schools in Turkey. In the study, the cross-sectional survey model was used to collect data. In analyzing the emerging data, non-parametric tests were administered because the findings did not show normal distribution. When the data were analyzed, it was revealed that the teachers showed supportive behaviors involved in the learner autonomy of the students. On the other hand, gender was found to be a significant variable in relation to the teachers' supportive behaviors underlying learner autonomy. Further, the results of the study indicated that the seniority year was not a significant variable in relation to the teachers' supportive behaviors underlying learner autonomy. The study concludes by suggesting the need to prepare future EFL teachers to support autonomy in the classroom setting.

**Keywords:** EFL teachers, learner autonomy, survey, teacher education

### 1. Introduction

Of the social-psychological factors widely studied in the field of second language teaching (SLA), motivation is frequently used to account for the rate and success of adult L2 acquisition (Dörnyei, 1998; Gass & Salinger 2008; Gardner, 2010). It is often the case that learners who are motivated tend to learn a foreign language better and to a greater degree. Clearly, as Dörnyei (1998) suggested, motivation serves as the primary impetus to initiate learning another language and to maintain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, examining all the other factors involved in motivation can be important to help understand the language learning process to some extent. Gardner who has become a distinguished figure in the field of motivation in L2 learning defined motivation as rooted in four aspects involving "a goal, effortful behavior, a desire to attain the goal and favorable attitudes towards the activity in question" (Gardner, 1985, p. 50). This supports the view that motivation has an effect on the amount of effort which learners invest in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Oxford, 1989). As such, by determining the factors influencing motivation, practitioners are in a position to harness students' motivation and thus to compel them to sustain their efforts in the language learning process persistently.

A general assumption underlying motivation is the belief that it is mainly characterized by its diverse aspects. In this respect, L2 motivation is a complex, multifaceted construct understood through different perspectives (Dörnyei, 1998). One of the most general and well-known motivation theories is that of intrinsic/extrinsic distinction. The intrinsic motivation deals with action performed for its own sake to experience satisfaction, such as listening to music, driving a car. As for the extrinsic motivation, the only reason for performing an act is eventually to obtain financial reward such as passing an exam. A great deal of motivation research conducted in the field of SLA has become interested in intrinsic/extrinsic distinction, and the focus on these concepts has contributed to the various attempts to pinpoint the source of differences in motivation between different types of learners. Williams & Burden (1997) suggests that it is important to introduce tasks which stimulate learners' intrinsic motivation both at the stage of initiating and maintaining motivation. Therefore, practitioners should take into account personality traits including interest, curiosity and challenge in the process of language teaching.

Although Dörnyei's extrinsic/intrinsic dichotomy dominated motivation research, Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) developed an alternative theory of motivation called self-determination theory (SDT). The present study draws on the defining principles of STD as a framework to explore motivation and its role in a learner's participation in an activity or task (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008, O'Reilly, 2014). Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) contended that humans have three fundamental needs when pursuing an activity. These three basic needs constitute feelings of competency, feelings of relatedness (i.e., belonging), and perceived autonomy support (i.e., perceived freedom of choice about learning tasks) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These needs interact to influence an individual's level of motivation (Vandergrift, 2005). This means that changes involved in any of these needs are likely to bring about a change in the level of an individual's self-determination motivation. Of these three needs in SDT, autonomy support is the construct that directly influences student motivation. Specifically, scholars argue that student perceptions of autonomy have an effect on individual learner motivation (Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 1999; Reeve, 2006).

Within the past decade, a good deal of research on motivation in the scope of SLA has been incorporated into the autonomy that informs self-determination theory. The findings of such studies highlight the value of personal autonomy in developing motivation. To this end, Ushioda (1996) asserted that autonomous language learners are motivated learners. Spratt et al. (2002) conducted a large-scale study on Hong Kong tertiary students in order to examine their readiness for autonomy. Their study has shown that motivation emerges as a key factor influencing the extent to which learners feel ready to learn autonomously. The close link between motivation and autonomy was also highlighted by Deci & Ryan (2000) who stated that 'intrinsic motivation will be operative when action is experienced as autonomous'. In a questionnaire study conducted by Borg (2017), the beliefs, practices and constraints related to learner autonomy were examined through the reports obtained from 359 teachers working on an English Preparatory Year Program at a university in Saudi Arabi. The results revealed that the teachers associated learner autonomy primarily with notions of independence and control. The study asserted that promoting learner autonomy was a desirable goal for most of the participating teachers. Similarly, a study recently carried out in Turkish context (Yiğit & Yıldırım, 2018) aimed to investigate the perceptions of ELT students related to learner autonomy in language learning. The findings from the study indicated that the participants mainly stated similar responsibilities, abilities, and activities in terms of their year of study.

On the other hand, the bulk of research underlying motivation has also investigated the role of autonomy support in fostering students' motivation to learn. Notably, the focus in these studies has mainly been on the relationship between autonomy support and types of motivation as proposed by self-determination theory (Black & Deci, 2000; Assor et al., 2005; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). The findings of these studies revealed a positive correlation between autonomy supportive contexts and several constructs such as self-determined motivation types, intrinsic motivation, and students' academic performances. In a similar study Noels et al. (2003) sought to identify how various motivational subtypes correlate to teachers' communication styles. These styles, among others, involve talking enthusiastically about the subject, explaining things clearly, being strict, and the like. The findings of the study pointed to a positive correlation between learners' intrinsic motivation and their perceived autonomy support. The studies covered above revealed the positive correlation between autonomy support and motivation. The EFL teachers' autonomy support positively affects students' enthusiasm and their interest in the course. It also supports students' various skills (entrepreneurship, decision-making, creative thinking skills). In this context, the autonomy support provided by English teachers to the students is of great importance. The present study attempts to extend the SDT framework to an academic foreign language context in order to examine whether teachers of English in Turkish schools demonstrate autonomy supportive behaviors.

### *1.1 Purpose of the Study*

The present study aims to examine EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors. To this end, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the dimensions that correspond to EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors?
2. Is there a significant difference between EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors and gender?
3. Is there a significant difference between EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors and the seniority year?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Model*

In the phase of data analysis, the study employed the cross-sectional survey method. The properties to be examined by the researcher are measured once through a sample and statistical analysis of the obtained data is done (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). In cross-sectional survey model, the aim is a research model that measures the data related to the variables that make up the research topic in a single measurement and determines whether there is a significant

difference between the variables in question. In this study, a cross-sectional survey model was used because it was aimed to determine the perceptions of EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors at one go.

## 2.2 Population and Sample

The population of the study is composed of EFL teachers who are working in Çanakkale city center and districts in 2017-2018 academic year. The sample of the research consists of 80 EFL teachers selected randomly. Such a sample type was used in the study because the probability of being selected for sampling was equal to the units (each unit in the sample) taken as basis in random sampling.

## 2.3 Data Collection Tool

The "Autonomy Supportive Scale" developed by Oğuz (2013) was used in the present study. The 13-item scale developed by Oğuz (2013) has a three-factor structure. This involves 7-item "Emotional Thinking Support", 5-item "Learner Process Support" and 4-item "Evaluation Process" factors. The scale developed by Oğuz (2013) is of the five-point likert type and is coded as "Always", "Very Often", "Sometimes", "Very Little" and "Never" ranging from 1 to 5. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was  $\alpha = .92$ . However, the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient for the dimension "Autonomy Support" was .88, "Learner Process Support" dimension was .80, and "Emotional Thinking Support" dimension was .88, and "Evaluation Support" dimension was found to be .86 (Oğuz, 2013). In the study, EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors were shown to be "Never" ranging from 1 to 1.80, "Very Little" from 1.81 to 2.60, "Sometimes" from 2.61 to 3.40, "Very Often" from 3.41 to 4.20, and "Always" from 4.21 to 5.00 respectively.

## 2.4 Analysis of Data

SPSS package program was used for the analysis of the research data. Descriptive analysis findings of the resulting data were determined by arithmetic mean ( $\bar{X}$ ), standard deviation (Sd), frequency (f) and percent (%) values. In addition, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were used because the data that make up the whole scale did not show normal distribution (Skewness: -2.26, Kurtosis: 10.3).

## 3. Results

In this section, findings obtained through the research are ranked according to sub-objectives and described in the context of the results of analysis.

Table 1. Analysis of EFL teachers' autonomy support levels

	Dimensions	$\bar{X}$	Sd
I.	Dimension	4.27	.54
II.	Dimension	4.44	.52
III.	Dimension	4.14	.63
Total		4.31	.49

I. Dimension: Emotion and thinking support, II. Dimension: Learning process support, III. Dimension: Evaluation process

As was exhibited in Table I, EFL teachers' autonomy supportive behaviors were measured to be higher ( $X = 4.44$ ) than the other dimensions with respect to "Learning Process Support" and were found to have responded to this dimension "Always". It was also found that EFL teachers responded to the whole scale ( $\bar{X} = 4.31$ ) similarly and the "Emotion and Thinking Support" dimension ( $\bar{X} = 4.27$ ) "Always". In addition, EFL Teachers' responses to "Evaluation Process Support" dimension were found to be "Very Often".

Table 2. Analysis of EFL teachers' autonomy support levels in relation to the gender variable

Dimension	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
I.	Female	57	43.68	2489.5	417.5	.02
	Male	23	30.48	670.5		
II.	Female	57	42.46	2420	487	.12
	Male	23	33.64	740		
III.	Female	57	43.34	2470.5	436.5	.03
	Male	23	31.34	689.5		
Total	Female	57	43.07	2412	416	.03
	Male	23	30.41	669		

I. Dimension: Emotion and thinking support, II. Dimension: Learning process support, III. Dimension: Evaluation process

In considering the data involved in Table II, it can be seen that female teachers had a higher level of support for learning autonomy regarding the dimensions "Emotion and Thinking" and "Evaluation Support" (Mean Rank: 43.07; 43.68; 43.34) than male teachers (Mean Rank: 30.48) and that this difference was significant [ $U = 416, p < .05$ ;  $U = 417.5, p < .05$ ;  $U = 436.5, p < .05$ ]. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the male and female teachers in the "Learning Process Support" sub-dimension of the scale [ $U = 487, p > .05$ ].

Table 3. Analysis of EFL teachers' autonomy support levels in relation to the seniority year variable

Dimension	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sd	$X^2$	p	Sig.
I. Dimension	1-5	17	43.29	2	.827	.66	-
	6-10	21	39.73				
	11 – 11 <sup>+</sup>	42	30.59	2			
II. Dimension	1-5	17	42.88		.513	.62	-
	6-10	21	39.40				
	11 – 11 <sup>+</sup>	42	30.88				
III. Dimension	1-5	17	44.38	2	.951	.77	-
	6-10	21	39.55				
	11 – 11 <sup>+</sup>	42	30.33				
Total	1-5	17	40.80	2	.102	.95	-
	6-10	21	39.59				
	11 – 11 <sup>+</sup>	42	30.83				

I. Dimension: Emotion and thinking support, II. Dimension: Learning process support, III. Dimension: Evaluation process

Table III reveals that teachers' level of displaying autonomy support did not show a significant difference according to the seniority year variable. Although teachers with occupational grades of 1 to 5 years of teaching had higher rank average scores in the whole scale (Mean Rank: 40.80) than teachers with 6 to 10 (Mean Rank: 39.59) and 11 and above years of teaching (Rank Average: 30.83, this difference was not significant [ $U = .950, p > .05$ ]. In the same way, although teachers' perceptions of autonomy support for the teachers with 1 to 5 seniority years in three dimensions of the scale respectively (Mean Rank: 43.29, 42.88, 44.38) had higher rank average scores than teachers with 6 to 10 (Mean Rank: 39.73; 39.40; 39.55) and 11 and above years of teaching (Mean Rank: 30.59; 30.88; 30.33), it was determined that this difference was not significant.

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

A close analysis of the research data suggests that the EFL teachers appear to adopt autonomy supportive approaches. This result is consistent with the previous research findings (Güvenç, 2011; Dinçer, 2011; San 2012; O'Reilly, 2014). One possible interpretation for this finding is that teachers allow students to express all kinds of feelings and thoughts about the learning process on a large scale. As the research literature revealed (O'Reilly, 2014; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio and Turner, 2004), this view strengthens the assumption that high autonomy support serves as a psychosocial variable that can have a positive effect on learner outcomes.

The results of the present study come to justify the view that EFL teachers tended to appreciate the students' efforts to work independently on the classroom level. Although this applies to the EFL teachers in the Turkish context, some teachers exhibit control-oriented teacher behaviors in the classroom setting regardless of autonomy supportive approaches (Cai, Reeve, & Robinson, 2002). In this respect, Reeve (2009) stated that teachers adopted a controlling motivating style because of cultural values and personal traits. It was also found that the controlling teachers were perceived more competent than autonomy supportive teachers by parents and administrators (Reeve, 2009). Despite these contradictions undermining the value of autonomy at some level, creating autonomy supportive climate in the classroom is of particular importance to learner outcomes in pedagogical terms. The study conducted by Dinçer (2011) aimed to examine how autonomy supportive climate would have an impact on EFL learners' success involved in the speaking course. It was revealed that an English speaking course climate in the department was autonomy supportive and the instructors behaved in an autonomy-supportive motivating style by listening to students, giving choices, understanding students' feelings, and so forth (Dinçer, 2011). The study (Dinçer, 2011) concludes that creating autonomy supportive language contexts results in students' classroom engagement whereby enhancing their competence in speaking skills.

Another finding in the research indicates that gender is a significant variable associated with autonomy supportive teachers in two dimensions (emotion and thinking support and evaluation process support). It may be that female teachers can allow students to take responsibility for their own learning process and in turn to be able to assess their learning outcomes. Another cause of this finding may also be related to the lessons of female teachers taught with a more empathetic point of view. The data on the learning process dimension indicates that male and female teachers have similar approaches.

The results of the research findings show that the professional seniority of English teachers is not a significant variable in supporting learning autonomy of students. In Turkey, the efforts have been made to train EFL teacher candidates adopting constructivist approach to teaching English in Turkish context since 2005. The resulting findings may be due to teaching programs introduced by teacher training institutions in Turkey. However, the fact that Faculties of Education as teacher training institutions in Turkey do not give weight to practical courses within their programs may be the cause of this result. Güvenç's (2011) research supports this result in the study. In a survey conducted by Güvenç (2011) with the participation of primary school teachers, it was found that teachers' autonomy support perceptions did not vary according to their seniority. It is stated that novice teachers have a tendency towards the mastery of control rather than support autonomy and that there is a meaningful difference between experienced teachers and those who are new to the profession (Reeve, 2009). The seniority year may not have emerged as a significant variable because the teachers who form the sample of the research within this framework are educated through the educational system depending on this approach to a large extent. It may be that the teachers arrange their learning experiences with activities based on the constructivist approach at some level.

Finally, this study provides several implications for future researchers to consider. Previous research has shown (Deci & Ryan, 1985; O'Reilly, 2014) that practitioners can foster an autonomy supportive classroom climate in multiple ways and this, in turn, may have an effect on learner outcomes. This is possible through student centered teaching and autonomy supportive teaching styles (Fournes, 1994; Bieg, Backes & Mittag, 2011). Such topics should be more closely examined in teacher education programs for teachers (Bieg & Mittag, 2010). Further, additional quantitative and qualitative research is needed to examine how teacher training programs in the field of English language teaching prepare future EFL teachers to support autonomy in the classroom setting.

## References

- Bieg, S., & Mittag, W. (2010). Self-determined motivation. In T. Hascher & Bieg, S., Backes, S., & Mittag, W. (2011). The role of intrinsic motivation for teaching, teachers' care and autonomy support in students' self-determined motivation. *Journal for Educational Research Online*, 3(1), 122-140.
- Black, A. E., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The effects of instructors' autonomy support and students' autonomous motivation on learning organic chemistry: A self-determination theory perspective. *Science Education*, 84, 740-756. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-237X\(200011\)84:6<740::AID-SCE4>3.0.CO;2-3](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-237X(200011)84:6<740::AID-SCE4>3.0.CO;2-3)
- Borg, S., & Alshumaimeri, Y. (2017). Language learner autonomy in a tertiary context: Teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817725759>
- Cai, Y., Reeve, J., & Robinson, D. T. (2002). Home schooling and teaching style: Comparing the motivating styles of home school and public school teachers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94, 372-380. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.94.2.372>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2271-7>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Dinçer, A. (2011). *Turkish EFL Speaking Course Students' Motivational Orientations and Their Instructors' Autonomy Support*, Unpublished Master Thesis, Atatürk University, Turkey.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1998). Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 31, 117-135. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480001315X>
- Fournes, A. (1994). *Promoting students' personality through student-centered teaching arrangements in primary education*. Frankfurt A.M: Lang.
- Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2006). *How to design and evaluate research in education (6th ed.)*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: the role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.

- Gardner, R. C. (2010). *Motivation and second language acquisition: the socio-educational model*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second language acquisition: an introductory course (2nd edition)*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Güvenç H. (2011). Autonomy Support and Self-Efficacy Perceptions of Primary School Teachers. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 17(1), 99-116.
- Noels, K. A., Clément, R., & Pelletier, L. G. (1999). Perceptions of teachers' communicative style and students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83(1), 23-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00003>
- Noels, K. A., Pelletier, L. G., Clément, R., & Vallerand, R. J. (2003). Why are you learning a second language? Motivational orientations and self-determination theory. *Language Learning*, 53(1), 33-64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9922.53223>
- O'Reilly, E. N. (2014). Correlations Among Perceived Autonomy Support, Intrinsic Motivation, and Learning Outcomes in an Intensive Foreign Language Program. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(7), 1313-1318. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.7.1313-1318>
- Oğuz, A. (2013). Developing a Scale for Learner Autonomy Support. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 13(4), 2187-2194. <https://doi.org/10.12738/estp.2013.4.1870>
- Oxford, R. (1989). Use of language learning strategies: A synthesis of studies with implications for strategy training. *System*, 17, 235-247. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(89\)90036-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(89)90036-5)
- Reeve, J. (2006). Teachers as facilitators: what autonomy-supportive teachers do and why their students benefit. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106, 225-236. <https://doi.org/10.1086/501484>
- Reeve, J. (2009). Why teachers adopt a controlling motivating style toward students and how they can become more autonomy supportive. *Educational Psychologist*, 44, 159-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903028990>
- Spratt, M., Humphreys, G., & Chan, V. (2002). Autonomy and motivation: Which comes first? *Language Teaching Research*, 6, 245-266. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168802lr106oa>
- Stefanou, C. R., Perencevich, K., DiCintio, M., & Turner, J. C. (2004). Supporting autonomy in the classroom: Ways teachers encourage student decision making and ownership. *Educational Psychologist*, 39(2), 97-110. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3902\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3902_2)
- Ushioda, E. (1996). *Learner autonomy 5: the role of motivation*. Dublin: Authenrik.
- Vandergrift, L. (2005). Relationships among motivation orientations, metacognitive awareness and proficiency in L2 listening. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(1), 70-89. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amh039>
- Vansteenkiste, M., Simons, J., Lens, W., Soenens, B., & Matos, L. (2005). Examining the motivational impact of intrinsic versus extrinsic goal framing and autonomy supportive versus internally controlling communication style on early adolescents' academic achievement. *Child Development*, 76, 483-501. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00858.x>
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: a social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yiğit, G., & Yıldırım, Ö. (2018). Perceptions of ELT Students Related to Learner Autonomy in Language Learning, 7(4), *International Journal of Higher Education*, 76-89.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](#) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.