Research Article

Parental involvement and learner autonomy in EFL context: A case study

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Autonomy development has an undeniable part in individuals' language learning process since it is almost equal to successful learning. Autonomy development starts in early childhood with the support of parents, and it continues in higher education, for the reason that autonomy is not a situation, rather it is a process. To be able to develop autonomy in children, parents have leading roles, since their involvement in the learning process affects their children's autonomous behaviors. The research has tended to focus on mostly parental involvement and learning achievements; however, few published studies have attempted to identify the relationship between parental involvement and learner autonomy. Hence, the present research carries out a case study in an EFL context with nine students and their parents by administering semi-structured interviews. The findings of content analysis of collected data reveal that a moderate and positive involvement in English language learners' learning process may lead to foster children's autonomy; nevertheless, involving in all process from setting goals and making decisions to applying appropriate techniques of children may result in less autonomous behaviors. Considering the psychological aspects, a wide range of studies can be carried out to shed more light on the issue of parental involvement and learner autonomy.

Keywords: Parental involvement, learner autonomy, parents' perceptions, language learning

1. Introduction

Feeling independent or being free? Making decisions on your own or following your own path? There are lots of terms related to autonomy, which makes it hard to conceptualize. Among several definitions by different scholars, Holec's (1981, p.3) definition "the ability to take charge of one's learning" was drawn upon in most studies. Besides, Littlewood (1996) posits that having an independent capacity to make decisions and carrying out these decisions governing the actions is the predictor of an autonomous learner. Little (2020) reports that learner autonomy is about learners' own planning, implementing, and evaluating their own language learning process. To be able to make it clear, the adapted definition of autonomy with regard to learning English in the present paper is the combination of these three definitions and is that "autonomy is to take responsibility of one's learning process by giving own decisions, setting goals, knowing what to learn, how to learn, weaknesses and strengths, being able to choose the appropriate techniques, being willing to learn, and taking risks to communicate.".

Additionally, the present study deals with parental involvement, which is the participation of parents in their children's learning process. Parental involvement has different aspects and different models. One of the best-known parental involvement models has been proposed by Epstein (1995); (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, (6) collaborating with the community. This model deals with the perspectives of parents, students, school, and community together as parts of a whole in students' development and education. The present study adopts the "learning at home" aspect of this model since it is related to parents' involvement with their children's learning at home by helping them with homework and goal setting, also it adds the decision-making aspect in a way of involving children's decisions about their language education.

The issue of the importance of autonomy has been under the discussion for several decades. According to Benson (1997, p.18), autonomy is the desirable goal of language education, and autonomous learning is almost tantamount to effective learning. Parental involvement is one of the key factors for the effective language learning and achievement of learners. A number of researchers have explored the positive effects of parental involvement on learners' achievements (Fan & Williams, 2010; Hosseinpouret al., 2015; Keçeli-Kaysılı, 2008). Emphasis has been on the relationship between parental involvement and learning achievement, with scant attention given to the relationship between parental involvement and learner autonomy.

Autonomy is a part of an individual's identity. It is obvious that there is a relationship between parents' behaviors and their children's autonomy level. The way the parents behave and involve in the learning process of children affect the way of learning (Punar & Karatepe, 2019) and becoming autonomous of learners (Doğan & Şahin Taşkın, 2016). The development of autonomy starts in early childhood within the family environment. According to Erikson's Epigenetic Principle (1977), there are eight stages of children's psychosocial development and parents are responsible for their children's psychosocial development. These eight stages are (1) trust vs. mistrust, (2) autonomy vs. shame and doubt, (3) initiative vs. guilt, (4) industry vs. inferiority, (5) identity vs. confusion, (6) intimacy vs. isolation, (7) generativity vs. stagnation, (8) integrity vs. despair. The second stage of the developmental process is autonomy vs. shame and doubt, and it occurs between the ages of one and three. Erikson claims that children are concentrated on developing a sense of autonomy in this stage, and if the parents do not allow their children to control their life, to make choices, to take responsibility of their choices, so children start to feel shame and doubt due to their choices (Erikson, 1977, p.226). Developing independence and a sense of identity are the key terms of this stage, and not providing opportunities to children for social experiences and independence may result in difficulty in feeling autonomous.

Additionally, Chickering (1969) proposed a theory for the developmental process of identity of higher education students. The Theory of Identity Development by Chickering (1969) investigates identity development by concentrating on seven vectors of development: (1) developing competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, (7) developing integrity. As it is seen that the third vector is about the process of autonomy. According to this theory, a higher education student should be able to work on their own and take responsibility for her learning. Students' independence is a key factor here and it should be both emotional and instrumental independence. As a means of this vector, students can be successful by being free of the constant need for comfort and approval from others, by developing a sense of autonomy and independence from others.

So far, the literature has mostly focused on the issue of learner autonomy in terms of learners' and teachers' perspectives. On the other hand, some studies focused on the relationship between parental involvement and learner autonomy. One of the known studies was carried out by Cullaty (2011). His study was to explore the influence of parental involvement on college students' autonomy developments. He conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 students studying at a state university in the South-East. The results showed that the parental involvement has a great influence on college students' autonomy development. When considered from this angle, the influence of parental involvement on language learners' autonomy development may also be significant. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on the issue of parents' involvement in the language learning process and the effect of this involvement on learners' autonomous behaviors. Based on this gap in the literature, the aim of the present case study is to explore the relationship between parental involvement and its effect on learner autonomy during the language learning process in an EFL context. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1) What are the parents' perceptions on their children's autonomous behaviors?
RQ 2) To what extent are parents involved in their children's language learning process?
RQ 3) To what extent do the children consider themselves autonomous?
RQ 4) What is the relation between parental involvement and learner autonomy?

2. Methodology

The present study aims to illuminate the relationship between parental involvement and their children's autonomy level in the language learning process. A case study as a qualitative research design, in which a detailed description and analysis of participants take place (Creswell, 2014) is used. Since the case study is a method for obtaining a detailed description and offering in-depth insights into a social issue in a cultural context (Dörnyei, 2007), it serves the purpose of the present study by enabling the researcher to examine the relationship between parental involvement and learner autonomy in an EFL context.

2.1. Participants

Since the study is conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and having a chance of readily available students, the participants are selected based on convenience sampling as a type of non-probability sampling. On account of that case studies are mostly carried out to examine a real-life issue rather than generalizing to a wider population, non-probability sampling serves the purpose of such studies (Taherdoost, 2016). The participants are English Language Preparatory Class students at a state university in Turkey. Out of 27 students in a class, nine of them and their parents participate in the study voluntarily. The Consent Forms are obtained from both parents and students whom to participate in the interviews. The age range of the students is 18-20. Students are enrolled in the departments of Aerospace Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Management and Information Systems. Demographic information of parents is demonstrated in Table 1. For the findings, the names of the parents are coded as P1, P2, P3…, P9; the name of the students are coded as S1, S2, S3…, S9 to be able to keep their names confidential.

Table 1
Demographic information of parents

	N	Percentage
Age		
41-45	5	56
46-50	2	22
50+	2	22
Gender		
Male	1	11
Female	8	89
Children number		
2	5	56
3	2	22
4	2	22
Knowing English		
No	9	100
Current statıs of working		
Doesn't work	7	78
Working in a private corporation	2	22

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews, which is a type of interview including some pre-prepared questions and enabling to encourage the ones who are interviewed to elaborate on the related issues (Dörnyei, 2007) will be carried out with students and their parents. The interview questions for students and parents have been prepared by the researcher based on the interview guide offered by Dörnyei (2007) to be able to find answers for each research question. Parents' interviews consist of two parts; the first part is allocated for parents' perceptions of their children's autonomous

behaviors; the second part is allocated to determine their involvement in children's language learning process.

Students' interview consists of 10 questions to be able to identify their perceptions of their own autonomous behaviors. Both interviews are carried out in Turkish, since the level of learners is not enough to answer the questions in English, and participants' parents do not know English.

For the last research question, students' self-reflection papers written previously and the observations by the lecturer during the class hours are used to identify the relation between parents' involvement and students' autonomous behaviors while learning English.

To be able to identify the demographic information of parents, a demographic survey, consisting of the information of age, gender, current work status, children number, and knowing English, has been created by the researcher on Google Forms.

2.3. Procedure

The lecturer observed the students during the class hours and recorded the sessions held on Google Meet. Before the data collection procedure has started, the students were asked to write a self-reflection paper and send back to the lecturer via email. Out of 27 students in the class, 19 of them wrote and sent the self-reflection papers. Then the actual data collection process was started. As a first step, the students were informed by the researcher about the interview to be held with students and their parents and asked who want to participate voluntarily. The ones who want to participate in the study got in contact with the class representative and registered their names on a schedule prepared by the researcher. After that, the class representative sent a consent form, which was in Turkish, prepared by the researcher to the students and their parents. The class representative sent the final schedule to the researcher and the researcher created a Google Meet link for each student and parents and sent the links via email to the students' email addresses. When the time on schedule came, the participants joined in Google Meet session and the demographic survey was sent via chat-box and participants were asked to fill in it.

Parents were interviewed at first, and each interview for both parents and students lasted approximately 20 minutes, and all the sessions were recorded. After parents, the students were interviewed. While interviewing with parents, the students were asked to leave the room in order to be sure of not being affected by the parents' answers, and it was the same for parents as well.

2.4. Data Analysis

To be able to analyze the data, the very first step was to transcribe the recorded interviews. Afterward, transcripts were read again and again as the second step for coding, which is the process of organizing data by identifying the keywords to make categories and writing words to represent categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The coding process included initial coding, which is the reading transcripts several times and labeling the keywords related to the research topic, and second-level coding, which is focusing on the most frequent and significant codes and reorganizing them (Dörnyei, 2007). The codes developed during the coding process are the combination of predetermined codes about autonomy and emerging codes collected from participants. For the validity of codes, an external auditor, a lecturer who is not familiar with the research (Creswell, 2014), reviewed the interviews and codes.

3. Findings and Discussion

The primary focus of this research is on the investigation of the relationship between parental involvement and English language learners' autonomous behaviors. Following four research questions, the first step was to get learners' and parents' ideas on the definition of autonomy. The adapted definition of autonomy with regard to learning English in the present paper is that "autonomy is to take responsibility for one's learning process by giving own decisions, setting goals, knowing what to learn, how to learn, weaknesses and strengths, being able to choose the appropriate techniques, being willing to learn, and taking risks to communicate."

Utilizing content analysis demonstrated that five of the parents never heard the autonomy term, while two of them claimed they heard but did not know what it was, and two of them claimed they knew but could not explain it. According to the students' answers, the most common term related to autonomy was "*independence*", followed by "*freedom*". One of the students claimed she could not explain it and gave no keywords related to it.

So, it is clear that neither parents nor their children know what exactly autonomy is.

3.1. What are the Parents' Perceptions on their Children's Autonomous Behaviors?

The first research question focused on the parents' perceptions of their children's autonomous behaviors. Out of nine parents, seven (P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9) of them reported that they thought their children were autonomous while learning English; on the other hand, P2 and P4 thought their children were not autonomous. With regard to adapted autonomy definition, the perceptions of parents on their children's autonomous behaviors are as follows.

Parents (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9) reported that their children were enthusiastic and willing to learn English. According to these parents, children always study hard, search for new information, spend much time studying English. For instance;

> "My girl is really prone to English, and she loves it so much. She always speaks English with her sister. She always searches for something new, asks the things she doesn't know to her friends. If it were not the pandemic, she would like to take private English course. She wants to do lots of things about English." (P6)

On the other hand, only P2 did not claim any willingness of her child, by only focusing on the child's fear and concern in terms of learning English.

> "I don't think that my child is an autonomous learner. She has difficulty in learning English, and she always thinks she cannot learn English, she will be unsuccessful, she has lots of fears of falling English. She has lots of concerns about English." (P2)

From the point of knowing what to learn, how to learn, and adapting appropriate techniques, the parents had various perceptions. P1 and P5 claimed their children knew what and how to learn English.

> "My child knows what and how to study and learn English. Even if he doesn't know, he searches for it." (P1 and P5)

P6 reported that her children knew what and how to study and learn, but panic while learning. P9 reported her son knew and she was not sure that his son really applied these techniques. On the other hand, P2, P3, and P4 claimed their children did not know what and how to learn English.

> "I think he doesn't know how to study English. So far, he has studied English only to pass English exams, and now he has no idea about studying English." (P3).

P8 did not report any perception on the topic of applying the appropriate techniques, since she did not know anything about the term.

> "I cannot say anything about his topic because I don't know. But he knows to finish something he begins. Otherwise, I don't know techniques and so forth." (P8)

The findings of the interviews in general regarding the first research question demonstrated that even if the parents did not know what autonomy was, most of them thought their children were autonomous. On their perceptions, most children were willing to learn English and knew what and how to study and learn English. On the other hand, some parents believed their children were not autonomous and they did not know what and how to study and learn English. The common demonstration of children's autonomous behaviors, according to parents, was to search for the things they did not know well.

3.2. To what extent are Parents Involved in their Children's Language Learning Process?

The second research question aims to identify the extent of parental involvement in children's language learning, so this part will be investigated into three dimensions; (1) goals, (2) decisions, and (3) process.

Interviews showed that each learner had goals in relation to language learning somehow. The parents reported that they knew their children wanted to learn English well, to go abroad with some exchange programs such as Erasmus, and also learn one more language except English.

"He says he wants to learn English so well that he can live in a different country." (P1, P5, P7 and P9)

The abovementioned parents only reported ideas on their children's goals for learning the language. Based on the excerpts, it might be understood that the parents knew their children's goals and involved in these goals in a positive way by just affirming and supporting them. On the other hand, other parents claimed their children's goals with their own ideas, by actually involving in these goals.

"WE have a goal, of course. To have a great language education, to improve self. Her goal might be to learn adequate English to express herself." (P2)

"He wants to go abroad with Erasmus program, to improve his English. WE have such a goal." (P3)

As it is seen that these parents used "*WE*" while talking about their children's goals. It might be understood that these parents involved in their children's goals about language learning.

"She definitely has a goal, but I don't know what it is. She has a dream of going abroad but I'm not sure that she wants it to improve her English, or just to have fun. This is open to question." (P4)

The excerpt of P4 revealed a negative parental involvement. The parents here did not know anything about their children, and they just criticize her.

About the decisions, all parents claimed their children's decisions were more prominent than theirs, and they followed their decisions. However, with the content analysis and detailed interpretation, it was understood that the situation was different from their claims. Only four parents (P5, P6, P7, P8) reported a positive attitude towards their children's decision-making process.

"I never intervene with my son. I always support him whatever he does and decides. He really knows what to do and he is a conscious child. If he has a relatively wrong idea, I just talk to him and share my ideas to find a middle way." (P5)

"We normally sit and chat during dinner time. They share their decisions, and we just try to do something according to their decisions. We always respect their decisions." (P6)

The rest of the parents (P9, P1, P3, P4) involved in their children's decision-making process somehow.

"If it is not an extreme decision, he makes his own decisions, and we try to support him. Sometimes he shares his decision, we just search for it, and if we find it useful, so we let him to do it. But, if it is not good, we just try to dissuade him. We cannot send him a language course by force if he doesn't want. We know that it will be bad for all of us."(P9)

"I want my daughter to learn English and attend a language course. I ask –how would it be if I send you a language course? -. I saw an application on the phone of my colleagues and asked my daughter to buy it. I thought it would be good for her. If she does not want to go, I don't send her to the course. Her decisions are more important." (P2)

Even if P2 claimed that she did not force her child to do something, she intervened with the decisions. At the beginning of the interview, P2 said: "I especially wanted my child to have an English education and attend a preparatory class. And finally, it happened." As it is clear from this excerpt that, the parents focused on her decisions and asked her child to behave according to her decisions.

P4 also intervened with his daughter's decisions, but he could not make her accept his own decision. P4 asserted that:

"I did not want her to study at a preparatory class, but she insisted that she would improve herself. It is the same for everything. She decides and comes to us to say –I want to do this- so we cannot change her ideas. We warn her but cannot do more."

The last focus was on parental involvement in the language learning process. Since all of the parents did not know English, they did not help their children while learning English. Instead of

helping, all of them were involved in different ways in their children's language learning process. The details about parental involvement from the perspective of parents were demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Parental involvement from the perspectives of parents

Themes	Participants	Excerpts
Guide	P2, P4	…I try to guide her. English is a must nowadays. I always say –I wish you learn English well within 5 years, so you become a manager in a company. These are my dreams and I share them with my daughter to show some good sides of English. P2
		…I offer some useful ways to learn English that I have heard from someone. I tell the things that I find true to me. Actually, I am not the director of her life, I just try to guide her. P4
Support	P5, P6, P8	…He chose to study English, and I just supported him. If he says –I want to go to America just right now, I say –let's go. I'm the supporter of my son. P5
		…Sometimes my daughters said they could not do their homework. In such situations, we didn't intervene. We wanted them to take their responsibilities for learning. We just supported them but never intervened with the process. P6
		…We cannot guide them for his language future, since we don't know English, but we always support him to learn English. P7
Motivate	P1, P2, P5	…I always say my son that we did not have chance to study English. But he has. I know someone who learns English and becomes manager in my workplace. I mention him to my son to motivate him, by saying that –learn English so that you can become a manager as well. - P1
		…I sometimes send English words as messages to my daughter so that I can motivate her. –P2
		…I don't know English except a few words. So, sometimes I say some words I know to him. It makes him motivated and enjoy language learning. P5
Direct	P3, P9	…I want my child to take private courses from the ones I know. I want him to send a language course. P3
		…I never say –study-, I just say –watch English movies instead of playing games. I ask him to buy English books to read, but I don't know what will happen. Normally I offer him to read English dictionary to learn new words. P9

These results showed that parents mostly tried to support and motivate their children in the way of learning English. The parental support has significance for children's learning process (Ule, Zivoder & Bois-Reymond, 2015), it may affect the learners' autonomous behaviors as well.

3.3. To what extent do the Children Consider themselves Autonomous?

The detailed analysis of the results demonstrated that all of the students considered themselves autonomous English learners. They mostly had an aim to learn English except being a compulsory course for them. They had goals, and they reported that they would do their best to learn English well. All of them reported that they knew their responsibilities and they were aware of their learning process. All of them had some weaknesses and strengths while learning English, and only some of them knew how to deal with the weaknesses. These results are in line with the studies associated with learner autonomy perceptions (Bayat, 2007; Ningsih, 2018; Razeq, 2014).

3.4. What is the relation between parental involvement and learner autonomy?

Autonomy is not a certain situation; instead, it is a process (Thanasoulas, 2000) that cannot be measured in one way. So, to be able to answer this research question, the first step is to take the adapted autonomy definition into consideration, and then compare the students' and parents' answers relatively to make an interpretation about the effects. Since it was a case study, each case was dealt with one by one, and two extreme points were selected to discuss and find an answer for the related research question. P2 and S2 were selected as negative parental involvement effect on autonomy, and P6 and S6 were selected as positive parental involvement effect on autonomy. All the other students showed autonomous behaviors somehow, and it would be difficult to interpret the effects. Therefore, choosing two extreme situations would be helpful to understand the relation.

In the case of P2-S2, the parents involved in almost all the language learning process of the child, from choosing the departments which had a compulsory preparatory class to forcing the child to download a language application. Based on the classroom observations, self-reflection papers and the student's interview answer, S2 could not demonstrate obvious autonomous behaviors, instead she was afraid of participating in the class sessions, she was unwilling to produce some English sentences when she was asked to say something, she was too anxious so that she could not understand the instructions as well. She claimed that her mother's decisions were more dominant, and she was afraid of doing something wrong. In P2-S2 case, the problem might be related to the mother's reinforcing her child of learning by claiming to make her motivated. Boonk et al. (2022) reported in their study that reinforcement of learning had a negative correlation with motivation. Even if the mother attempted to motivate her daughter by giving some examples, she literary led to anxiety. Additionally, the factor behind this issue might be related to the Epigenetic Principle by Erikson, since the second psychosocial stage is about developing autonomy or shame and doubt, and in the case of P2-S2, P2 may not be allowed her child to develop autonomy between the ages of one and three by not providing her opportunities to make her own choices and taking responsibility of these choices, S2 always feels doubt of herself, is afraid of doing something wrong, and feels dependent on her mother.

In the case of P6-S6, the parents tried to give responsibility to their child for their own learning from the beginning of the education life. The mother reported that they never intervened with their children's homework, or decisions. They just tried to support them to learn better English, to improve their language skills. In line with the mother's words, the student also supported these sentences by reporting that her parents allowed her to improve English however she wanted. Based on the classroom observations and self-reflection paper, S6 showed some autonomous behaviors, such as willingness to communicate, willingness to participate in group works, trying to have control on her learning process, reporting her weaknesses and strengths, and applying an appropriate method to study English according to her. The reason behind this positive autonomy effect might be associated with Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1969). For the reason that P6 gives responsibility for learning and choices to her child, and trying not to involve in every process, S6 develops a sense of autonomous identity by means of the third vector of the theory, based on her not needing approval or consent of her family, and this result is in line with the study of Cullaty (2011).

With regard to these two examples, it might be claimed that the more parents involve in the process by making pressure on the child, the less autonomous language learners will come into the stage. The more psychological support and giving responsibility, the more autonomous behaviors will be seen.

4. Conclusion

Inasmuch as autonomous learning is almost equal to successful learning (Benson, 1997, p. 18), helping English language learners become autonomous learners has significance in language learning. In the way of becoming autonomous individuals and learners, not only teachers but also

parents have important roles. According to Ericson's Epigenetic Principle, autonomy starts to develop between the ages of one and three. Additionally, Chickering's Theory of Identity Development focuses on seven vectors examining the identity development of higher education students, and one of these vectors is about moving through autonomy. In both theories, parents are at the center of children's autonomy development. Previous studies have predominantly concentrated on the effects of parental involvement on students' learning achievements. Nevertheless, scant attention has been paid to the relationship between parental involvement and learners' autonomy development. Therefore, the present paper first gives a brief overview of autonomy definition and theoretical background of autonomy. Then, it carries out a case study with nine English preparatory class students and their parents by conducting semi-structured interviews.

The results showed that none of the parents know the autonomy term, while some of the students claim that autonomy is associated with independence and freedom. Whilst some of the parents consider their children as autonomous English learners, all of the students consider themselves as autonomous. From the perspectives of parents, autonomous behaviors of their children are searching for the things they do not know, having responsibility for their learning process.

In the case of parental involvement, while some of the parents intervene with their children's goals, decisions, and learning process in a way, some of them just support and motivate their children to become successful English learners. Even if the parents claim they respect their children's decisions about the learning process, some of them report they disaffirm some decisions if they are not suitable with their own decisions.

In this present case study, two extreme situation leads to better understanding. If parents involve in the whole language learning process, including the goals, decisions, actions, and motivation, it may make students less autonomous learners. On the other hand, giving responsibility for learning from the beginning of learning, and supporting the decisions made by children enables students to be more autonomous.

The results of this study have significant pedagogical implications in terms of developing learner autonomy in higher education. Even if autonomy development starts at the very young ages, in higher education, autonomous learning plays a significant role. Before starting higher education, the parents should be acknowledged about the importance of supporting and guiding, and also providing motivation for their children. If the parents are aware of the significance of fostering autonomy, it may result in much more successful and effective language learning (Cullaty, 2011).

The findings of the present case study cannot be generalized to all, since the aim of this inquiry is to give some samples on the issue of parental involvement and learner autonomy in an EFL context. Due to the time and related study limitation, the findings and discussion of the present study could not be dealt and supported with related studies effectively. Additionally, the present paper only concentrates on a specific aspect of parental involvement. For further studies, a wide range of aspects associated with parental involvement may be included in the variables, and the research design may be triangulated by carrying out various types of data collection tools. On the other hand, since autonomy is associated with psychological aspects, further studies should be carried out by considering these psychological aspects of parents and students at the same time. Moreover, a longitudinal case study might be investigated to be able to shed light on the relationship between parental involvement and language learner autonomy, on the basis of Epigenetic Principle and Theory of Identity Development.

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