

Young EFL Learners as Co-researchers: Agents in Foreign Language Contexts

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Abstract

Autonomy is a crucial concept that has gained popularity in educational contexts in recent years. The importance of autonomous learners who are independent in that they are able to plan, control and evaluate their own learning has increased in classrooms. That is why this study investigates young EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' attempts as co-researchers doing their own research autonomously. Fourth grade students in a primary school were assigned to conduct a study on a topic of their interest and were interviewed to get insights into their research processes to identify their autonomous actions. Findings show that the majority of participants were able to choose a topic and conduct studies individually without any support from the teacher, and to successfully report their findings. They had problems with reflecting on and evaluating their outcomes.

Keywords: *autonomy; co-researcher; English as a foreign language; language learner autonomy; learner autonomy; learner involvement; target language use; young learners*

Introduction

Autonomy in educational contexts has gained importance over the years. Learner autonomy implies learners' ability to take charge of their own learning indicating that an individual has to be able to control his or her actions (Benson, 2001). If one focuses on autonomy in the educational context, it is crucial to bear in mind that several factors such as the teaching and learning context, the teacher's role, responsibilities given to students, and administrative issues may contribute to or hinder the promotion of autonomy.

Central to the development of learner autonomy is student choice operating at three levels: control of the learning process, control of resources, and control of the language (Benson, 2001). Choice in the educational context reflects freedom to decide on the ways one is going to learn and what one aims to acquire, and calls for critical reflection since it is not easy to make choices. Choice is the main factor that enables learners to commit themselves to the work they are doing. Increasing the level of learner control through enabling learners to make choices leads to an increase in the level of self-determination which obviously promotes learner autonomy (Chan, 2001).

The current study focuses on the political aspect of autonomy which relates to an individual's freedom to make choices and takes autonomy as the ability of individuals to control their learning processes including its planning, organization, and evaluation.

Since "good YL [young learner] teaching will provide opportunities for children to construct meaning in the language they encounter by incorporating it in purposeful action and interaction" (Cameron, 2003, pp. 107-108) and autonomy is fostered through choice, students in the present study were allowed to choose a research topic of interest, design their research questions individually, decide on the participants and the methods of data collection. This form of freedom was provided because it was aimed to motivate students to do research using English, and to increase their interest to learn English which could decline if one does not motivate learners in their early years (Cameron, 2003).

In addition to providing choices, "providing a rationale for a task can also promote a sense of autonomy" (vanLoon, Ros, & Martens, 2012, p. 1017). The importance of the task in question was explained to the students so that they knew the purpose of the research project: finding answers to questions that are of interest to the individual EFL (English as a foreign language) learner.

Many researchers (Benson, 2001; Huang, 2005; Little, 1995; Littlewood, 1996) have conducted research on autonomy with focus on foreign language learning. In studies that incorporated young co-researchers (Kellett, 2004; Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011), on the other hand, learners made use of their native languages. In the current case, the study aimed to emphasize the foreign language learning environment focusing on young language learners' research processes, in which they were allowed to consult the teacher or others reflecting the interdependence principle of autonomy. The use of the target language and students' progress with the assignment was monitored through the first group interviews conducted. The teacher made clear that the students knew how to go on with their studies and recommended any form of scaffolding concerning content and language use if asked for by the learners.

Literature Review

It is widely accepted that at the core of autonomy is learners' acceptance of responsibility for their learning (Little, 1995) which means that individual learners have to set their learning goals, reflect on their learning processes and evaluate their progresses. In order to be

autonomous, learners have to be aware of their needs, and be able to make decisions for themselves (Benson, 2001; Chan, 2001; Smith, 2008). The autonomous learner sets his or her own agenda for learning which encompasses “planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluation of the learning process” (Chan, 2010, p. 506). Here, the main point is being in control of one’s learning process which is divided into three branches: control over learning, control over cognitive processes, and control over learning content (Benson, 2001). According to Benson (2001), control over learning can be described through learners’ observable behaviours of planning, organization and evaluation of their learning. Control over cognitive processes is related to the psychology of learning, rather than observable learning of behaviours. Control over learning content has a situational aspect providing autonomous learners some freedom to determine their own goals and purposes.

As reflected through the various aspects of control, autonomy is a multifaceted concept. Based on this variety, previous studies dealt with autonomy in relation to many different aspects among which are motivation (Dickinson, 1996; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002), culture (Benson, Chic, & Lim, 2003; Ho & Crookal, 1995; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Littlewood, 1999; Pierson, 1996; Sercu, 2002), teacher autonomy and learner autonomy (Chan, 2003; Feryok, 2013; Voller, 1997), material development (Nunan, 1997; Sinclair, 1996), learning strategies (Esch, 1997; McDevitt, 1997), the role of self-access centres (Littlewood, 1997; Sheerin, 1997), technology (Bhattacharya & Chauhan, 2010; Schwienhorst, 2003), measuring autonomy (Benson, 2010; Dam, 2000) and describing autonomy (Benson, 1996; Little, 2009; Palfreyman, 2014).

Previous findings in autonomy research indicate that there are differing views on the relationship between motivation and autonomy (Dickinson, 1996; Spratt et al., 2002). It is still discussed if it is motivation that precedes autonomy or vice versa. In relation to culture, some researchers claim that autonomy belongs to the Western context while others assume that both Western and Asian contexts can promote autonomy but that culture influences its development in many ways (Benson et al., 2003; Ho & Crookal, 1995; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Littlewood, 1999; Pierson, 1996; Sercu, 2002). Material and curriculum development were also of concern as these explicitly influence the teaching context and either broaden or narrow freedom of choice and action for both the teacher and the students. Other points are technology and learner training or strategy training (Bhattacharya & Chauhan, 2010; Schwienhorst, 2003). Researchers see advantages in training students so that learners know what kind of strategies to use during their learning process to succeed (Esch, 1997;

McDevitt, 1997). One of such possibilities to profit from is the self-access center (Littlewood, 1997; Sheerin, 1997) but it is still discussed if it is the use of the center that promotes autonomy or if the center is used by autonomous students mainly.

Most of the studies in the field of autonomy focused on students at higher levels (Chan, 2003; Ho & Crookall, 1995) leaving young learners (YLS) out of concern. YLS' autonomy was dealt with indirectly, for example in relation to motivation (Wu, 2003).

For the current research study autonomy should be discussed in relation to young language learners. Characteristics of YLS at the ages of 8-10 are representative of several tendencies towards autonomous behaviour. These tendencies reflect themselves in YLS' ability to make decisions about their learning processes, frequent production of questions, knowledge about their likes and dislikes, and their readiness to collaborate with others (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). These raise the expectation that YLS make decisions about their learning, push themselves towards inquiry by asking questions, are self-aware and able to make decisions based on their likes and display openness to interdependency which are aspects of autonomous behaviour. Further, the fact that children between 7-10 can rehearse with help, while 12-year-olds are able to do this without support (Pinter, 2011) points to YLS' increasing ability to control their learning over the years indicating their autonomous behaviour.

Some researchers conducted studies in which YLS were involved as co-researchers (Kellett, 2004; Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011). These types of studies can serve as tools to examine if YLS are able to act autonomously. Lundy, McEvoy and Byrne (2011) engaged children as co-researchers to ascertain YLS' views on after-school programs. These researchers discussed the contribution of children to the development of the research questions and choice of methods, and their involvement in the interpretation of the data and findings. The authors suggested that, supportive strategies can guide children to conduct meaningful research. Kellett (2004) aimed to show that "with appropriate training, help and support children (...) can become active researchers, designing and leading their own studies" (p. 341). The work of children brings the child perspective into foreground while the experience of being an active researcher increases children's self-confidence and self-esteem which are two crucial factors that could promote autonomy.

It is assumed that engaging YLS as co-researchers will promote their autonomy since students will make decisions, plan their own study, and evaluate their outcomes. With this assumption, the present study investigated young EFL learners as co-researchers. Young

EFL learners were asked to conduct their own research on a topic they were free to choose, design and plan their research questions, research setting, time span of the research, and choose the participants, and prepare a research report and presentation using the target language.

Research Questions

The study set forth to examine young EFL learners' abilities to autonomously conduct research in the target language. For this purpose, it was aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do young EFL learners cope with tasks that require autonomous actions?
2. What are the difficulties EFL learners have to cope with as co-researchers?
3. What are the gains of co-researchers in terms of autonomous behaviour?

Methodology

Setting and Participants

Data were collected from two intact 4th grade classrooms of a primary state school in Turkey in the second semester of educational year 2014-2015.

The study dealt with students between the ages of 10 to 11 years, since younger children's level of engagement with research processes is possibly impacted by their limited literacy and numeracy skills (Lundy et al., 2011). The participants are in Piaget's concrete operational stage where they are expected to think logically and symbolically, use analogy, develop reversibility and conservation, appreciate causality, and develop hierarchical classification (Pinter, 2011).

The Turkish national curriculum assumes that students enrolled in 4th grade have reached A1 level in English (MoNE, 2013), so that the participants of this study can be regarded as having the qualities of A1 level students which means that they are able to understand and make use of simple sentences for satisfying everyday needs, introduce themselves or others, ask and answer questions about themselves and others, and communicate with someone if the interlocutor makes use of simple patterns (CEFR, 2001). These abilities were observed to be prevalent in the students.

All participants, whose L1 was Turkish, studied English for the first year and participated in three English lessons per week each lasting 40 minutes. The participants were of the same

socio-economic status which provided them with equal opportunities to make use of materials to complete the assignment. They had the possibility to access the Internet via computers or mobile phones and could also consult written and visual materials. Thirty-nine students were assigned to conduct research on a topic they wished to explore. Twenty-one (out of 39) students completed the research activity, thus the researcher continued working with these 21 students (9 male and 12 female).

Task

Students were assigned to conduct a research on a topic they were free to choose. This study had to be conducted outside class to help students develop as independent learners. The learners were given a “Study Form” (Appendix A) which guided them throughout their research. Students had to come up with a topic and formulate appropriate research questions they wished to find answers to. Finally, they had to report their findings and prepare a presentation via PowerPoint.

Instruments

Competence and age are two factors used to reason against children’s empowerment as active researchers, but there is evidence that “children can and do provide reliable responses if questioned in a manner they can understand and about events that are meaningful to them. The challenge is to find appropriate techniques that neither exclude nor patronise children” (Kellett, 2004, p. 331). With the aim of guiding YLs throughout their studies, the teacher conducted semi-structured group interviews (Appendix B) that are suitable for research with YLs as they enable children to participate without inhibitions (Pinter, 2011).

Since in autonomous classrooms the teacher has the responsibility to show the students what good learning activities are, focus them on their goals and ensure that they are realistic with regard to their choices (Little, 2009), interviews were conducted in form of group feedback sessions (there were 4 randomly assigned students in each of the five focus groups) to get insights into students’ research processes including their difficulties and gains from the tasks while they were still involved in their research. Twelve interview questions were used to see if students were able to make choices, track their goals, self-assess themselves, reflect on their learning processes and raise their awareness about issues related to learning.

A second interview (Appendix C), consisting of four questions, was conducted after the students had completed their research tasks. This interview aimed to elicit students' views on the effectiveness of the first group interview with regard to their research assignment.

Research Design

This study is a case study focusing on 4th graders of a single primary school in a specific region of a Turkish city. Data are collected via students' tasks and group interviews indicating the qualitative nature of the study.

Procedure

In relation to Unit 6 "Doing Experiments" of their English coursebook "İlkokul İngilizce 4" (Tatlícioğlu, 2014), students were told that they are going to act as researchers and find answers to questions on a specific topic they are interested in. They were handed a form which served as a guide during their research (Appendix A).

YLS were expected to come up with some research questions, state where they conducted research, provide the time span of their research, list the participants of their study, and report on their findings with appropriate answers and pictures. They were asked to collect data around their neighborhood, at home or any other place they desired which are tasks that foster autonomy.

In developing autonomous classrooms, the medium of communication is the target language and the teacher has to encourage students to make use of the target language (Little, 2009). This was ensured in the present study since the students were asked to complete the study form in English and were offered support if they asked for it.

Further, among the different researcher roles such as the "non-authoritarian adult", "friend" and "least adult" in research involving children (Davis, 1998), the non-authoritarian adult role was adopted to enable YLS to make as many choices as possible by themselves and to allow them to control their learning situation without any form of interference from outside unless the students asked for guidance. As scaffolding ensures success in task completion which may be difficult at first glance (Hung, Chee, Hedberg, & Seng, 2005), the researcher provided feedback in form of group interviews which were conducted while the participants were still involved in their research tasks and at the end of their research projects.

The group interviews focused on students' experiences during their research phase and their thoughts about their outcomes. During the first group interviews, which were conducted by the teacher researcher, the students were told which aspects to focus on when doing research because teaching children how to do research aims to "give them the tools they need to draw up their own research agendas, enable them to investigate issues that they determine are important in their lives and give voice to these issues through dissemination" (Kellett, 2004, p. 332).

The group interviews served to face students with their strengths and weaknesses, if they were not able to recognize these by themselves. The first interview aimed to elicit students' views on their research, the difficulties they encountered during their research process, their gains, and to transfer some research knowledge and skills (e.g. the aim of conducting research, the steps of doing research). Two weeks were devoted to support students with feedback on their research tasks. Students, in the current case, consulted the teacher just for approval of their research questions or their research process. Teacher interference was in the form of answering students' questions, providing suggestions about the research process and supporting target language use.

Since making children think about the learning process and their achievements leads to a successful learning experience (Pinter, 2007), the students were assigned to reconsider their research with focus on factors they were informed about during the group interview sessions and to prepare a presentation on their studies with the use of PowerPoint after the first group interview. Due to the fact that most of the participants did not have Internet connection or even a computer, they were asked to collaborate with a peer or someone who knows how to handle a computer.

Having presented their topic of interest and their results, the students were interviewed again. The second interview (Appendix C) aimed to collect students' ideas and views on the effectiveness of the first group interview, the research they conducted, and the presentations they prepared via PowerPoint.

The current study initially aimed to work with all 4th graders at the school (39 students of whom 21 completed the first research project). After having checked the research outcomes, it was decided to go on with the ones with reasonable outcomes (19 out of 21). Of those 19

students, only 13 fully completed the research assignment so that the other six were excluded from the study and the second group interview.

There were no ethical violations since none of the 4th graders were left behind and were assigned the same task. They were not forced to participate in the interviews and their anonymity was guaranteed.

Table 1. *Research Process*

Date	Process	Purpose
24.04.2015	Assignment of Research	to encourage students to do their own research in the target language and to develop learner autonomy, students were given a guiding handout (Appendix A) to plan their research
30.04.2015 – 08.05.2015	Collection of Primary Results of the Research Projects	to examine if students have any problems with the research process, the researcher reviewed the primary results in order to provide useful feedback and scaffold the learners, answered emerging questions, and corrected use of language if it was asked for so that students were enabled to reorganize their studies
14.05.2015	Group Interviews (1)	to elaborate on the primary research outcomes, the researcher conducted group interviews where relevant problems were discussed with the students and necessary recommendations (e.g. “You have to formulate questions that are of interest to you.”) were proposed so that learners had the possibility to monitor their advancement
14.05.2015	Assignment to Reconsider the Research Process	to make students work on their research projects with regard to the feedback and recommendations they received from the teacher researcher so that they had the chance to reorganize their work
15.05.2015 – 05.06.2015	Collection of the Research Projects & Assignment of a Presentation	the final version of the research assignments were collected in order to examine what the learners had achieved, students were asked to prepare a presentation so that other learners could be informed about other studies

		conducted, this aimed to enable students to gain the ability to present in front of an audience
11.06.2015	Presentations	students were asked to present their research studies to make them gain a sense of achievement and success
11.06.2015	Group Interviews (2)	to reflect on the whole research process and evaluate the research study

Data Analysis

The interviews which approximately lasted for 8 minutes were audio-recorded, while the researcher took some notes within the same process. Since the questions were not cognitively-demanding (see Appendix B and C) and the interviewees provided similar answers, outcomes for each interview question were unambiguous from early on so that the researcher did not transcribe the interviews or consulted a second person to verify the codes.

The coding process began with a general scan of the notes initially taken, while the recordings were re-listened to in order to complement and elaborate on these. Data analysis followed the constant comparison method to identify and categorize re-emerging themes.

Results

The findings of the study are based on the qualitative data collected through the interviews. Table 2 presents the interview questions referring to the research questions (RQ) which will be dealt with separately to present the findings of the study.

Table 2. *Findings*

Interview Questions		RQ	Answers
Making Choices	How did you decide on your topic? What were the factors that led you? (1)	RQ 1	individually (Group 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) family members (Group 1, 3 and 5) friends (Group 1)
	Are you able to choose a topic in which you are interested or is it difficult for you to make choices? (7)	RQ 1	easy to choose a topic on their own (Group 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5)
	How did you collect data? Have you consulted other	RQ 1	individually (Group 1, 4 and 5) family members (Group 1, 2 and 4)

		people to answer the questions or have you worked individually? Why did you choose to work with others/ individually? (3)	friends (Group 1) neighbours (Group 1) Internet (Group 1, 3 and 5) dictionary (Group 5) English notebook (Group 4) English coursebook (Group 5)
Goal Tracking		Where did you find your research questions?	RQ 1 individually (Group 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) family members (Group 1)
		How did you formulate your questions? (2)	friends (Group 1) Internet (Group 1, 2 and 4) dictionary (Group 1) English notebook (Group 2) English coursebook (Group 4)
Reflection		Have you enjoyed conducting your research? If yes, what did you enjoy? (4)	RQ 2, RQ 3 see Table 3
		Did you have any difficulties during your research? If yes, what were these? (6)	RQ 3 see Table 3
		Can you work on your own? (8)	RQ 1 Yes. (Group 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5)
		Can you consult help if you are in need? (9)	RQ 1 Yes. (Group 1, 2, 3 and 5)
		Do you need some feedback during task completion or do you think that feedback is not necessary? (10)	RQ 1 Yes. (Group 1, 2, 3 and 5) No. (Group 1, 4 and 5) Some students want to get some feedback, others like working on their own without interference. (Group 1) "I do not want to get any feedback." (Group 4 and 5)
		Can you complete activities if explained once? (11)	RQ 1 Yes. (Group 2 and 5) No. (Group 4) Sometimes. (Group 1 and 3)
Raising Awareness		Do you think that you have learned something from this assignment? What were your gains? (5)	RQ 2 see Table 3

Self- Assess- ment	Are you satisfied with your	RQ 2,	Satisfied. (Group 2, 3 and 4)
	outcome? What could you	RQ 3	Dissatisfied. (Group 1 and 5)
	do better? (12)		"I would choose a different topic." (Group 1)

Research Question 1: *How do young EFL learners cope with tasks that require autonomous actions?*

The research projects completed by the students show that they are able to choose a research topic (17 out of 21), formulate appropriate research questions (17 out of 21), search for answers to their questions and report their findings (18 out of 21). Further, it is apparent that they can provide information on the participants (20 out of 21), the time span (20 out of 21), and the setting of the research (20 out of 21). It seems that one of the participants (who had difficulties in reading and writing) struggled to figure out the essence of the task and handed in a study protocol including incoherent English sentences. The other 20 participants successfully completed the research task, but it emerged that they had difficulties with using the target language (e.g. vocabulary, syntax).

The five group interviews revealed that the students chose the topics based on their personal interests, previous knowledge they had about the topic (either through schooling or documentaries), their individual observations of animals, and the fact that the topic was easy to cope with. That students can come up with topics of their interest shows that they are able to make decisions which is one of the factors that promotes autonomy. Some students got help from others (e.g. family members, friends) to choose their topics pointing to the existence of interdependence.

When asked how they coped with formulating their research questions and if they completed the research individually, the participants reported that they formulated their research questions and tried to find answers to these questions either individually or that they consulted other sources for help (e.g. family members, friends, neighbours, dictionaries). During individual work they were aware that they could make use of dictionaries, their English notebooks or coursebooks which indicates that they had some awareness of their own learning processes and could track their goals.

Questions that asked for reflection revealed that the learners had the self-esteem to work individually, and were open to ask for help. Some participants did not ask to get feedback on their work (participants from Groups 1, 4 and 5), although they stated that they sometimes

have problems to complete a task when they receive the instruction once (participants from Groups 1, 3 and 4).

Research Question 2: *What are the difficulties EFL learners have to cope with as co-researchers?*

Questions which aimed to elicit the difficulties students faced during their research processes indicate that YLs experienced some problems with regard to language use and goal tracking. Students reported that it was hard to do research using the target language since they frequently had to consult dictionaries (online dictionaries, dictionaries installed on mobile phones or dictionaries as hardcopies). Some students expressed that it would be better to conduct the study in their mother tongue (participants from Groups 1 and 4). Other difficulties were not mentioned in the interviews. In the process of working on the research task, students reported that they struggled to find enough research questions or their answers.

Research Question 3: *What are the gains of co-researchers in terms of autonomous behaviour?*

Questions dealing with the gains from the research project revealed that the co-researchers not only had difficulties but also some positive experiences with the project under investigation. Students reported that they were interested in their research topics so that they were eager to do research and gained information about the chosen topic (Group 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Participants also addressed having enjoyed the use of the target language while they had insights into how to make use of English to accomplish a research task (Group 1 and 5). Other gains mentioned were knowledge about conducting research (Group 1, 3 and 4) or formulating questions and finding their answers (Group 2 and 5). During the reporting stage, students mostly enjoyed drawing and colouring, or finding appropriate pictures for their report protocols (Group 2, 3 and 5). One of the students reported that she enjoyed the research process since her friends were involved adding that she prefers working in groups.

Students' difficulties and gains during and after the research project are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. *Students' Views on the Research Project*

	Positive Opinions	Negative Opinions
immediately after handing out the tasks	<p>I enjoyed drawing pictures for my report.</p> <p>Finding pictures/ searching for appropriate pictures for my study was enjoying.</p> <p>I was interested in the topic.</p> <p>I liked to learn more about birds.</p> <p>Trying to find answers to the questions was enjoying.</p>	<p>Formulating questions in English was hard to cope with. I relied on computer translation (Google Translate).</p> <p>I used the dictionary to translate every word.</p> <p>I used the dictionary installed on my parents' mobile phone.</p> <p>I could not find the answers to my research questions.</p> <p>I could not find enough research questions.</p>
during the interviews	<p>I was interested in the topic of research.</p> <p>My friends were involved.</p> <p>I like to use English.</p> <p>I learned how to use English to accomplish the task.</p> <p>I gained information on the topic I chose.</p> <p>I learned how to conduct research.</p> <p>I had fun while drawing and colouring.</p> <p>I learned how to formulate questions.</p> <p>I enjoyed looking for appropriate pictures for my report.</p> <p>I enjoyed the process of doing research.</p> <p>I have a bird at home and that is why I was interested.</p> <p>I had fun finding the answers and the questions.</p> <p>I enjoyed asking questions.</p>	<p>It was hard to look up words, conducting research in Turkish would be better.</p> <p>Dictionary work was hard.</p> <p>It was hard to use English.</p>

Table 3 clarifies that the students welcomed the opportunity to work autonomously. There were indications of a readiness to engage in self-directed work.

The second interview which was conducted with three groups (Group 1: 5 students, Group 2: 4 students, Group 3: 4 students) aimed to collect students' opinions on the effectiveness of the first group interview, their reflection on the task and on the preparation process of their

presentations. From the 13 students interviewed, only two prepared PowerPoint presentations (Appendix E).

Table 4 shows the views of the students with regard to the effectiveness of the first group interview.

Table 4. *Reflections from the Second Group Interviews*

Positive Opinions	Negative Opinions
The first group interview was helpful for the task.	I think the first interview has not changed anything.
I could improve my research. I changed things.	I have not prepared a presentation because my brother would not help me/ I had not a computer/ my computer was broken (one student suggested that the ones who had not a computer could go to an Internet café to complete their tasks).
I have changed my topic/ my research question after the first group interview.	I would prepare a presentation if I would know how to do it.
I had prepared easy questions and changed them into more difficult ones.	
After the first interview, I completed the missing parts in my research/ I realized that it was easier to conduct the study after the first interview.	
I realized that it was easier to work on my own when my friends reported that they worked on their own.	
The research project brought better results after considering the information provided during the interview.	
I had not any problems preparing the presentation because I had my brother who helped me.	
I learned how to make use of PowerPoint because I watched my cousin preparing my presentation.	

It is apparent that most of the students think that the interviews were effective in that they helped them to improve their research tasks. The students who prepared a presentation stated that they managed to learn how to use PowerPoint although they had not any experience with this program before. Students who had not prepared presentations stated that they had no access to a computer but would have prepared a presentation if they had the opportunity. Nevertheless, one student's suggestion "You could go to the Internet café to prepare a presentation!" indicates that the participants who have not prepared a presentation did not dip into accessible reserves which shows their indifference towards their assignments or their inability to manage drawbacks.

Discussion

In autonomous environments choice and control play a crucial role since learners gain autonomous behaviour through the ability to make choices and the control of their learning processes. According to Benson (2001), control over learning encompasses learners' observable behaviours of planning, organization and evaluation of their learning. The co-researchers involved in the present study showed that they had control over their learning in that they were able to plan, organize and evaluate their learning. Further, they could control their learning content since these YLs had the freedom to choose the goals, aims, and topic of their study. Besides, they were allowed to handle the research with whom they wanted, were free to choose their research questions and the way of finding answers to their questions. These qualities show that YLs managed to do research autonomously, and confirm the assumption that being a co-researcher contributes to the development of autonomous skills.

Participant students differed in their levels of autonomy. Some students completed the research project, but others were not interested in doing any form of research or they did just to show up with homework. These students reflect a lower level of autonomy in that they were not ready to do research maybe because of a low level of motivation, their learning styles and strategies, laziness, or a lack of interest. As Dafei (2007) states "autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks" (p. 2) which for the present case demonstrates some co-researchers' low autonomous level. Another reason not to complete the task could be the fact that some students were not ready psychologically since "for learners to become autonomous, to the point they can engage in self-directed learning, a state of psychological readiness is necessary" (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2013, p. 53). It is also possible that these students have not developed a sense of the language learning process which is another ability to exercise autonomy (Chan, 2001).

Vygotsky assumes that children firstly learn to do things and to think through interaction with others in a social context and that there is a gradual shift away from reliance on others to independent action and thinking which is called internalization (Cameron, 2001). In the study, the aim was to figure out if YLs who were scaffolded by the teacher, if requested, were able to act autonomously on their task. It was observed that the completion of YLs' research studies was within their range of abilities but the task of preparing a presentation obviously was not, as there were only two students who prepared the presentation. The low

rate of presentations can also be explained through children quickly losing interest and motivation if they find tasks difficult (Cameron, 2001). Further, even the most motivated child can have problems in understanding an activity in the language lessons because there is not only the burden of the activity but also the burden of a new language. Thus, language learning tasks pose both cognitive and language demands on the learners. Cognitive demands are related to concepts and understanding the world, while language demands are related to using the foreign language (Cameron, 2001). The results revealed that YLs had not difficulties with cognitive demands since they were able to choose a topic, formulate questions and find appropriate answers. Contrary, language demands seemed to overcharge YLs as they reported to prefer using their L1.

Further, “different age groups need different task types and younger children are less likely to notice the demands of the task or the needs of the interlocutor” (Pinter, 2007, p. 203) which necessitates the teacher to act as a guide and facilitator that is very common in autonomous classrooms (Benson, 2001). Thus, the teacher could focus more on the students who had problems to ensure the completion of their assignments. To deal with students who “gave up doing research” it would be clever to follow Lamb’s (2011) recommendations for teachers: “to recognise that not all learners’ identities will be conducive to learner autonomy, and therefore to nurture such identities through appropriate forms of learner training; and to protect learners’ identities as learners responsible for their learning, by dealing with external constraints” (p. 79). Another factor worth mentioning is that “learner autonomy is achieved slowly and patiently” (Chan, 2010, p. 514), so it is unrealistic to expect students to turn autonomous after a first attempt. It has to be considered that

autonomous learning experiences do not automatically turn dependent learners into autonomous ones. Frequent consultations with the students over the approach to their autonomous study are thus necessary. The regular student-teacher dialogue offers a good basis for negotiations and allows the teacher to better assess each student’s capacity and potential to learn autonomously. It also helps them to be more aware of the problems that the students are likely to encounter (Chan, 2001, p. 294).

Apart from the student and teacher aspects, many of the technologies students had access to, such as online dictionaries, web-based translators, and dictionaries installed on the mobile phones were used by the students. This indicates that YLs applied learning strategies as they assumed that referring to other sources would facilitate their learning process. As

was the case in Levy's study (2014), it seems that students become autonomous and able to use their own technologies to reach their goals and complete their works if they are given the chance to do so.

Despite the fact that many students presented an autonomous existence as a learner through planning and organizing their learning processes and the use of learning strategies or resources, most of them overestimated their study outcomes claiming that they were satisfied with their work. Just a few students expressed that they would change many aspects of their research (e.g. topic, research questions) to have a better outcome. Although, students' ability to self-evaluate their learning outcomes is present, in some cases the outcomes were over-valued. In spite of the fact that YLs' own evaluation did not match the teacher's, students at the age of 10-11 were found to be able to evaluate their outcomes which is another factor that signals autonomous behaviour.

Further, it is usually the adult researcher who starts a project and involves children as participants. Kellet (2004) reports that "adult researchers interpret children's competence and value their 'expert knowledge' (p. 332)" and claims that "children of nine and ten do not possess the research tools and skills to be able to design their own studies" (Kellet, 2004, p. 332). However, in the current study, students were found to be able to conduct their own studies even using a foreign language. Thus, giving children the chance to express their views enables them to contribute to the research process (Lundy et al., 2011). Nevertheless, Lundy et al. (2011) state that there is the need for adult guidance since "young children are neither incompetent nor fully competent in many situations, including research studies" (p. 732). In contrast to previous findings, the current case showed that a large number of co-researchers did not want any interference in their work. This indicates that teacher guidance was not asked for while participants reported that they would consult others if they felt the need.

In fact, next to being interdependent, the autonomous learner is expected to demonstrate a variety of characteristics. Someone who is autonomous should be able to (a) set his/her learning goals, identify and develop learning strategies to achieve such goals; (b) develop study plans; (c) reflect on his/her learning which includes identifying problem areas and means of addressing these problems; (d) identify and select relevant resources and the necessary support; and (e) assess his/her own progress and define his/her own criteria for evaluating performance and learning (including strategies, materials, etc.) (Chan, 2011, p. 286).

The co-researchers in the current study are autonomous in that they are able to (a) set learning goals, (b) use their own learning strategies to cope with the research task (e.g. choosing a topic based on previous knowledge which makes them believe that it will render the research process easier), (c) reflect on their learning process by talking about their gains and problems during the research phase with the teacher, (d) make use of resources to cope with the relevant target language in the research project (e.g. dictionaries), and (e) evaluate their outcomes (although lacking objectivity).

Conclusion

The present research aimed to explore whether young EFL learners could work as co-researchers taking responsibility to conduct a research on a topic they were free to choose and report its findings in the target language. In order to gain insights into EFL students' autonomous behaviours as co-researchers group interviews were conducted. The research has highlighted two major findings in particular. Firstly, young co-researchers who are learning a foreign language welcomed the opportunity to work autonomously which led to the assumption that students have positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. Second, they were open to the idea of doing research in English although they had not developed all required language skills yet.

The learners in the study can be referred to as autonomous with regard to their ability to set learning goals, use learning strategies, and make use of resources to master the task and cope with the relevant target language. Conversely, students were only able to reflect on their learning process with the teacher's scaffolding and could not objectively assess their learning outcomes which are indicative of a low level of autonomy. The majority of the students did not feel the urge to ask the teacher for any help while they did not reject any form of scaffolding and took recommendations into consideration. This shows that the interdependence principle of autonomy applies.

To conclude, there were indications of acceptance of learner responsibility and a readiness for autonomous learning, although not demonstrated by all learners which could be led back to different factors such as psychological readiness, interest, and motivation. Nevertheless, engaging YLs as co-researchers and giving them the chance to make their own choices and control their learning process may be a first step to foster autonomy in young EFL learners increasing their interest in language learning. Further investigation is needed to find out why several students rejected to do research on a topic they were interested in and in which they

had freedom to plan the whole process. In addition, since the present study explores a single case and shows variance in terms of autonomous behaviour between the individual students, the study has to be replicated in other contexts to increase generalizability.

Biodata

Çiğdem Güneş started to work for the Ministry of National Education as an English language teacher in 2013 in Turkey and is teaching English to young learners in a primary school at present. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in English Language Teaching at Gazi University, Ankara. Her research interests include foreign language teacher education, second language acquisition, teaching and learning English as a foreign language, and young language learners.

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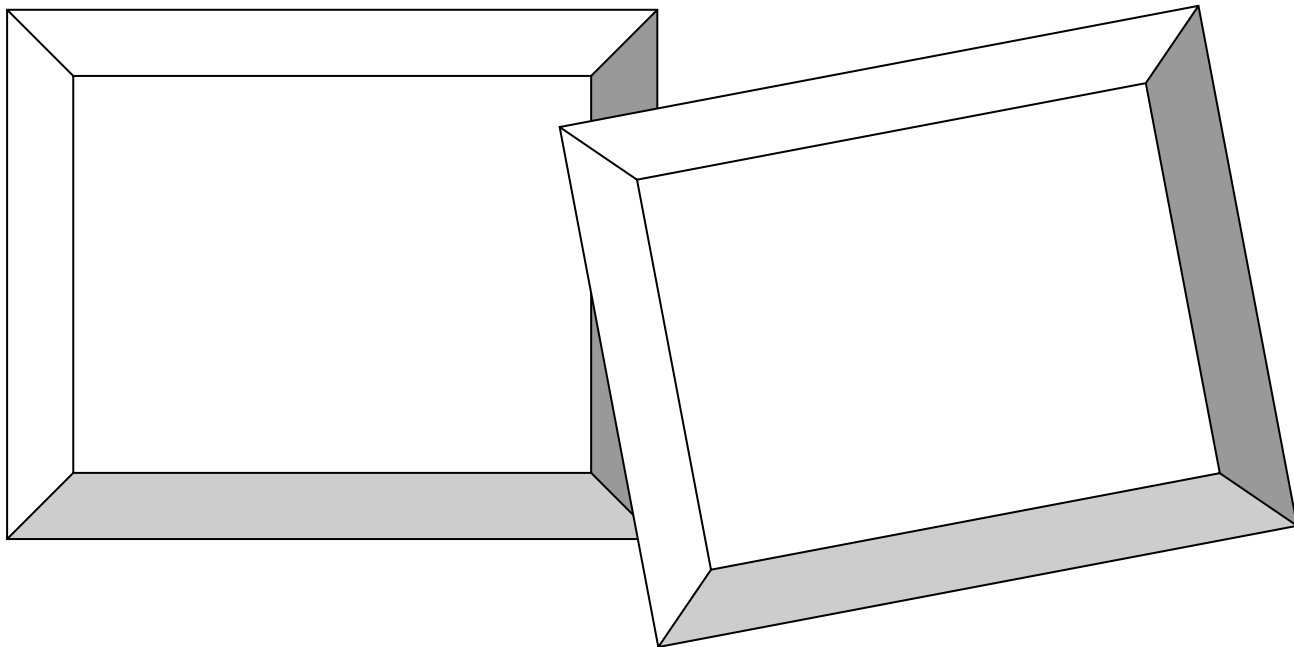
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Appendix A**Study Form (page 1)****My Study****Name** (İsim): _____**Grade** (Sınıf): _____**Age** (Yaş): _____

Information on my Research (Araştırmam Hakkında Bilgiler)	
My Research Topic (Araştırma Konum)	
Research Questions (Araştırma Sorularım)	Try to formulate your research questions in English. (Araştırmada kullanacağın soruları İngilizce oluşturmaya çalış.) 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10.
Setting (Araştırmayı Yapacağım Yer)	
Time (Süre)	
Participants (Katılımcılar)	

Study Form (page 2)

Report



Question (Soru)	Answer (Cevap)

Appendix B

Interview Questions (First Interview)

Young Learners as Co-Researchers Interview Questions (1)

Questions “While-Research”

1. Making Choices

How did you decide on your topic? What were the factors that led you?

2. Goal Tracking

Where did you find your research questions? How did you formulate your questions?

3. Goal Tracking

How did you collect data? Have you consulted other people to answer the questions or have you worked individually? Why did you choose to work with others/ individually?

4. Reflection

Have you enjoyed conducting your research? If yes, what did you enjoy?

5. Raising Awareness

Do you think that you have learned something from this assignment? What were your gains?

6. Reflection

Did you have any difficulties during your research? If yes, what were these?

Questions “Post-Research”

7. Making Choices

Are you able to choose a topic in which you are interested or is it difficult for you to make choices?

8. Reflection

Can you work on your own?

9. Reflection

Can you consult help if you are in need?

10. Reflection

Do you need some feedback during task completion or do you think that feedback is not necessary?

11. Reflection

Can you complete activities if explained once?

12. Self-Assessment

Are you satisfied with your outcome? What could you do better?

***Do you have anything to add?

Appendix C

Interview Questions (Second Interview)

Young-Learners as Co-Researchers – Effects of Research Experience on Autonomy Interview Questions (2)

1. Do you think that it was helpful to talk to the teacher after having completed your first research? In what ways?/ Why not?
2. Do you think that your second research helped you to improve to do things on your own?
3. Do you think that you could manage preparing presentations?
4. Did you have any difficulties in preparing the presentation? If yes, what are these?

***Do you have anything to add?

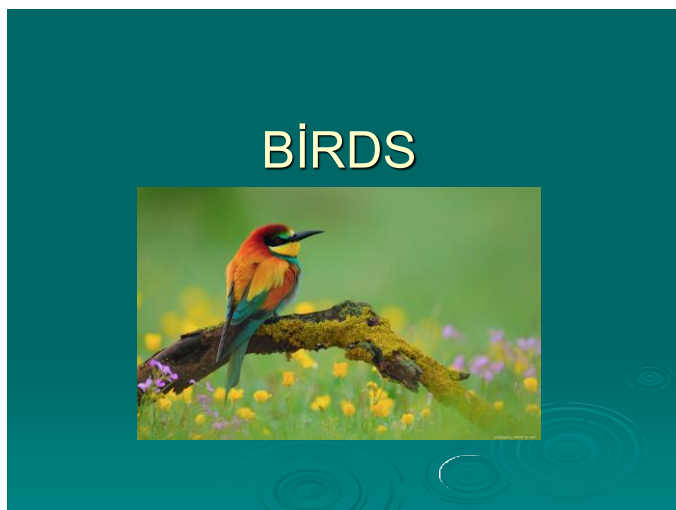
Appendix D

Completed Study Form (page 1)

Information on my Research (Araştırmam Hakkında Bilgiler)	
My Research Topic (Araştırma Konusu)	butterfly 7 Hebebe
Research Questions (Araştırma Soruları)	Try to formulate your research questions in English. (Araştırmada kullanacağın soruları İngilizce oluşturmaya çalış.)
Ne yer	(E1. What butterflies place?
Nerede yazar	(E2. Where butterflies live?
Ne kadar yazar	(E3. How butterflies live?
Ne yapar	(E4. What do butterflies?
Çeşitli ne?	(E5. What are the different kinds of butterflies?
Doğ. gözünde	(E6. How many maths consists of mesh?
Sorular	(E7. Butterfly lovers what to do?
Ne yapmayı sevmez	(E8. Butterflies do not like what to do?
Ne yapmayı sevmez	(E9. What are the characteristics of the butterfly?
İnsanlardan korkar mı?	(E10. Is it afraid of people butterflies?
Setting (Araştırmayı Yapacağım Yer)	Internet
Time (Süre)	10 dk Ten minute
Participants (Katılımcılar)	Friends

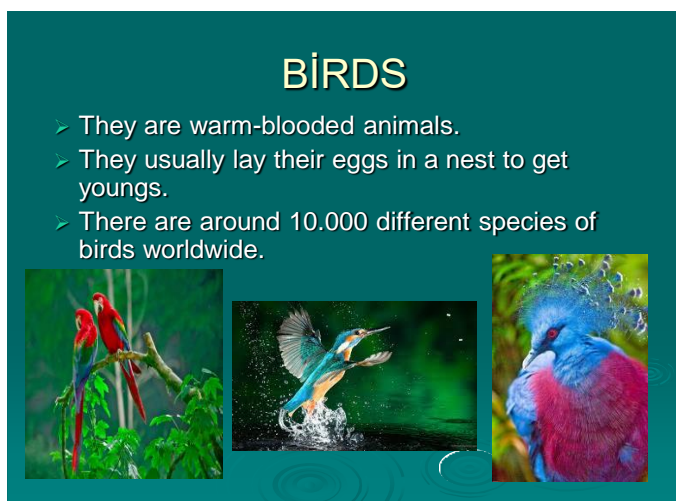
Appendix E

PowerPoint Presentation




A PowerPoint slide with a teal background. At the top, the word "BIRDS" is written in a light yellow, serif font. Below the title is a list of characteristics of birds, each preceded by a blue arrow. To the right of the list is a rectangular image of a blue jay perched on a branch with red berries.

- The bird is an flaying animal with two feet, and a tail.
- Birds have feathers, wings and a beak with no teeth.
- Birds has got bipedal.



A PowerPoint slide with a teal background. At the top, the word "BIRDS" is written in a light yellow, serif font. Below the title is a list of facts about birds, each preceded by a blue arrow. At the bottom of the slide are three rectangular images: two red parrots on a branch, a kingfisher in flight over water, and a peacock with its tail feathers fanned.

- They are warm-blooded animals.
- They usually lay their eggs in a nest to get young.
- There are around 10.000 different species of birds worldwide.