Developing Student Autonomy While Teaching Listening in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is one of the essential requirements of contemporary education, however, as the experience of shifting to online teaching and learning has revealed, students turned out not to be not sufficiently prepared for it. The goal of the given research was to develop an efficient approach to foreign language listening autonomy and to assess whether the suggested approach really yields significantly better results than the existing approach. The quantitative research (questionnaire survey) held in three high schools (one private and two public) in Georgia revealed the effectiveness of the suggested approach.

Keywords: learner autonomy; listening; listening activities; cognitive strategies; metacognitive strategies; EFL.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is defined by the author in [1:11] as "a situation in which the learner is solely responsible for all decisions". It is indispensable in contemporary conditions to provide the learner with the ability to continue his/her education after completing the formal education. As this capacity does not develop in a short time, it has to be introduced at school and developed step by step, increasing the degree of responsibility for one's decisions. However, as shown in the researches by [2, 3 , 4], learners do not demonstrate the needed degree of autonomy while learning English as a foreign language. This implies that either no special effort is made to develop autonomy or the effort made is insufficient. Therefore, another approach has to be developed and tested.

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The article deals with listening skills while teaching English as, on the one hand, the development of receptive skills requires more autonomy than the development of productive skills, and, on the other hand, as listening skills are, according to [5], the basis (meaningful input) of learning any language.

1.1. Strategies needed for learner autonomy concerning listening skills

Learning strategies are defined by [6:63] as "specifications, behaviors, steps, or techniques - such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task - used by students to enhance their own learning". Reference [7:8] emphasizes control and goal-directedness in learning strategies. To be useful, a strategy should relate well to the given task and fit the particular student's learning style. Learning strategies are divided by her [7:17) into two parts: direct and indirect strategies. Direct / cognitive ones include learning, memory and compensation strategies, whereas metacognitive, affective and social ones are viewed as the indirect ones). The direct ones are concentrated on the linguistic input rather than the self-awareness, attitudes and environment. Reference [7, 8] classifies strategies as cognitive (reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining), metacognitive (being able to describe one's learning and problem-solving), memory-related (rhyming, creating an association or a mental picture), compensatory (avoidance, guessing), and social strategies (sharing the strategies, asking for clarification). All of them are important for the development of listening skills. While cognitive strategies help better understanding, metacognitive strategies help learners to identify and choose their preferred cognitive strategies better, as metacognition refers to learner's preferences, needs for second language planning, gathering and organizing materials, monitoring mistakes, evaluating task success and type of learning strategy. Memory-related strategies help to memorize the material, to connect one concept to another, they help to retrieve the information, sounds, images or their combinations, use total physical response movements, visual aids – flashcards, etc. They are very useful in foreign language learning. Compensatory strategies are the ones that help the learner to make up the missing knowledge and make guesses from the context. Affective strategies are connected with the learner's mood or anxiety and may involve negative or positive feelings towards language learning. They are also associated with the self-efficacy levels of a learner in the foreign language learning. Social strategies are needed for verification and clarification, asking for help in doing language tasks, talking with a native speaker and dealing with cultural and social norms, and helping the learner to work with others.

Based on ideas expressed by [9, 10, 11] about learner autonomy, it is possible to say that learner autonomy in the development of listening skills involves students' actions in the following areas:

- Setting the goals for developing one's own listening skills (on the whole);
- Setting the goals for developing particular sub-skills (components of listening skills);
- Initiating practicing listening initiative;
- Realizing one's difficulties in listening;
- Planning one's pre-, while- and post-listening practice;
- Choosing listening comprehension strategies that are the most efficient for the particular learner;
- Improving one's listening skills by mastering such strategies that fit each particular listening activity;
- While practising listening, setting the objectives for each particular listening activity without teacher

intervention;

- Monitoring and evaluating one's own listening skills development;
- Making records on one's own progress and language details important for self-development;
- Assessing oneself and planning the further cycle for the improvement of listening skills.

Correspondingly, in order to achieve student autonomy in connection with the development of their listening skills, the teacher has to:

- Increase student awareness of listening difficulties and ways to overcome them;
- Explain to students how important it is that each of them is involved in pair, group (to share the strategies and background knowledge) and individual (do select the strategies effective for the particular student) work;
- Monitor students' individual work and help / provide feedback as soon as it necessary;
- Provide a choice of activities and listening materials on a variety of topics;
- Provide independent listening tasks for in-class and out-of-class activities.
- Enhance student peer and self-assessment, their reflection over effective strategies and activities.

1.2. Activities for developing learner autonomy while teaching EFL listening

According to [11], group work is useful for the development of metacognitive listening strategies. After fulfilling a listening comprehension home task, students are split into small groups of 3-5 students, they check each other's comprehension of the text and share the applied strategies for understanding the unclear fragments. This can also be done as part of homework, when students create groups where they discuss the arising problems, and share the strategies used and the solutions. The following activities for the development of cognitive strategies related to listening comprehension are offered by [12]: rehearsal, organizing; inferencing; summarizing, applying rules to the understanding of language, imagery, transfer and elaboration. Reference [12] recommended some tasks for the development of metacognitive listening strategies. They are:

- while-listening: selective attention - focusing, for example, on logical stress in order to find the key words;

- post-listening: evaluation - checking comprehension after the completion of a receptive language activity.

To develop listening memory-related strategies, the following tasks were recommended by [13]:

- while listening to the text, memorizing the sequence of actions,

- visualizing (imaginary or on paper) the text while listening and then retelling it based on created cues,

- comparing the texts heard and read (recollecting what was heard),

- listening a script and reciting it.

According to [14], pre-listening activities like brainstorming the factual information and/or the language on the text topic in small groups or by the whole class are among activities that stimulate the development of socio-affective strategies. Games and competitions (who faster and better sums up or paraphrases the heard text), creative tasks (continuing the heard story) are emotional and contribute to the development of affective strategies. Self-talk also aims at reducing anxiety about tasks [15]. Finding the textual cues supports bottom-up strategies, while recalling the background knowledge – the top-down strategies.

It is suggested in the article, based on [11-17], to classify listening activities for autonomous listening development according to:

- the listening stages (pre-, while- and post-listening);

- the place they are going to be held (in or out of the classroom);

- the goal (removing linguistic difficulties, developing cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies of listening; removing listening anxiety and enhancing motivation).

2. Materials and methods
2.1. Methods

The research was based on the quantitative method of investigation, since "it involves studies that make use of statistical analyses to obtain findings. Key features include formal and systematic measurement and the use of statistics" [18: 17]. Quantitative research of two kinds was applied. First, Likert format of questionnaires was used to collect, gather and measure teachers' insights with regard to learner autonomy, as well as learners' autonomous listening abilities, to determine their "thoughts about and feelings towards issues, events, behaviors and so on" [19: 21]. Second, experiment was used to obtain objective results and generalize conclusions, as it is the only type of education research which permits to speak about causality [20: 272]. Any deep research needs not only to know how things are, but also why they are so.

2.2. Participants

The population of the research included English language teachers and high school students aged 16-17 of both genders in Georgia. According to LEPL National Center for Teacher Professional Development, there are 5,847 English teachers in Georgia. There is no statistics about the number of high school teachers (out of these 5,847), but the number is not much smaller. According to [21], there are 40,316 high school children – all students learn English as either the first or the second foreign language. A representative sample, based on [20] would be roughly equal to 25% of the population. As there are too many high school students learning English), it would hardly be possible to have a representative sample for this study from their quantity viewpoint. So, instead, a stratified sampling, in which all essential strata were represented, was chosen. It is a probability sampling technique where the population is divided into strata (or subgroups) and a random sample is taken from each

subgroup. According to [22], stratified sampling "ensures that subgroups (strata) of a given population are each adequately represented within the whole sample population of a research study". It is used to make the research representative (from strata viewpoint) and when a researcher wants to examine how each group (in this research, capital and region, private and public schools, as well as male and female students) behave. Therefore, to make the experiment and the accompanying survey at least more or less representative of Georgian students and teachers, schools from Tbilisi, the capital city, and a smaller town (Rustavi), were involved, public schools were more represented than public ones, as this is the situation in Georgian secondary education, and both female and male students took part in the survey. Participation was voluntary. Three schools were involved in the experiment, two of them were in the capital city Tbilisi. One was a public school and the other was a private one. The third school was a public school in Rustavi. Two classes participated in each school, one as an experimental group and the other as a control group. The participants were 11th graders.

Table 1: Demographic data of experiment participants

	School 1 (Tbilisi, private)		School 2 (Tbilisi, public)		School 3 (Rustavi, public)	
student number	Exper. group:	Control group	Exper. group:	Control group	Exper. group:	Control group
	8	11	34	30	31	30
Age	16-17	16-17	16-17	16-17	16-17	16-17
language level	B2		B1		B1	
Gender	F	M	F	m	F	M
	6	13	35	29	34	27

2.3. Materials and procedure

The teaching and learning conditions were the same for the experimental and control groups. Teachers were different in the control and experimental groups, but their qualification (MA or BA + teacher certification 60-credit program) and experience were equally high. The treatment was applied in the English language classes. The amount of time spent on listening classroom and homework tasks was the same for the control and experimental groups (unless voluntarily some students studied more at home). The textbooks were the same for both groups in each school: [23] for public schools and [24] for the private school. At the pre-experimental stage the experimental and control groups were given a pre-questionnaire for the autonomous listening skills and a listening proficiency test in English. The treatment was held in the quasi-experimental design as there was no possibility to reorganize classes for the administrative reasons. The classes for the experiment in the public schools were selected at random, but the students could not be selected at random. The treatment stage involved regular instruction and activities to maintain autonomous listening skills to the experimental group, however, the control group received standard instruction in listening. In comparison to the control groups, experimental groups received more support in the autonomous listening ways, but this occurred within lesson time, no extra tuition time was provided, and the groups were, correspondingly, comparable. The results of the experiment were measured through a listening test (the listening part of the last 2 years' National Admission exams, so they can be viewed as reliable and valid), and the statistic parameters were calculated with the help of the SPSS 25

software, which is highly applied for the research purposes in studies. The tests were held online due to pandemic and whole education done online, with the same timing and conditions for all students.

2.4. Results and analysis

The gained score was calculated in accordance with the answer key out of maximum 20 points. Three tests – pre-, while-, and post-experimental ones – were held. Table 2 shows the overall results of listening tests.

Table 2: The pre-, while, and post-testing results of the students' listening skills

	School 1 (Tbilisi, private)		School 2 (Tbilisi, public)		School 3 (Rustavi, public)	
	Exper. group 1 (8 sts)	Control group 1 (11 sts)	Exper. group 2 (34 students)	Control group 2 (30 sts)	Exper. group group 3 (31)	Control group 3 (30)
Pre-test						
Mean results	10.0000	12.9091	8.7941	9.3333	8.2258	7.9967
Median	10.5000	14.000	8.0000	9.0000	8.0000	7.500
Mode	6.0000	15.000	8.0000	9.0000	6.0000	6.0000
Standard deviation	3.20713	2,62505	2.42186	2.08993	2.37641	2.02541
Skewness	0.104	-0.608	0.650	0.427	0.543	0.715
Kurtosis	-0.894	-0.890	-0.630	0.750	-1.140	-0.475
While-test						
Mean results	14.1250	13.7273	14.0882	10.7333	13.9677	9.3000
Median	15.0000	15.0000	14	11.0000	14.0000	9
Mode	15.0000	15,0000	11	11.0000	15.0000	8
Standard deviation	2.47487	2.24.03	2.13723	1.20153	1.87054	1.54317
Skewness	-0.265	-0.662	-0.062	0.427	0.181	0.431
Kurtosis	-1.706	-1.312	-1.170	1.291	-0.649	-0.612
Post-test						
Mean results	17.3750	14.6364	17.2059	11.9333	17.3548	11.3333
Median	18.0000	15.0000	17.5000	12	18.0000	11.0000
Mode	18.0000	15.0000	18.0000	11	18.0000	11.0000
Standard deviation	0.91613	1.56760	0.94643	0.94443	0.75491	1.8419
Skewness	-0.999	-0.976	-0.895	0.666	-0.711	0.761
Kurtosis	-1.039	-0.585	-0.266	-0.482	-0.845	-0.082

The pre-testing mean results in both the experimental and the control groups were close to each other), which makes the groups comparable. According to standard deviations, the levels of students inside the groups differ substantially. Their medians and modes quite differ. On the other hand, the skewness in the experimental group

is positive (but not big), which means that more students received higher than the means results than lower than it. At the same time, the skewness (except the control group 1) is positive, which means that more students received higher than the means results than higher than it. The kurtosis of all groups' results more than -3 and less than 3, which means that the results are reasonably spread. So, eventually, with certain reservations, the groups are comparable enough. The post-testing results in the experimental groups increased from 10.00 to 17.38 in the first, 8.79 to 17.21 in the second, and from 8.33 to 17.35 in the third. The mean, median and mode are similar, so the results are trustworthy enough. The standard deviation is no longer high, it has decreased, which reveals that the level inside the groups has become quite homogeneous. In the control groups the mean also increased, but less than in the experimental groups: from 12.90 to 14.64 in the first, 9.33 to 11.93 in the second, and from 8.00 to 11.33 in the third), this reveals that both groups were successful enough, but the experimental group was more successful. The mean result in the control group was similar enough to the median and the mode, so the results were trustworthy enough. The standard deviation decreased a little (from 2.24 to 1.57), however, was still high, which means that the level of listening skills in the control groups was still quite various. Skewness in all groups (except the control groups 2 and 3) was negative, which reveals that more students had lower than the mean results than those who had higher than the mean results. Kurtosis in both groups was negative, which reveals that their results were reasonably spread to the left (above -3). Therefore, the results in the experimental groups were growing faster than in the control groups. However, to see whether the difference is statistically significant, T-test was applied (see table 3a, b, and c).

Table 3a: Paired-samples T-test (experimental group 1 and control group 1)

Paired Samples Statistics

	mean	N	std dev.	std.err.mean
Variable 1	13.7983	6	2.40283	0.98095
Variable 2	1.50000	6	0.54772	0.22361

Paired samples correlations

	N	correlation	sig.
Var 1 & Var 2	6	-0.017	0.974

	Paired differences							
	Mean	std dev	std err mean	95% confidence interval of the difference		t	Df	sig (2-tailed)
				lower	Upper			
Var1 & Var 2	1.22983	2.47378	1.00992	9.70226	14.89440	12.178	5	0.000

The significance equals p=0.000<0.05, therefore the difference between the experimental group 1 and control

group 1 results is statistically significant.

Table 3b: Paired-samples T-test (experimental group 2 and control group 2)

Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	n	std dev.	std.err.mean
Variable 1	12.0133	6	3.18000	1.29823
Variable 2	1.50000	6	0.22361	0.22361

Paired samples correlations

	N	correlation	sig.
Var 1 & Var 2	6	-0.465	0.353

	Paired differences							
	Mean	std dev	std err mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
				lower	upper	t	df	sig (2-tailed)
Var1 & Var 2	1.05133	3.46877	1.41612	6.87308	14.15359	7.424	5	0.001

The significance equals p=0.001<0.05, therefore the difference between the experimental group 2 and control group 2 results is statistically significant.

Table 3c: Paired-samples T-test (experimental group 3 and control group 3)

Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	std dev.	std.err.mean
Variable 1	11,3633	6	3.68845	1.50580
Variable 2	1.50000	6	0.54772	0.22361

Paired samples correlations

	N	correlation	sig.
Var 1 & Var 2	6	-0.541	0.268

	Paired differences					t	df	sig (2-tailed)
	Mean	std dev	std err mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
				lower	upper			
Var1 & Var 2	9.86333	4.011106	1.63751	5.65398	14.07269	6.023	5	0.002

The significance equals p=0.002<0.05, therefore the difference between the experimental group 2 and control group 2 results is statistically significant. Therefore, it has been shown that the higher listening skills level growth in the experimental groups compared to the control groups is statistically significant. As for the students' self-reported questionnaires results, they are presented in tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Statistical results of learner listening autonomy questionnaire (Experimental groups' results of 72 students)

Stage groups	Pre-experimental				Post-experimental			
	experimental groups		control groups		experimental groups		control groups	
items / points	mean	st.dev.	mean	st.dev.	mean	st.dev.	mean	st.dev.
1. I use audio/ CD recordings of the books to listen in my spare time out of class.	1.7778	1.29160	1.9437	1.46275	2.7639	1.80370	2.9437*	1.73112
2. I can choose listening input for the given language proficiency level by myself.	2.7778	1.66338	2.8732	1.747789	3.9028	1.71291	2.9859*	1.7432
3. I try to recall background information of the listening task before I listen.	2.7083	1.46737	2.7465	1.52801	3.7746	1.82206	2.8310*	1.56740
4. I recall the vocabulary around the topic before I start listening.	2.8451	1.77802	2.9718	1.79660	4.0694	1.87140	3.1268*	1.84336
5. I know the best ways of	2.6806	1.35133		1.39097	4.1111	1.8198	2.7324	1.41379

learning that fit my characteristics.			2.7465				
6. I can plan and monitor listening process on the while-listening stage.	3.3278	1.55620	3.4648	1.58413	4.3750	1.41856	3.3662	1.56058
7. I use Listening Profiles to follow the listening process.	2.8194	1.64725	2.7887	1.64678	3.8889	1.67463	2.8451*	1.68733
8. I reflect and evaluate the ways I used for listening comprehension.	2.3056	1.29614	4.7093	1.23833	3.88889	1.78061	4.7746*	1.12373
9. I can set short or long term goals for listening skills development for the next time.	2.4722	1.49150	2.4930	1.42301	3.9028	1.66285	2.9577*	1.87797
10. I am using learning sites on internet to work out listening skills.	4.3750	1.37828	4.2535	1.42145	5.0000	0.95618	4.2817*	1.41606
11. I make inferences and discussions about the ways which I have used for learning listening input.	3.6944	1.71685	3.6056	1.70276	4.1944	1.58904	3.5775	1.67043
12. I am a risk-taker to try new ways even when they seem very and challenging.	3.9583	1.29395	3.8028	1.42046	4.3889	1.21673	3.9014*	1.39545
13* I can acquire knowledge about learning ways only from the teacher.	4.4444	1.34152	4.3662	1.46618	4.6944	1.02968	4.4648*	1.42258
14* I cannot decide what and how to listen for the learning purposes without teacher support.	3.9583	1.28301	4.0704	1.57955	4.5000	1.02091	4.0423	1.56238
15. I listen to the music, watch films, etc. for learning purposes deliberately.	3.8611	1.87876	3.9143	1.85521	4.5000	1.54737	4.0563*	1.85847
16* Sometimes the lack of knowledge hinders the listening comprehension success and the willingness to practice it outside the class.	3.4028	1.81278	3.4507	1.77111	4.3750	1.44804	3.2676	1.78852

It is possible to see from the table that in both the experimental and the control groups the autonomy has increased, however, in the experimental groups it has increased more. To see whether the difference between the increase in the groups is statistically significant, a T-test was applied (see tables 5a,b, and c and 6a, b, and c).

Table 5a: Paired samples statistics (experimental groups' students' pre-experimental and post-experimental answers compared)

Pair 1	mean	N	std dev	sig.
Var. 1	3.2137	16	0.77931	0.19483
Var 2	4.1506	16	0.49867	0.12467

Table 5b: Paired samples correlations (experimental groups' students' pre-experimental and post-experimental answers compared)

Pair 1	N	correlation	sig.
Var. 1 & var. 2	16	0.891	0.000

Table 5c: Paired samples T-test (experimental groups' students' pre-experimental and post-experimental answers compared)

Pair 1	Paired differences							
	mean	st. dev.	st. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference lower	upper	t	Df	sig (2-tailed)
Var. 1 & var. 2	-0.93688	0.40435	0.10109	-1.15234	-0.72141	-9.268	15	0.000

The significance p=0.000<0.-5, which reveals that the difference between the pre-experimental and post-experimental answers of the experimental groups is significant.

Table 6a: Paired samples statistics (control groups' students' pre-experimental and post-experimental answers compared)

Pair 1	Mean	N	st. dev.	st. error mean
var. 1	3.33612	16	0.77448	0.19112
var. 2	3.5100	316	0.65570	0.16393

Table 6b: Paired samples correlations (control groups' students' pre-experimental and post-experimental answers compared)

Pair 1	N	correlation	sig.
Var. 1 & var. 2	16	0.697	0.03

Table 6c: Paired samples T-test (control groups' students' pre-experimental and post-experimental answers compared)

Pair 1	Paired differences							
	Mean	st. dev.	st. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
				lower	upper			
						t	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Var. 1 & var. 2	-0.24875	0.56157	0.13039	-0.54799	-.5049	-1.772	15	0.097

The significance of the differences between the control groups' pre-experimental and post-experimental results equals p=0.097>0.05, therefore, the difference is statistically insignificant. This reveals that, although both the experimental and the control groups increased the level of autonomy, the experimental groups' autonomy level increased more than that of the control groups' (according to students' self-assessments).

2.5. Discussion

It has been shown in the research that a systematic approach to work on learner autonomy, the application of the suggested model (pre, while, and post-listening activities combined with cognitive and metacognitive strategy teaching) of developing learner autonomy that concerns EFL listening skills development provides a significant increase in listening skills. Different researches [8, 11, and 14] assess the impact of certain activities on learner autonomy dealing with EFL listening. Author [25] confirmed that students become better listeners when taught cognitive strategies of listening through specially developed activities, which makes them more autonomous learners. Another author [26] also confirms the importance of teaching cognitive strategies for listening in order to increase the level of listening skills. In research by [27] the role of developing metacognition is emphasized in order to develop listening skills. The findings of the given research are in line with these authors, however, it is necessary to mention that the majority of studies [15, 28, and 29] deal with the impact of autonomy on the quality of listening comprehension, while the given research is dedicated to a less studied issue of the impact of certain listening activities on the development of autonomous learning.

3. Conclusion

Learner autonomy is an absolute necessity in the contemporary, fast-changing world in order to provide students with the capacity of continuous learning. Listening skills are the basis for English as a foreign language teaching, this is why it is especially important to start developing learner autonomy in connection with it. Based on literature review, the following approach to developing autonomous listening skills has been offered: pre,

while, and post-listening activities should be further subdivided as supporting the development of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Both the experiment with totally 145 students from 3 schools supported the efficiency of the suggested approach. This approach can be recommended for application. Due to the limited number of participants, further research would be recommended to make the received results generalizable for a wider scale.

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