Developing Teacher and Learner Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on an investigation into the development of teacher autonomy in helping students overcome academic reading challenges. The study followed a three-stage design using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It commenced with exploring the scope of the academic reading challenges students experienced through an open-ended survey, the results of which were then used to construct a Likert-type questionnaire which asked them to rate the challenges and also to suggest strategies they used to deal with the challenges. In the second stage, the teacher initiated an intervention by arranging a focus-group discussion during which the students discussed the questionnaire findings and considered how they applied to themselves. The third stage involved a follow-up written reflection in which the students evaluated the insights from previous stages and considered ongoing action to address their challenges. As a result of the study, the teacher developed autonomy by gaining insight into students' academic processes and strategy deployment, which informed ongoing decision-making and helped to more accurately target the assistance they needed. An added benefit was that the students also gained insight into their challenges and were able to develop their own autonomy by considering effective strategies for dealing with them. Suggestions are made for ongoing research.

The concept of learner autonomy is well established in the field of education, having been introduced by Holec (1981), who defined it as learners' ability to take charge of their own learning, and developed by numerous others in the years since (e.g. Aoki & Smith, 1999; Benson, 2013; Cotterall, 2008; Dam, 1995; Lee, 1998; Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017; Murray, 1999; Ushioda, 2011; Wenden, 1991; Widdowson, 1996). Teacher autonomy, however, has received less attention, although there has been more interest in it in recent years.

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2. Literature Review

A review of the current literature reveals that Little (1995), for instance, defines teacher autonomy as a teacher's ability to engage in self-directed practice, while according to Smith (2003), teacher autonomy is the teacher's capacity for self-directed professional development. Along similar lines, Vieira (2006) describes it as professional freedom or teachers' ability to take charge of their own professional activity, while Benson (2013) stresses the need for teachers to be willing to demonstrate autonomy by means of experimentation. According to Dikilitaş and Griffiths, (2017), teacher autonomy includes "knowing how to be free from impositions, creating links between theory and practice, aligning needs with things-to-do, considering actions and capacities, overcoming contextual constraints by modifying beliefs and practices" (p.39).

Autonomous teachers are characterized by qualities such as being willing and able to control their educational situations (Vieira, 2003), and being willing to act, make decisions and adopt stances related to their work and professional identities (Vähäsantanen, 2015). However, this does not mean they are isolationist: on the contrary, an important characteristic of autonomous teachers is that they are able to collaborate effectively with others (Vangrieken et al., 2017; Xu, 2015). They are transformative and critically reflective as well as self-critical (Benson, 2010) and able to deal with dilemmas or tensions in the classroom (Wermke & Höstfãlt, 2014). They can make sound decisions (Smith & Erdoğan, 2008) and develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for themselves in cooperation with others (Smith, 2003). They are able to empower themselves to create "spaces and opportunities for manoeuvre" (Lamb, 2000, p.128), and to make informed decisions based on an awareness of their own and their students' needs, interests, and values (Koestner & Losier, 1996).

Very importantly, autonomous teachers are willing to allow learners to exercise their autonomy (Dam, 1995), to make students responsible for their activities and to allow and encourage them to express their identity, thoughts and desires (Kenny, 1993). Gao (2018) also acknowledges teacher autonomy to be central to teachers' efforts to promote learner autonomy, a key point also made by Little (1995). According to Dikilitaş (2020)

> Autonomous teachers are likely to assist the development of learner autonomy by adapting their instruction and beliefs about learning and allowing learners to take control of their own learning. Therefore, autonomy is not a concept that could provide a methodological tool to follow but is ingrained in teachers' approach to teaching, how much space they leave for the learner to engage in learning and how much liberation is wisely granted to learners to create their own ways of learning with minimal support or support when necessary (scaffolding), how much challenge is created for learners to manage to solve the problem or complete the learning task (pp.133-134).

3. The Study

The study reported in the current article was initially motivated by the teacher's (the first author of this article) observation that his class of Ph.D. students was struggling with the high-level academic texts that they needed to read in order to complete their doctoral theses. In order to investigate the causes of this difficulty and to provide evidence for informed decisions (e.g. Koestner & Losier, 1996) about how best to help his students, he decided to undertake a small-scale action research project for which the research questions were:

1. What are the challenges encountered by students when reading high-level academic texts?

2. What strategies do these students use to deal with these challenges?

3.1. The Research Design

The current study adopted an essentially action study approach, according to which "the teacher becomes an 'investigator' or 'explorer' of his or her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it" (Burns, 2010, p.2). In the case of this study, the main researcher was the teacher, who observed a problem that his students were having with academic texts. In order to assist with this, he decided to investigate ways of dealing with the problem. A three-stage procedure was adopted:

1. Exploration of the issue, which, itself proceeded in five steps
2. Action to address the issue (intervention)
3. Evaluation of the impact of the action

3. 1. Exploration

- Step a – identifying the challenges: The students in Dikilitaş's class were asked to identify the challenges they faced when reading the material which they needed for their theses. The challenges which they identified were then analysed thematically.

- Step b – thematic analysis: The challenges were grouped around salient themes by the two authors of this article working independently before collaborating to produce the final list. Examples of the challenges identified by the students are included in the results section.

- Step c – questionnaire construction and piloting: These themes were written into a Likert-type questionnaire with a 5-level rating scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Biographical details (n=4) were also requested to provide a basis for investigating whether individual or contextual differences contributed to any challenges reported. This was then converted into a Google forms format and piloted with a group of students not involved in the final study.

- Step d – data collection: After minor adjustments according to feedback from the pilot, and the addition of a space for students to suggest strategies they used to deal with the challenges, the questionnaire was sent out to the original students in Dikilitaş's class, who were asked to send it to other similar students they knew (snowball sampling) in order to expand the pool of participants and to provide a more reliable basis for generalization.

- Step e – data analysis: The responses were analysed for reliability, for median levels of agreement regarding the challenges and for differences according to biographical student variables. The strategies the students suggested were grouped thematically by the two authors working at first independently before collaborating to produce the final list, the items of which were subjected to a frequency analysis.

3.1.2. Intervention

Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, the original students in Dikilitaş's class were sent the results and invited to a focus-group discussion. The purpose of this intervention was to allow them to review the results and discuss their ideas with the teacher and each other in order that they might pick up useful suggestions for managing the problem (high level academic reading) from the research data and from their classmates and the snowball participants.

3. Evaluation: Following the focus-group discussion, Dikilitaş's students were asked to evaluate the intervention and consider how useful it had been for themselves personally by means of reflective essays. A sample of their responses is provided in order to exemplify the kinds of comments they made.

3.2. Participants and Setting

The initial participants in this study were Ph.D. students (N=16) studying for a doctorate in ELT (English Language Teaching) in the first author's class in a private university in Turkey. The students were all either research assistants or teachers themselves, working at various levels from primary school to tertiary. They were asked to identify the difficulties they experienced when reading for their Ph.D.-level assignments and theses and then to suggest strategies they used to deal with these difficulties. In order to help them obtain a wider perspective with which to compare their own experiences, these 16 students were also asked to involve a larger group of Ph.D. students (N=58, making 74 participants in total) from several different Turkish universities by means of snowball sampling (that is, they all sent the questionnaire to others they knew at different universities). Of the respondents:

- There were 23 males, 51 females
- Length of time studying for their Ph.D. varied from 1 to 5 years.
- Length of teaching experience varied from 1 to 10+ years
- Position held varied from research assistant to teacher in a school to instructor at university.

3.3. Ethical Issues

In order to satisfy ethical requirements, permission was obtained from university authorities, and the students were informed of the dual purpose of the task (both learning-focused and research-focused). They were informed that their participation was voluntary, that the data they provided would have no effect on their grades, and that whatever they wrote would be kept completely anonymous. They were asked to sign permission for the use of their data for research and/or publication (all of them did this).

4. Results of the study

4.1. Exploration

4.1.1. Step a – identifying the challenges

The first group of 16 Ph.D. students identified 76 challenges with the reading required for their Ph.D. assignments or theses.
Step b – thematic grouping: These challenges were assigned to 11 thematic groups by the two authors of this article, working at first independently and then collaborating to produce the final groups. Sample comments about the challenges (reported here as they were originally submitted, including any "infelicities") included:
1.   Terminology
    o   new terms that I'm not familiar with
    o   a few of the articles may include some terms that I need to read about
2.   Academic vocabulary
    o   word choice of the authors is really difficult to understand
    o   using very infrequent words
3.   Complicated/disorganized structure
    o   confusing titles or lack of organization.
    o   complicated flow of ideas
4.   Unclear or ambiguous language
    o   ambiguous language use
    o   difficulty to focus on the content because of redundant, long and distracting language.

5.   Length
- o   so much to remember
- o   understanding the key points because of the length of the article

6.   Research methodology is difficult to understand
- o   quantitative analysis parts that seem to be very mechanical
- o   understanding the findings, tables and figures

7.   Statistics are difficult to understand
- o   sometimes, it's challenging to read and interpret the statistics
- o   tables can make the article even more difficult

8.   Lack of background knowledge
- o   not being able to understand the whole text due to lack of background knowledge
- o   reference to unfamiliar discussions and past research

9.   Motivation
- o   losing interest after a few pages
- o   when…you have the feeling of learning too little and over a time period, this puts too much stress on you and upsets your motivation.

10.   Comprehension
- o   losing track of what the author mentions
- o   sometimes cannot make sense of it

11.   Time constraints
- o   There are lots of sources to read, but limited time.
- o   It is a big challenge to juggle all the responsibilities as a Ph.D. candidate and full-time language instructor/in-service educator in a quite demanding context.

4.1.2. Step c – questionnaire construction and piloting

In addition to answering biographical details (n=4), participants were asked to rate the statements from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) (see Appendix for the Word version of the scale). The questionnaire was piloted by converting it to a Google forms format and sending it to a number of MA students (who were not included in the main study) of whom 37 responded. The alpha reliability coefficient from this pilot was 0.812, which is considered a reasonably high level of reliability in the social sciences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007). The questionnaire was therefore deemed acceptable for use with the main study with minor adjustments to wording and formatting.

4.1.3. Step d – data collection

After adjustments had been made and space provided for students to suggest the strategies they used to cope with the challenges they experienced, the questionnaire was sent out to the original 16 Ph.D. students in Dikilitaş's class who were asked to send it to other similar students they knew (snowball sampling) in other universities in order to obtain a broader view of the issues involved with which the original 16 students might compare their own views. Altogether 74 responses were received.
Step e – data analysis: The data relating to the challenges were analysed for reliability, for median levels of agreement and for differences according to biographical variables. The strategies, defined by Griffiths (2018) as actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning, were also examined for salient themes and subjected to a frequency analysis.

4.2. Reliability of the Questionnaire

Alpha reliability for the questionnaire was .837. This is considered a reasonably high level of reliability in the social sciences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007), so it can be assumed that the questionnaire was reliably measuring the target construct (reading challenges).

4.3. Challenges

Since Likert scales produce ordinal data, the ratings were analysed for median levels of agreement (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007). Ratings ranged from 5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree) and the results are set out in Table 1.

As we can see from Table 1, the highest levels of agreement (median=4) were for Item 3 (regarding structure), Item 7 (regarding statistical analysis) and Item 11 (regarding time constraints). The highest levels of disagreement (median=2) were for Item 2 (regarding vocabulary, Item 8 (regarding the background) and Item 10 (regarding meaning comprehension).

Table 1.
Median levels of agreement for challenges experienced by Ph.D. students reading academic texts

When reading academic texts, I find the following challenging	Median
1. Specialised terms (i.e. terms specific to a particular discipline or subject, e.g. "pedagogical", etc.)	3
2. Academic vocabulary (i.e. words not used in everyday conversation, but may be used by more than one discipline, e.g. "phenomenon", etc)	2
3. Complicated or disorganized structure	4
4. The language used is ambiguous or unclear	3.5
5. Articles are too long	3
6. The research methodology is difficult to understand	2.5
7. The statistical analyses are difficult to understand	4
8. Understanding the background to the article	2
9. Maintaining motivation	3
10. Comprehending the author's meaning	2
11. It is difficult to find enough time	4

4.4. Differences According to Biographical Variables

According to a Mann-Whitney test of difference for non-parametric data for two independent samples, there were no significant differences of agreement among these students regarding their challenges according to gender. According to a Kruskall-Wallis test of difference for non-parametric differences for several independent samples, there were also no significant differences for years of study, years of teaching experience or position held. From this we can conclude that the challenges regarding high-level reading texts were viewed reasonably consistently across the participants irrespective of biographical differences.

4.5. Strategies for Coping with the Challenges

Altogether 601 strategies (as defined by Griffiths, 2018), were suggested by the students (N=74) for coping with their reading challenges. These were assigned to 13 thematic groups by the authors working

initially independently before collaborating to produce the list of themes. Sample comments made about the strategies and examples given included:

1. Using other resources.
   o checking Google or related books for unknown theories
   o Sometimes I use a dictionary to learn the meaning of academic words.
2. Using human resources
   o I like peer and group discussions with my friends
   o asking a friend/someone who has some knowledge about the topic
3. Focusing attention
   o I try to concentrate more on the article and reading each line carefully
   o focusing on the key terms
4. Reading strategies
   o I reread the article by using skimming and scanning techniques
   o repeated reading of abstract, intro and conclusion.
5. Guessing from context
   o We do not have to understand the unknown words as long as we can get the main idea
   o using contextual clues
6. Translating
   o use thesaurus and mobile phones apps to look up English/Turkish or Turkish/English translations
7. Using existing schemata
   o making use of previous knowledge
   o also try relating the article to my existing knowledge
8. Revising/practising
   o rereading and going back when needed
   o I revise my course notes and books
9. Avoidance
   o skipping the methods and results and reading only the introduction and conclusion sections.
   o reading simplified texts, ppts, blogs related to the topic
10. Adapting the text
    o I try to make a summary of what I read. I make a diagram, use symbols and connect my ideas with the new concept
    o I take notes and list the specific issues while reading and underline the most significant parts
    o I feel the necessity of rephrasing most of the sentences in simple formats
11. Inferencing
    o I try to infer the meaning from the given context
    o I infer meaning of unfamiliar terms by identifying the main idea
12. Affective strategies
    o I give several breaks, do some other activities such as drinking coffee or eating something and then continue reading. I try to focus on the final goal that I want to achieve (completing the Ph.D. Program) and how that would make me feel
    o I always try to remember that any article damaging my motivation is just a piece of the big puzzle I am trying to solve

13.   Time management
- o   There are lots of sources to read, but limited time. Reading the abstract first, I try to make sure that I spend time and energy to read the correct article
- o   Planning, organizing time and trying to be loyal to a schedule provides me with the time management skills. If you really want something, there is always time.
- o   Prioritizing by writing a to-do list with a rank order. Sometimes I add a schedule/timetable.

Mentions of these strategies were then submitted to a frequency count, the results of which are set out in Table 2.

Table 2.
Strategies for dealing with the challenges identified by the students

	Strategies for coping with the challenges	Mentions
1	Using other resources, such as texts, online material, dictionaries, etc.	141
2	Using other human resources such as their peers or teacher	65
3	Focusing attention, e.g. by allocating enough time	14
4	Reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, reading extensively or selectively, transferring L1 strategies to the TL, re-reading, reading aloud	209
5	Guessing from context	29
6	Translating	1
7	Using existing schemata	2
8	Revising/practising	14
9	Avoidance	20
10	Adapting the text e.g. by taking notes or making lists, highlighting, summarising, shortening, partitioning, mind mapping, etc	47
11	Inferencing e.g. by trying to work out the writer's intention, looking for themes, etc.	16
12	Affective strategies e.g. relaxing	12
13	Time management	31

As we can see from Table 2, the most mentions were for reading strategies (Item 4) and use of other resources (Item 1). Translation (Item 6) and using existing schemata (Item 7) were least mentioned.

4.6. Intervention: Focus-group Discussion

After the questionnaires had been analysed and the results were available, these were sent out to the original 16 Ph.D. students who were then invited to a discussion group to consider the findings. They were asked what they thought about the challenges identified and the questionnaire results. They were also asked what they thought about the strategies suggested, and whether they believed that any of the suggested strategies might be beneficial for their own study.

The discussion lasted about an hour and was led by the first author (who recorded and transcribed the exchanges) with the second author participating by Skype. The students (N=16) participated with enthusiasm, discussing their own and each other's challenges and strategies and comparing them with those elicited by the questionnaire. A number of them seemed to be keen to include strategies suggested by other participants in their own strategy repertoires in future.

4.7. Evaluation

Following the focus-group discussion, students were asked to write reflections in order to evaluate how successful the intervention had been. Sample extracts from these reflections are included here (student names have been initialized for the sake of anonymity).

C: Thanks to the strategies I follow and learned in our academic reading session, I realized how I can improve my academic reading. I used to read abstract first and then conclusion part without reading the rest. I figured out I was missing the information thus there were questions about the article in my mind. Now I am reading every part of the article by questioning what the sentences mean and what the author wants to mean. Furthermore, I started taking notes, which helps me not to forget the name of article and what it is about. I become more critical towards the articles, questioning every single sentence. In relation to this, I feel more confident in academic reading because I associate the knowledge with the real-life experience in my life which helps me to keep the things I learned for a long time.

F: I am a person who likes to think about her own thinking. I use metacognitive strategies very often. Before reading I try to activate my prior knowledge, or while reading an academic text, I often check my own understanding going back and forth through the text. So questioning myself is something I always do. However, during that reflection session, reflecting on my reading experience in presence of others (thinking aloud) was another kind of experience for me. We not only shared our strategies but also listened to others', and this allowed a sort of interaction between the strategies in our own repertoire and the ones we encounter. I liked that! The reflection session on academic reading helped me realize that my reading strategies bear both similarities to and differences from those of my friends. Interestingly I noticed that I had been using a particular strategy that none of my friends used (making a "mental map" in my own handwriting). This was something I found highly useful especially before attending our article discussion because I feel making a mind map helps me synthesize what I read and connect it with my prior knowledge. However, when I was reflecting on this strategy, I understood that indeed it was my own reading strategy. It was a pleasure to introduce it to my friends with the hope that perhaps it could give inspiration to someone else. Yet from their mimics, I also realized that my strategies were perhaps specific to my own context and even if I share them with others, they may not appeal to their interest that much. But still sharing what I am doing with others makes me feel surer about my own way of doing things. Thinking about your own strategies again and again is not repetitive as it seems indeed because each time you add new dimensions, perspectives to your strategy use. In the case of academic reading, reflection is even a more dynamic process. When you reflect, it helps you rearrange your repertoire.

S: Reflecting on my academic reading challenges improved my awareness in understanding strategic research. First, it is time bound, simply more and more reading! Second, it is relevance. I can say that as well as wider context reading activities in ELT, my struggle to understand the academic readings has been stabilized thanks to the relevance of the context I've been interested in reading. The more I read about my interest area, the more I started to grasp and arrive to desired conceptualizations. So, in my case, I arrived at the conclusion that it mainly depends on the reading volume, the duration of time and familiarity or relevance of the readings that were key things and still are to understand academic context more and more. I've been more interested and confident in the area I am reading, and I think this affected my reading autonomy.

M: This was interesting because I had not reflected on this before. I now reflect when reading and have developed a number of strategies as well as skimming and scanning, reading abstract introduction and conclusion. Four strategies I have developed:
• Key word search using Control and F within the article
• Looking for familiar concepts and sources I know in the article
• Imagining myself taking part in the research as researcher participants (when I need a deeper understanding). This personalises the impersonal.
• Trying to predict the outcome of the research
Other practical strategies
• Increasing font size
• Highlighting text with mouse
• Reading aloud
Other things I consider
• The Journal (quality) determines how much effort I will spend. There is no point spending time on a low-quality journal article which may not easy to read anyway.
• The year
Reading online calls for different strategies such as
• Downloading several texts on one topic for later.
• Compare texts switching between them to compare.
• Leaving breaks between articles. Trying to finish an article not breaking in the middle and losing concentration.
The discussion session and questionnaire were useful. Thank you.

5. Discussion of the Results

According to the results of this study, the most problematic areas identified by the students are complicated or disorganized structure of the material, statistical analyses which are difficult to understand, and lack of time. These results helped develop the teacher's autonomy by providing him with the information he needed to make sound decisions about how best to support his students, as suggested by Vãhãsantanen (2015) . Although teachers have no control over the material which appears in journals or books, it is possible that time spent on strategies such as summarizing, highlighting and paraphrasing might help students to deal with complicated and disorganised texts. Likewise, teachers can provide practice with interpreting statistical data to help them cope with that difficulty. As for lack of time, this is highly dependent on individual circumstances, but some time discussing options for effective time management might be helpful for students who seem to have this as a problem. In the case of this study, by the time these results were available, the current course was nearly finished, so there was no time to action a sustained intervention (e.g. by preparing material to address the difficulty with interpreting statistical data) with the current set of students. The teacher therefore decided on a relatively brief intervention in the form of a focus-group discussion as a practical alternative while bearing in mind possible longer-term interventions with future classes, thereby sustaining the kind of research cycle suggested by authors such as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), Burns (2010), and Edwards and Burns (2015).

In addition, this study identified some academic reading-related areas that these Ph.D. students do not find challenging. These include academic vocabulary (i.e. words not used in everyday conversation, but may be used by more than one discipline, e.g. "phenomenon", etc.), understanding the background to the article, and comprehending the author's meaning. A lot of time is often spent on these issues, but the results of this study would seem to suggest that, since students do not appear to find them challenging, the time might more productively be dedicated to the areas that students do struggle with. In this way, teachers are

empowered to make informed decisions based on an awareness of their own and their students' needs (Koestner & Losier, 1996).

Examination of the results regarding strategy use also provided the teacher with some useful insights for possible ways to help his students. According to the results set out in Table 2, these students already use many traditional reading strategies (e.g. skimming and scanning) and they already use other resources (e.g. online material and dictionaries), so they probably do not need too much extra help with these. It should be noted, however, that these two strategy categories (reading strategies and using online resources) are themselves very broad and could easily be broken down into more nuanced categories by further research. But two strategies that receive low mention rates are translating and using existing schemata. It is possible, of course, that they actually do use both of these, but they either are not aware of doing so or they do not want to admit it. If, however, they really do not use them, some teacher support for doing so might be useful and autonomy-enhancing, as suggested by Griffiths (2018).

An examination of the reflections suggests that the students found the exploration and discussion stages of the study helpful. Several of them comment on increased confidence, awareness, and sense of autonomy. The overall reaction to the evaluative reflections was overwhelmingly positive: "I liked that!" (F) and it was "useful. Thank you" (M). These reactions underline the importance of teacher autonomy in the development of learner autonomy (e.g. Dikilitaş 2020; Dam, 1995; Gao, 2018; Little, 1995)

Although individual or contextual learner factors are sometimes believed to contribute to learner variability (e.g Dikilitaş and Griffiths, 2020), the responses to the issues explored in this study were remarkably consistent across all the biographical variables investigated. In other words, learner differences do not appear to play a significant role as far as challenges experienced. This means that the teacher is freed from the constraints of needing to make allowances for specific students according to whatever individual needs they might have. It must be remembered, however, that, although this might apply to the current group, it may or may not apply to any other group. Such factors are highly contextualized, and decisions regarding them need to be made on a case-by-case basis based on context-specific, if not individual-specific exploration, intervention and evaluation.

6. Implications for Autonomy Development

The information provided by this study helped to develop the teacher's autonomy by providing knowledge about an issue over which he had been puzzling and affording a base for further informed decision-making and ongoing action. A useful by-product of this was that it also helped to develop learner autonomy by offering learners a valuable opportunity to reflect on a practical challenge with which they had been having difficulty and to plan for future action (e.g. Dikilitaş 2020). In this way, the study became an example of learners' pedagogical collaboration with their teachers, thereby creating a democratic classroom environment (Manzano Vazquez, 2017). This contributed to the development of autonomy in both teacher and learners as a result of the deeper understanding of a shared concern and the opportunity to co-construct positive steps to address the concern.

By raising awareness of challenges and strategies, a study such as the one described in this article can contribute to teacher autonomy by providing evidence and supporting informed decision-making about how best to assist students with the challenges they experience. Likewise, such studies can promote learner autonomy by raising awareness and helping them to make informed choices which are best targeted to their own individual needs.

7. Suggestions for Further Research

Although this study was carried out with ELT (English Language Teaching) students in a Turkish context, there would seem to be no reason to expect that the results are not generally applicable to students of all disciplines everywhere, since all Ph.D. students need to read, no matter where they are or what they are studying, and the material they are required to read is usually challenging. However, this does need to be tested empirically in a variety of contexts and with different subject areas. These studies could be built into a meta study if there were sufficient interest in doing so, publication of which might further help to develop teacher's sense of professional competence and autonomy.

   Other questions awaiting research include:
1. This study has looked at autonomy in relation to academic reading, but there are many other areas that might benefit from exploration (e.g. other skill areas, academic vocabulary, etc).
2. The relationship between such studies and how teacher autonomy develops needs clarification. This might be done, for instance, by getting a number of teachers to conduct the same study and then interviewing the teachers to explore their autonomy development.
3. The relationship between the development of teacher and learner autonomy also needs further exploration and theorizing.

8. Conclusion

This study has produced some interesting findings which suggest that students are quite capable of identifying the challenges they have, and that they are also capable of identifying the strategies that they use in order to address the challenges. Interestingly, no statistically significant differences according to biographical variables was discovered; in other words, the challenges remained consistent irrespective of gender, years of study, years of teaching, or position held. Although the study was conducted among Turkish ELT students, there would seem to be no obvious reason why these results would not apply to students more generally irrespective of major or location, although this assumption needs further empirical testing.

   The findings of the study suggest implications for both teachers and learners. In the case of the teacher, his research initiative promoted his own autonomy by helping him to clarify the areas presenting the most challenge for his students which informed ongoing decision-making about how best to support them. In turn, learners' autonomy was developed by empowering them with more control over their own challenges through self-regulating their own strategies and learning from others. In short, the study seems to provide a win-win situation from which both teacher and students derived considerable benefit.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Please rate the items in the questionnaire according to the following scale:

5=strongly agree   4=agree   3=neutral   2=disagree   1=disagree

When reading academic texts, I find the following challenging	Rating	Strategies you use to cope with the challenge
Specialised terms (i.e. terms specific to a particular discipline or subject, e.g. "pedagogical", etc.)		
Academic vocabulary (i.e. words not used in everyday conversation, but may be used by more than one discipline, e.g. "phenomenon", etc)		
Complicated or disorganized structure		
The language used is ambiguous or unclear		
Articles are too long		
The research methodology is difficult to understand		
The statistical analyses are difficult to understand		
Understanding the background to the article		
Maintaining motivation		
Comprehending the author's meaning		
It is difficult to find enough time		