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Abstract

The international online conference of *Self-Directed Learning and Advising in Language Education* brought together researchers and teachers from around the world, and several preservice English teachers were among the participants in this international event. This paper aims to present preservice English teacher participants' impressions on attending an international academic conference, their reflections on the organization, the presentations, and their theoretical and practical gains. Preservice English teachers' reflections revealed that they benefitted from attending this international e-conference in terms of their academic and professional development as teachers. The sessions they attended also triggered changes in their perspectives regarding self-directed learning, learner autonomy, and advising in language learning. As first-time participants in such an academic event, they indicated their interest to attend similar conferences in the future.

Keywords: self-directed learning, learner autonomy, learning advising, preservice English teachers

Conferences bring together researchers and practitioners working in specific fields. Participants get the opportunity to enhance their knowledge in their areas of expertise with the most up-to-date works from different backgrounds, either presenting their own studies or following other's talks. Academic events also make it possible for participants to learn from each other through their discussions in such gatherings. Such events have a lot to offer for future practitioners, and it is crucial that students studying in related fields should be encouraged to attend as well.

The international conference of *Self-Directed Learning and Advising in Language Learning* was organized as an online event on 24 April 2021 jointly by Ankara Yildirim Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages (AYBU-SFL) and IATEFL Learning Autonomy Special Interest Group (LASIG). As the first international event dedicated to

advising in language learning in Turkey, the event attracted the interest of researchers and practitioners from various countries. Several preservice English teachers were among the participants in this gathering, and most of them were attending such an academic event for the first time in their careers.

Four preservice English teacher participants were asked to reflect on their expectations about attending an international academic conference, their overall and specific reflections on the organization of the event and the presentations, as well as their theoretical and practical gains as specified in the following reflective prompts:

- What were your initial expectations about attending this conference? Was it your first participation in an international academic conference? How did you feel about attending this event?
- What are your thoughts about the organization as a whole? Describe your overall experience as a conference attendee.
- Which talks / presentations did you find most informative? What did you like most about them? How did these sessions contribute to your development as a preservice English teacher?
- Did the presentations help you enhance your theoretical and/or practical knowledge in the field of English Language Teaching? If so, how?
- Were your personal goals for the conference met? If ‘yes,’ how? If ‘no,’ why? Please explain.
- Would you like to attend similar academic events in the future? Please explain.

Preservice English teachers’ reflections and reviews of their selected talks based on these prompts revealed that they benefited from attending the event even though it was held online. They appeared to have learned more about the theoretical backgrounds of self-directed learning and advising in language learning and reconsidered their roles as future English teachers by putting all this knowledge into practice effectively. The responses compiled are presented as follows:

Dilek Akin, Junior at the English Language Education Program at TED University

“Listening to these studies inspired and encouraged me to imagine that one day I would talk about the study that I will do, too.”

When I first heard about this conference, I remember being eager to attend it. I say I remember because the pandemic affected the whole world close to the date of the conference, and this caused the conference to be postponed. As someone who has attended short seminars before, this conference was a big event for me. I have to say that I add a variety of things to myself from every seminar I attend. Improving myself, looking at certain issues from different perspectives, and thinking critically make me feel happy. Therefore, the thought of attending this event made me feel happy and excited.

I wanted the event to be held face to face because I wanted to experience that environment and share something with each participant, but it was not possible due to the pandemic. On the other hand, it had its good sides as an online organization. First of all, it was a great opportunity to attend many different seminars from home. Moreover, as candidate English Teachers, we try to gain a lot of information by reading many kinds of research papers, articles, and studies. Therefore, it was an incredible chance to listen to the valuable studies of the presenters at this conference. In addition, I am in a department that is open to many academic studies. Therefore, attending this conference has been like a guide for me. I got to listen to various studies that showed how the studies were developed, how questions were asked, and how they progressed. I would like to undertake many academic studies in the future. That's why listening to these studies inspired and encouraged me to imagine that one day I too will talk about my own study at a conference once a day.

Every presentation I attended was informative, but there were three that caught my attention the most. First of all, the presentation entitled "*The Positive Impact of Language Advising over 21st Century Skills*" gave me a clear understanding of the impact of 21st-century skills on learners, which I had learned about in theory in the past. Since I was trained via traditional methods, I especially did not think that distance education would provide effective learning because it was a new experience for me. I had never experienced a distance education course before, so I had some prejudices towards it. Considering that most teachers have never taught online, I thought it would not be possible for distance education to succeed. Teachers and learners had to be experienced in the use of technology, and they had to be able to use the necessary software to ensure success in the distance education process. Moreover, technology had to be integrated into education. I know that distance education will hold an important place in our lives in the future, but I was still advocating for face-to-face education for effective learning. Due to the pandemic, distance education has become a mandatory need. In truth, I can say that I took the first step towards changing my mind by attending the

presentation titled “*The Digitalization of Self-Access and Advising Services in Times of Covid-19.*” It was a successful study, in my opinion, and when I saw the positive comments of the learners as presented in the talk, my belief that an effective out-of-class learning environment could be created got even stronger. I have a lot of theoretical knowledge in the field of English Language Teaching, but I have never had the opportunity to practice them. On the other hand, listening to the work done through attending lectures helped my theoretical knowledge to become more instrumental.

For this conference, I had a goal to observe different studies, to learn how these studies are conducted, and what conclusions have been reached. This conference met my expectations because I participated in all of the presentations that I was curious about, and I understood how they designed their studies and what conclusions they reached. Various studies were presented at the conference, and my goal as a preservice English teacher was to see presentations with different themes because I wanted to learn different and creative ways that I could use to teach and guide each student effectively. Each person's learning process works differently. I want to reach learners not only as a teacher but also as their hero, idol, or guide. Therefore, the more I learn in different ways, the more I will be able to touch the lives of many people. Teaching makes me feel complete.

As a person adds something to oneself, he/she feels his/her existence. As a person adds something to himself/herself, he/she feels his/her existence. I believe that learning something new every day or experiencing something new, whether good or bad strengthens a person in life. Every piece of information I add to myself accompanies me on my path to completion. I will continue to participate in academic activities because I owe this to myself. In addition to these, I do not think I should have any limits on improving myself. I believe that this is also necessary to meet the expectations of the current world, and I am open to this. This conference was my first academic and international academic event. Overall, I learned a lot from the results of different kinds of studies and gained an idea of how I could benefit from the main topics of the conference.

**Cansu Yasar, Freshman at the English Language Education Program at TED
University**

“I understand that the key term for creating a self-directed learning environment is to listen to learners’ needs clearly and set proper goals for both students and teachers.”

The conference lasted for a day, and at first, I thought it would be tiring. However, the organization was well planned out, and this prevented boredom and exhaustion. The attitude of the presenters was professional and sincere. The information provided on learner autonomy and advising in language education was in-depth and highly relevant. Overall, the organization was decent and clear.

In my opinion, one of the most informative presentations was given by Christian Ludwig and Lawrie Moore-Walter. They mentioned how self-directed learning can be applied to a classroom environment and how autonomous learning should be conducted. These were the two topics that I was quite curious about, so I found this talk especially informative. Before attending, I was particularly interested in how to apply self-directed learning in a classroom and create a balanced environment for learners. That is why their presentations helped me a lot. Also, before attending I was wondering if out-of-class spaces for students to practice self-directed learning existed. Tarık Uzun and Gamze Guven-Yalcin gave a piece of very informative and clear information on how self-directed and autonomous learning can be implemented in out-of-class environments like the one they created. Thus, I enjoyed being their participant as well. Overall, I understand that the key condition for creating a self-directed learning environment is to listen to learners' needs clearly and set proper goals for both students and teachers.

This academic conference was on a topic that was relevant to me as a future English teacher as well. Thus, attending it gave me critical and concrete information about learner autonomy, what independent learning was, how it should be implemented, and discovering the best ways for students in learning. I, myself, knew what I needed as a student, but I didn't know how to provide it for others. My personal goals regarding the conference were to better understand self-directed and autonomous learning and advising, which were important for both students and teachers, to learn how to use them in the future, and to understand what kind of an environment was needed for self-directed learning. The presenters touched upon these issues very well and provided a usable route to the questions and goals that I had in mind before joining.

I would love to participate in similar academic events. Attending a conference, in general, provides a different viewpoint on any topic. Hence, I think both ELT students and teachers ought to participate since the academic conferences might enhance their understanding of their profession and provide beneficial techniques to make use of. As a student and a teacher candidate, I believe that attending an academic event in the future can

help me a lot in engaging with my profession. At the same time, these academic events awaken the desire to come to become a presenter myself one day in the future. Additionally, international conferences give a very distinct experience and perspective to the participant and can offer an international business plan or a chance to continue studying or working abroad for the attendees.

Selen Ertunç, Junior at the English Language Education Program at TED University

“I understood that even with simple adjustments, ordinary tasks can be turned into tasks that aim to increase learner motivation and autonomy.”

As it was my first time attending an international academic conference, I was not very sure about what to expect. All I expected was to learn new information that I could integrate into my theoretical knowledge about teaching that I have obtained so far at university. Also, I expected this conference to build on my existing knowledge of “self-regulated learning.”

The conference touched upon many subjects both for teacher training and student education. It exceeded my expectations in terms of the diversity of presentations. There were a variety of presentations on several different components of “autonomous learning.” The conference brought in significant points of view for me, which I will surely utilize in my future practices and studies. Of course, all the conferences that I attended substantially contributed to my development as a teacher candidate. However, the two presentations that I found most informative were *“You Can and Can’t Teach an Old Dog New Tricks”* and *“Learners’ Reflections on Their Self-Directed Gaming Practices and Language Development.”* Both presentations helped me gain a different perspective on learner autonomy. What attracted me most in those two presentations was that they not only provided me with deeper theoretical information but also practical information on learner autonomy.

Apart from explaining what learner autonomy is in more detail, Inci Keçik, an English language teacher, shared a demo lesson plan with us, which I found to be very creative and successful. Certainly, I already had some information on how to teach English to young learners. However, I did not know that there were so many strategies available that might be helpful to increase learner autonomy. I understood that even with simple adjustments, ordinary tasks could be turned into tasks that aim to increase learner motivation and autonomy. When it comes to the other presentation, I was intrigued by this topic the most. As is known, with the advent of developing technology, younger generations have become increasingly more interested in playing games, which in turn, parents and teachers generally

complain about. This presentation changed my perspective on this issue. I used to think that playing games did not contribute to student development; on the contrary, I thought it had a debilitating effect. I thought that games such as PUBG or Call of Duty only distracted students. I would never have thought that playing games would actually play a part in students' learning experiences. Nevertheless, according to the study, it was found that online games, in fact, include many autonomy-supportive features which could enhance foreign language education. The presenter shared ways to integrate English education with online games as well. After this presentation, I now believe that as a teacher candidate, it will be more beneficial for me to integrate games into language education rather than opposing it in the future.

My personal goals for the conference were met much better than I expected. Last semester, I took a course that addressed the issue of “self-regulated learning.” I expected that the content of the conference would be similar to my current knowledge, but it provided me with additional perspectives in this field. As we will have students with different learning styles in the future, knowing how to improve learner autonomy is of even greater importance for us now. Even in online conditions, the conference was carried out with great success. I cannot deny the positive influence that this conference will have on my academic and personal development. It was an excellent opportunity for me. Therefore, I cannot wait to join such academic events in the future and learn more.

Meysa Acar, Junior at the English Language Education Program at TED University

“I learned that advising helps students in terms of their emotional, social, and academic developments and makes a huge impact on students.”

I have attended other international academic conferences before. Yet, I believe that attending this conference helped my academic development, particularly when speaking of advising. There were moments when I questioned my beliefs and understood other people's thoughts. I gained new perspectives and added novelty to my teaching philosophy. In some parts, I enlarged my opinions and agreed with the presenters because they came up with such great projects and their results. It was great to see that some other people think the same way I do. I believe that the most important part for me was to see that people learned from each other, even if the conference was conducted online.

Since my department is English Language Teaching, I credit the presentation given by Tarık Uzun and Gamze Güven-Yalçın to help me learn more about self-access learning and

advising. I gained new ideas like how effective it is to create an Independent Learning Center in schools to enhance language learning. Also, it was a wonderful experience to hear about the frameworks of self-directed learning and advising from Dr. Jo Mynard. In the process of learning about advising, I found answers to the question, “What should my role be as an advisor in such a process?” Besides this, from the presentation entitled “*Learner’s Reflections on their Self-directed Gaming Practices and Language Development*,” I expanded my perspective about the gaming experiences of students. Similar to the presenter Tevfik Darıyemez, I believe that the background experiences of the learners develop in an observable way thanks to such games. In my private tutoring groups, such as the one in the Full Support Scholarship Program by the Turkish Education Association, I pay attention to these experiences of students so that they can benefit and enjoy the classes. In the process of teaching the communicative uses of English, giving importance to students’ feelings and interests have an essential role in their effective learning processes. Hence, as a prospective teacher, various aspects in my classes, from material choice to the methods I use are determined according to my students’ background knowledge. It was a great opportunity for me to look deeper into some projects that can actually work very well in my English classrooms. For instance, I could see the examples of how learner autonomy works, and the goals set for the learning outcomes in the presentation “*You Can and Can’t Teach an Old Dog New Tricks*” by İnci Keçik and Senem Üstün Kaya.

Before attending this conference, I wanted to learn more about self-directed learning. Because I knew the importance of advising, I wanted to learn more about how self-directed learning is managed and in what kind of environments it is developed in universities. I also learned that advising helps students in terms of their emotional, social, and academic development, and it makes a huge impact on students. I would like to join such events because I strongly believe that these conferences help us to determine our objectives for ourselves as teachers. Not only do you update yourself, but you also have the chance to see other people’s views. In these academic events, there is a diversity of ideas among teachers; therefore, such environments are full of different perspectives.

Conclusion

Preservice English teachers’ reflections on this international e-conference reveal that they benefitted significantly from learning about the theoretical and practical aspects of self-directed learning and advising. They also felt challenged to question their existing beliefs and

practices and consider perspective-shifting or multiple perspectives on a variety of topics that relate to autonomy, self-directed learning, and language learning in general. They were encouraged to engage in deeper reflection as to how learner ownership and engagement prove critical in the regulation of learning and autonomy building. The conference seems to have opened up a broader perspective with respect to how they can imagine language learning in self-regulated, multimodal, fluid learning environments. Some preservice English teachers put themselves into the shoes of presenters and got motivated through the prospect of presenting their own work in similar events in the future.

Preservice English teachers should be encouraged to attend similar academic events and follow different types of presentations. By doing so, their identity development as English teachers and mindset changes from that of learners' into teachers' and researchers' could be facilitated. They should also be included in research groups and motivated to take on presenter roles in conferences or related events.

Notes on the Contributors

Tarik Uzun is an instructor, a learning advisor, and the coordinator of the Independent Learning Center (ILC) at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages, Turkey. He teaches English and Turkish as foreign languages. He holds a Ph.D. in foreign language teaching. His research focuses on second language pronunciation, learner autonomy, and self-access language learning.

Hatice Karaaslan, holding a Ph.D. in Cognitive Science from Middle East Technical University and Learning Advisor and Advisor Educator Certificates from Kanda University of International Studies, works as an EFL instructor, a learning advisor and an advisor educator at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages, Turkey. Her interests include ecological learning models, blended/flipped learning, self-determination, and advising in language learning.

Meysa Acar is an undergraduate student at the English Language Teaching Program at TED University, Ankara, Turkey. She also participates in voluntary teaching in the Full Support Scholarship Program provided by the Turkish Education Association. Her research interest areas include motivation in second language learning, the use of L1 in second language learning and the integration of technology into language learning.

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