

DOI No: <http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/Joh.52645>

Makale türü: Araştırma makalesi		Article type: Research article
Geliş tarihi	21.09.2022	Submitted date
Kabul tarihi	07.07.2022	Accepted date
Elektronik yayın tarihi	31.08.2022	Online publishing date

Atıf Bilgisi / Reference Information

Okumuş Dağdeler, K. (2022). EFL Instructors' Perceptions of Personalized Learning. *Journal of History School*, 59, 2588-2603.

EFL INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING**Kübra OKUMUŞ DAĞDELER¹****Abstract**

Technology has a great opportunity for providing personalization in education. Thus, personalized learning has come to the agenda more than ever. However, it is not known how educators perceive personalized learning. Hence, this study aimed at identifying EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors' perceptions of personalized learning and personalized language learning. The study adopted a qualitative research and 8 EFL instructors participated in the study. An open-ended questionnaire form that was developed by the researcher was used in order to collect data. The data were gathered in an online setting. The data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings showed that the instructors defined personalized learning as a learning approach that was regulated to the learners' needs, interests, paces, strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, the instructors of this study thought that individualized learning and personalized learning were the same concepts as both of them took learners' needs and interests into consideration. Moreover, they believed that technology provided lots of tools for personalized learning so its contribution was very important.

Keywords: Personalized Learning, Personalized Language Learning, EFL, Perception, Technology

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Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Öğretim Elemanlarının Kişiselleştirilmiş Öğrenme Algıları

Öz

Teknoloji, eğitimde kişiselleştirme için büyük fırsat sağlamaktadır. Bu yüzden, günümüzde kişiselleştirilmiş öğrenme her zamankinden daha fazla gündeme gelmiştir. Ancak eğitimcilerin kişiselleştirilmiş öğrenmeyi nasıl algıladıkları bilinmemektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğreten öğretim elemanlarının kişiselleştirilmiş öğrenme ve kişiselleştirilmiş dil öğrenimi algılarını belirlemeyi amaçlamıştır. Çalışma nitel bir araştırmayı benimsemiştir ve çalışmaya 8 İngilizce öğretim elemanı katılmıştır. Veri toplamak için araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilen açık uçlu soru formu kullanılmıştır. Çevrimiçi ortamda toplanan veriler içerik analizi yoluyla çözümlenmiştir. Bulgular, öğretim elemanlarının kişiselleştirilmiş öğrenmeyi öğrencilerin ihtiyaçlarına, ilgi alanlarına, öğrenme hızlarına, güçlü ve zayıf yönlerine göre düzenlenmiş bir öğrenme yaklaşımı olarak tanımladıklarını göstermiştir. Öte yandan, öğretim elemanları, her ikisi de öğrenenlerin ihtiyaç ve ilgilerini dikkate aldığından bireyselleştirilmiş öğrenme ve kişiselleştirilmiş öğrenmenin aynı kavramlar olduğunu düşünmektedirler. Ayrıca, katılımcılar teknolojinin kişiselleştirilmiş öğrenme için birçok araç sağladığına ve bu nedenle katkısının çok önemli olduğuna inanmaktadırlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kişiselleştirilmiş Öğrenme, Kişiselleştirilmiş Dil Öğrenimi, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce, Algı, Teknoloji

INTRODUCTION

It has been well-known for many years that individual differences play a key role in teaching and learning process. Thus, the approaches of personalized learning (PL, hereafter) and personalized language learning (PLL, hereafter) have been a topic of research. Although it is agreed on that PL is important for learning, there is not an explanation of PL which is mostly agreed upon. Basham vd. (2016) believe that a few people know what personalized learning really is, and fewer can create and implement personalization in education. According to Bulger (2016), definitions of personalized learning include many possibilities such as student-centered classrooms, learning management systems, customized interfaces and adaptive tutors. It seems that it is not easy to comprehend and describe personalized learning. However, some definitions are worthy of note to address here. For instance, U.S. Department of Education (2017) defines PL as follows:

“Personalized learning refers to instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner.

Learning objectives, instructional approaches, and instructional content (and its sequencing) may all vary based on learner needs. In addition, learning activities are made available that are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests and often self-initiated” (p. 1).

The definition above shows that PL provides a learning process where learner needs are the center of this process. Personalized learning is an educational approach in which the learner differences and preferences are taken into consideration as enabling individuals or groups to achieve pre-determined goals (Kukulka-Hulme, 2016). PL creates intrinsic motivation for success by engaging students in learning process and taking their abilities, interests, and aptitudes into consideration (Hughey, 2020). Personalization in education provide learners to experience learning in diverse locations, review their own learning and access to educational resources related to their skills and abilities (Petersen et al., 2009). The key of personalized learning is the individuality and learner-centeredness. The core elements of personalized learning are individual differences, personal needs and personal development (Peng, Ma & Spector; 2019). In PL, although the educational objectives are the same, the ways to achieve these goals are peculiar to individual. In a class where each student has the same educational goals and objectives, learners follow their own pace and paths and learn according to their own needs. In the same direction wit PL, PLL provides learning regulated to learner needs, pace and interests in learning language. In the process of language learning, the needs, abilities, interests, and learning speed of learners are taken into account and learners learn language in a way that is adjusted for them.

The literature is lack of studies focusing on PL and PLL. Literature about the adaptive technologies which provides personalized English language learning is highly limited (Kerr, 2016). In literature, some studies developing some personalized language learning systems can be found. Some of these studies propose and implement some PLL systems (e.g. Jung & Graf, 2008; Fu, 2008; Hsu, 2008; Petersen et al,2009; Hsu & Hwang & Chen, 2013; Griol et al., 2014; Yeung & Lee, 2018; Troussas et al., 2018). Moreover, some attitude and perception studies related to personalized learning and personalized learning environment can also be seen in literature although they are highly limited. Some of these studies focus on students’ attitudes and result in that students’ attitudes are positive towards PL. (Sahin & Kislak, 2016; Doğan & Çakır, 2019). As this study focused on instructors’ perceptions, here the practitioners’ attitudes and perceptions were highlighted. For example, Hurtienne (2017) conducted a case study with four teachers who made a transition from traditional learning to PL. She explored that the teachers regarded PL beneficial for students although it was

difficult to give the control to the students. Dinkins (2017) expressed that teachers believed that they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to implement PL although they had enough resources. Arnesen et al (2019) found that pre-service teachers experienced PL had positive attitudes towards PL and they understood the importance of personalization in student development and motivation. Pre-service teachers find personalized learning environments easy and practical (Şahin & Uluçol, 2016; Bunting et al.; 2021). Bunting et al. (2021) interviewed teachers for personalized language learning technologies. The participants regarded PLL technologies “a promising way to mitigate the competence differences in the children’s English” (p. 9). Underwood & Banyard (2008) found that teachers regarded PL as “the need to recognize pupil voice and autonomy” (p. 245). Courcier (2007) found that teachers believed that PL was good but difficult to implement. Moreover, Courcier (2007) explored that the teachers had some confusion about what personalized learning, individualized learning and differentiation were.

Literature shows that there are some studies identifying attitudes and opinions of teachers towards/on PL but there is lack of study exploring what teachers mean by personalized learning. As learning is a personalized experience that helps individuals to expand their knowledge, perspective, skills, and understanding personalized learning models can provide to meet individual needs and goals (Shemshack & Spector, 2020). However, even the literature is confused about what personalized learning is. The review study of Shemshack & Spector (2020) discussed that personalized learning, individualized instruction and customized instruction were used interchangeably in scientific research. In such a mess, it is important to know how teachers who are the implementers of PL perceive PL. Thus, this research focused on the following research questions:

- How do EFL instructors perceive PL?
- How do EFL instructors perceive PLL?

METHOD

The research design, participants and data analysis of the study were explained below.

Research Design

This study adopted phenomenology, one of the qualitative research methods. In the studies using phenomenology “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon” is expressed

(Creswell, 2007, p. 57). In this study, the concepts of PL and PLL was defined and described through the eyes of EFL instructors, so phenomenology was preferred as the research design.

Participants

The study group consisted of 8 EFL instructors from three universities in Turkey. The group showed variety in terms of age, title and teaching years. The information related to the group was presented below.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Title	Teaching years
P1	M	41-50	Assist. Prof. Dr	11-20
P2	F	31-40	Lecturer	6-10
P3	F	41-50	Lecturer	20-30
P4	F	22-30	Research Assistant	1-5
P5	F	31-40	Lecturer	11-20
P6	F	51-60	Assist. Prof. Dr.	20-30
P7	M	41-50	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	20-30
P8	M	51-60	Assist. Prof. Dr.	30+

Data Collection

The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire form which was prepared by the researcher. Firstly, the questions were prepared based on the literature review. Then, two researchers, which one of them was expert in ELT and the other one was expert in personalized learning, were consulted to get their opinions. Based on the expert opinions, the form was improved and then sent to the target group through Google Forms. The participation in the study was completely voluntary. Ethics committee approval of this article was received at Sivas Cumhuriyet University, dated 04.08.2021 and with the number of E-60263016-050.06.04-72423.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through content analysis. The data were read and re-read by the researcher and themes and codes were identified. In data analysis,

numerical data were not preferred; only words and phrases underpinned the data analysis.

In order to provide validity and reliability, the approaches of credibility and trustworthiness of Creswell & Miller (2000) and Lincoln & Guba (1985) were adopted. The techniques of member check and peer debriefing were applied. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) member check is the most important technique of credibility. In member checking, the data and interpretations are shown to the participants and asked them if they confirm the credibility of information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, two of the participants checked and confirmed the data and interpretations. Moreover, in order to provide peer debriefing which “provides an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208), one researcher who studies personalized learning reviewed the whole process. Characteristics of research such as aim, questions, method, data, and analysis procedure were explained to the reviewer. The reviewer confirmed the research process.

RESULTS

The findings related to the EFL instructors’ personalized learning perceptions were presented below. While presenting data, the key words that form the codes were used in italics. Moreover, a table was used for presenting data that included many codes.

What Does Personalized Learning Mean?

In order to identify PL perceptions, firstly a description of PL through the eyes of instructors were done. It was observed that the participants defined PL in a similar way although there were some differences. 3 of the participants defined PL using the term of “*learners’ needs*”. The instructors perceived PL as learning adapted to the *learners’ needs, weaknesses, strengths and learning styles*. For example; P7 stated that:

“Personalized learning can be defined as a type of learning that considers the needs, strengths and weaknesses of each learner and a plan is made according to the results.”

PL was regarded as a learner-centered, autonomous, individual-centered and self-directed learning by P1 and P2. Moreover, P5 and P6 preferred the term of “*customization*” in their definitions.

“It is the customization of learning according to learners needs, learning (cognitive) styles, strengths, weakness and expectations”. (P5)
“That is customized learning for each student depending on their needs and interests.” (P6)

Only one instructor described PL by addressing technology as follows:

“Nurturing each individual’s social, emotional and physical development. Additionally, systematic use of IT and adaptive software can be analyzed within this concept.” (P8)

The main similarity among the descriptions was that participants grounded their definition on individual differences such as learners’ needs, paces, strengths and weaknesses. It was observed that EFL instructors comprehended PL similarly.

Definition of Individualized Learning

The question of “How can you define individualized learning” was asked to the instructors. The instructors used the terms of *learners’ needs, paces, strengths and weaknesses* also defining individualized learning. 4 instructors made definition based on learners’ needs. Some of the excerpts were given below:

“It refers to the approach that aims to realize the teaching-learning process based on individuals' needs, interests, weaknesses, strengths and skills.” P1

“We have to look the students' performance to know what they require and build on that.” P6

“Individualized learning can be teaching according to the needs of the individual students.” P7

Two instructors believed that PL and individualized learning were the same things.

“The same as 'personalized' and 'autonomous', self-directed learning.” (P2)

“I think individualized learning and personalized learning refer to the same thing” (P4)

One instructor used “technology” in his definition. The same instructor also described PL by benefitting form use of technologies.

“It refers to the peace of learning in terms of content and instructional technology.” (P8)

These definitions showed that EFL instructors did not differentiate PL from individualized learning. They described both concepts with the same or similar ideas.

Definition of Personalized Language Learning

The definitions of PLL were in parallel with the definitions of PL. In general, descriptions focused on adjusting *learners' needs, strengths, weakness, and interests* to the language learning process. Some excerpts from the participants were given below.

"Language learning through a learner-centered approach, considering learners' needs, deficiencies, skills, strengths, motivation for learning and so on." P1

"Learning a language based on learner's specific needs, interest or planning learning by considering the learner's prior knowledge about that language" P3

"Knowing what learners' strengths and the areas they need to improve to help them foster better learning that suits them." P5

"Personalized language learning can be defined as tailoring language teaching according to individual needs, strengths, weaknesses, skills and learning styles of learners. and monitoring their performance." P7

All of the instructors focused on individual differences and the need for addressing these differences as defining PLL while not all of the instructors mention these needs, interests and performance in their definition of PL. Moreover, some notions such as autonomous and self-directed that were stated in PL definitions were not observed in PLL perceptions. Lastly, none of the instructors defined PLL by relating it to the technology.

The Characteristics of Personalized Learning

The characteristics of PL which provided more comprehension of PL were shown by using Table 2.

According to the participants, one of the most important characteristics of PL was the learning process where the learners participated in the different steps of learning process. The excerpts from the participants reflect their opinions as follows:

"It focuses on individuals. Students are a part of the process. They have concise objectives to achieve" (P1).

“Further searching, reading, watching about the given topic and reflecting on it. Practising and taking part in interactive tools” (P2).

“Involving students in the creation of learning activities and relying on students’ personal interests. The intent is to create engaged students who have learned how to learn” (P8).

Table 2
Characteristics of PL

Themes	Codes
Positive aspects	Independent learning
	Flexible
	Specific
	Target oriented
	Individual
	Autonomy
	Customization
	Active participation of students in learning process
Negative aspects	Assessing learners' skills, performances continuously and redesigning teaching.
	The number of students
	Cultural issues
	apatethic students
	The need for one to one tutoring

Some participants believed that learning provided learner autonomy. According to P5, the main characteristics of PL was autonomy. He stated that:

“Autonomy, taking responsibility for one’s own learning, knowing what works best, working out communicative and compensatory strategies on their own.”

The participants related PL to specific, target-oriented, flexible, individual and independent learning.

Some participants mentioned about some challenges such as cultural issues and apathetic students of PL. Moreover, P3 and P5 addressed the high number of students. P5 stated that:

“The application of personalized learning requires one-on-one tutoring for every student based on their interests and it is the most challenging part of this process”

As the classes are crowded and PL requires to regulate learning to the individual differences, the lecturers find PL difficult to implement. The

participants were asked if they were benefiting from PL in their teaching and 5 of the stated that they did not use. And one participant using PL stated that *"I try to respond to students' needs and interests, and teach them to manage their own learning"*. Another participant using PL said that *"I read articles, watch Youtube videos, share my experineces with my colleagues and students"*. These statements showed that almost none of participants really utilized PL in their teaching process. However, the participants who did not use PL at that moment stressed that they would implement it in future.

Relationship Between Technology and PL

Instructors answered the question about the relation between technology and PL. They believed that technology provided many *tools, sources and applications* for PL. Some excerpts were given below:

"I think technology provides incredible tools for personalized language learning. It provides useful tools to improve all aspects of the language learning." P2

"Technology is inevitable. Learners have the chance to choose online activities or applications according to their needs." (P3)

"Technology gives both teachers and learners a great chance to benefit from different tools, web pages, sources in language learning. There are numerous mobile applications that learners can use and maintain their own learning process. Students can make practice and also track their own learning through online quizzes, games, flashcards etc." (P4)

"Very effective. In this ever-shrinking world, people can have access to information from all around the world. They have anything they are interested in at their fingertips, and with a click on their mouths they might have easy access to it." (P6)

"It contributes a lot to personalized learning because there are a lot of apps that can be used for personalized learning." (P7)

Technology provides many instructional tools and resources for learning. Thus, it *makes PL easier* to implement. P5 expressed that:

"It can facilitate personalized language learning; make it more practical and accomplishable".

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It has been known for many years that individuals have different interests and needs and that education should be organized to address these interests and

needs. However, factors such as crowded classroom environments make personalized teaching difficult. On the other hand, the development of technology day by day and access to millions of educational resources bring personalized learning to the agenda again. Despite the importance of personalized learning and its facilitation by technology, it is seen that it does not take place enough in the literature and practice. In particular, practitioners' awareness of PL and their use are unknown. However, educators play a key role in the effective use of PL. Therefore, PL awareness and perceptions of the instructors who will perform the teaching are very important. Thus, the EFL instructors' perceptions of PL and PLL were analyzed in this study.

Although there is little understanding of PL in literature as it is confused with adaptive learning, individualized learning, differentiated instruction and customized learning, there is an agreement that PL is something related to learners' need, styles, interests etc. The participants of this study also perceived PL as a learning approach that were optimized to the learners' needs, interests, pace, strengths and weaknesses. This perception of instructors is parallel with the definitions found in literature. For example, Patrick et al. (2013, p.4; cited in Arnesen et al., 2019) defined PL as:

“Personalized learning is tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible.”

The pace of learning is another key concept of PL. Each learner has a different learning pace, and it is important to take it into consideration in learning process. PL attaches much importance to the differences in pace of learning. The instructors of this study highlighted this while defining PL. U.S. Department of Education also emphasizes this in their definition as follows: *“personalized learning refers to instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner”* (p. 1).

As expressed before, the literature is unsure about the concepts of PL and individualized learning. The participants of Courcier (2007) were confused about these terms. The same finding was observed in this study. Some of the participants expressed that PL was equal to individualized learning and some other defined individualized learning almost the same with PL. The review study of Schemsack & Spector showed that individualized learning, PL and customized learning were used in the articles interchangeably. The confusion that was seen in researchers was also observed in the practitioners which were EFL instructors in this study.

Although PL definitions vary, the common themes are student-centeredness, flexibility, student agency, holistic perspective to the learner (DeMonte, 2019). Similarly, participants of this study, regarded PL as a flexible, autonomous, customized, independent and learner-centered approach by the instructors. The teachers participated in the study of Underwood & Banyard (2008) also highlighted autonomy as describing PL.

It was observed that none of the participants properly implemented PL in their teaching even though they regarded it positively. One of the reasons can be the negative aspects that they expressed such as crowded classes and the need one-for one tutoring. PL was found to be difficult to implement by teachers (Courcier, 2007; Hurtienne, 2017) as they believed that providing right kind of support for each learner would lead excessive burden to them (Bunting et al, 2021). Another reason can be the lack of knowledge related to the PL, which was concluded based on their perceptions of PL.

After technology begins to affect education profoundly, PL has been directly related to technology. *“Personalized learning is characterized by the promotion of 21st century skills and the use of technology to create instructional pathways that incorporate students’ needs, interests, and aspirations”* (Hannover Research, 2014, p. 4). Thus, instructors’ opinions about the relation between technology and PL were interrogated. While only one instructor included technology in his definition of PL, all of the instructors accepted the importance of technology in providing PL. They believed that technology provided incredible number of resources and tools for PL, which makes PL easier to implement. Basham et al. (2016) state that technology is a tool for supporting the implementation of PL but implementing PL requires more than technology. PL can be defined without touching on technology, but it is a fact that technology plays a crucial role in personalization of learning especially today’s world. Thus, a description of PL without technology can be insufficient for our age. Twyman & Redding (2015) define PL by highlighting use of technology as follows:

“Personalized learning varies the time, place, and pace of learning for each student, enlists the student in the creation of learning pathways, and utilizes technology to manage and document the learning process and access rich sources of information” (p. 3).

Based on these findings and interpretations, it is concluded that there is need for understanding of PL and PLL. With the light of the possible effects of PL to students’ success, the practitioners’ perceptions and knowledge of PL become more of an issue. Thus, further studies may focus on digging PL

perceptions by including more participants like teachers, instructors and students as this study was limited to eight instructors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It has been well-known for many years that individual differences play a key role in teaching and learning process. Thus, the approaches of personalized learning and personalized language learning have been a topic of research. Literature shows that there are some studies identifying attitudes and opinions of teachers towards/on PL but there is lack of study exploring what teachers mean by personalized learning. As learning is a personalized experience that helps individuals to expand their knowledge, perspective, skills, and understanding personalized learning models can provide to meet individual needs and goals (Shemshack & Spector, 2020). However, even the literature is confused about what personalized learning is. The review study of Shemshack & Spector (2020) discussed that personalized learning, individualized instruction and customized instruction were used interchangeably in scientific research. In such a mess, it is important to know how teachers who are the implementers of PL perceive PL.

Hence, this study aimed at identifying EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors' perceptions of personalized learning and personalized language learning.

This study adopted phenomenology, one of the qualitative research methods. In the studies using phenomenology “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon” is expressed (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). In this study, the concepts of PL and PLL was defined and described through the eyes of EFL instructors, so phenomenology was preferred as the research design. The study group consisted of 8 EFL instructors from three universities in Turkey. The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire form which was prepared by the researcher. The data were analyzed through content analysis. In order to identify PL perceptions, firstly a description of PL through the eyes of instructors were done. It was observed that the participants defined PL in a similar way although there were some differences. 3 of the participants defined PL using the term of “*learners' needs*”. The instructors perceived PL as learning adapted to the *learners' needs, weaknesses, strengths and learning styles*. Moreover, EFL instructors did not differentiate PL from individualized learning. They described both concepts with the same or similar ideas. Although PL definitions vary, the common themes are student-centeredness, flexibility, student agency, holistic perspective to the learner (DeMonte, 2019). Similarly, participants of this study, regarded PL as a flexible, autonomous, customized, independent and learner-centered approach by the instructors. The teachers participated in the study of Underwood & Banyard (2008) also highlighted autonomy as describing PL. It was observed that none of the participants properly implemented PL in their teaching even though they regarded it positively. One of the reasons can be the negative aspects that they expressed such as crowded classes and the need one-for one tutoring. PL was found to be difficult to implement by teachers (Courcier, 2007; Hurtienne, 2017) as they believed that providing right kind of support for each learner would lead excessive burden to them (Bunting et al, 2021). Another reason can be the lack of knowledge related to the PL, which was concluded based on their perceptions of PL. In this study, EFL instructors' opinions about the relation between technology and PL were also interrogated. While only one instructor included technology in his definition of PL, all of the instructors accepted the importance of technology in providing PL. They believed that technology provided incredible number of resources and tools for PL, which makes PL easier to implement.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that there was need for understanding of PL and PLL. With the light of the possible effects of PL to students' success, the practitioners' perceptions and knowledge of PL become more of an issue.