

The Relationship between Learner Autonomy and Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This quantitative study is conducted at Kocaeli University English Prep School, Turkey with four B (beginner/ elementary) and four A (pre-intermediate/ intermediate) level classes to identify the level of students' learner autonomy and their use of language learning strategies. It also aims to find out whether there is a relationship between their learner autonomy and strategy use. Findings indicate that students take half of the responsibility of their own learning. They are aware of the language learning strategies and sometimes use them; thus, they do not have strong control over their learning process. The data also shows that there is a relation between learner autonomy and language learning strategy use; the more the students autonomous are the more language learning strategies they employ to cope with the difficulties they face in their language learning process.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; Language learning strategies; Strategy use; Language learning process; Language learning proficiency

The Relationship between Learner Autonomy and Language Learning Strategies

The focus of much research in education is on defining how learners can take charge of their own learning and how teachers can help students to become more autonomous (Wenden & Rubin, 1987). Holec (1981) describes an autonomous learner in various aspects. An autonomous learner is capable of determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.) and evaluating what has been acquired. Autonomous learners have the capacity to determine realistic and reachable goals, select appropriate methods and techniques to be used, monitor their own learning process, and evaluate the progress of their own learning (Little, 1991). According to Dam (1990), an autonomous learner is an active participant in the social processes of learning and an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows. Autonomous people are intrinsically-motivated, perceive themselves to be in control of their decision-making, take responsibility for the outcomes of their actions and have confidence in themselves (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Bandura, 1989; Doyal & Gough, 1991). Dickinson (1995) underlines the importance of learner autonomy while giving five features of autonomous learners; they i) understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices ii) are able to formulate their own learning objectives iii) are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies iv) are able to monitor their use of strategies v) are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

The literature showed that students do apply strategies while learning a second language and that these strategies can be described and classified. The taxonomy of language learning strategies used in this study is Oxford (1990) in which strategies are grouped as direct or indirect

language learning strategies. Language learners employ strategies; however, they vary in their choice of strategies. Ellis (1994) defines some factors that affect the strategy choice of learners. Learners' beliefs about language learning affect strategy choice. Ellis (1994) states that learners who emphasize the importance of *learning* tend to use cognitive strategies (direct strategies), while the ones who emphasize the importance of *using* the language rely on communication strategies (indirect strategies). Learner factors such as age, aptitude, motivation, personal background, and gender also affect strategy choice. Ellis (1994) states that young children employ strategies in task-specific manners, while older children and adults make use of generalized strategies. Aptitude, related to learning styles, also affects strategy choice. Oxford and Ehrman (1990) suggest that introverts, intuitives, feelers, and perceivers have advantages in classroom contexts because they have more aptitude for language learning and use more strategies. Ellis (1994) suggests that highly motivated students use more strategies related to formal practice, functional practice, general study, conversation, and input elicitation than poorly motivated students. Learning experiences also affect strategy choice; students with at least five years of study use more functional-practice strategies than students with fewer years of experiences (Ellis, 1994). The nature and range of the instructional task affect strategy choice and use as well. Learning languages that are totally different from learners' native language may result in greater use of strategies than learning similar ones (Ellis, 1994).

Method

Participants

In this study, the population is Kocaeli University 2013- 2014 academic year Foreign Languages School students. There are eight classes randomly chosen; four B (beginner/ elementary) level and four A (pre-intermediate/ intermediate) level classes. The students are

assigned to the classes based on their grades of the placement test administered at the beginning of year. The study focuses on learner autonomy in a school context where the students proceed through already defined content; therefore, what we refer to as autonomy should better be regarded as reactive autonomy. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford) was conducted to identify the strategy use of the students and Learner Autonomy questionnaire prepared by Karabıyık (2008) was used.

Results

The results in Table 1 show that the mean score falls within the range of a score of „3“ on the Likert scale. That is, the students considered their teachers to be neither the only authority nor the facilitator in the class, but falling somewhere in between.

Table 1. The role of the teacher

	Sole authority			Facilitator				
Answer	1	2	3	4	5	X	SD	
N	12	13	40	24	10	3.06	1.126	

As the results displayed in Table 2 indicate the mean score falls within the range of a score of „3“ on the Likert scale. The students consider themselves neither autonomous nor teacher- dependent, but falling somewhere in between.

Table 2. Learner Autonomy

	Dependent on the teacher			Autonomous				
Answer	1	2	3	4	5	X	SD	
N	6	6	46	29	13	3.38	.993	

As shown by the data in Table 3, there were no items which were clustered in the „frequently“ category of the scale. The items that attained the highest percentages were “*participating in group/pair work activities*” (item 9), “*choosing partners to work with*” (item

12), “*participating in a project work*” (item 13), “*setting learning goals*” (item 16) and “*evaluating the courses*” (item 17), which were „sometimes“ carried out by the participants in their high schools with mean scores of 2.93, 2.65, 2.79, 2.93 and 2.68 respectively. The items that had the lowest mean scores were “*preparing portfolios*” (item 19), and “*deciding what to learn next*” (item 18) with mean scores of 1.98, and 2.09 respectively. Frequency counts show that more than half of the respondents were „rarely“ asked to engage in these activities.

Table 3. About high School Education

Throughout your high school education, ...	Frequency Percentages (%)				X	SD
	Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Frequently 4		
9. How often were you asked to participate in group/pair work activities?	6	23	43	28	2.93	.872
10. How often were you asked to evaluate your own work?	13	35	43	6	2.46	.834
11. How often were you asked to evaluate your peers' work?	23	39	31	7	2.22	.889
12. How often were you asked to choose your partner to work with?	11	34	34	21	2.65	.935
13. How often were you asked to participate in a project work?	5	30	45	20	2.79	.813
14. How often did your teachers ask you to choose what activities to use in your lessons?	18	42	30	10	2.32	.857
15. How often did your teachers ask you to choose what materials to use in your lessons?	21	40	30	9	2.27	.890
16. How often were you asked to set your own learning goals?	7	28	29	36	2.93	.966
17. How often were you asked to evaluate your course?	8	37	33	22	2.68	.915
18. How often were you asked to decide what you should learn next?	35	32	22	11	2.09	1.009
19. How often were you asked to prepare portfolios?	37	35	22	6	1.98	.916

In the next part, participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of their teachers' and their own responsibilities while learning English. There were 13 items related to perceptions of responsibility, and the respondents ranked their answers on a three-point Likert scale that ranged from *completely the teacher's* to *completely mine*. Table 4 shows the percentages, frequencies, means and standard deviations of each item. As shown by the data, for items 20 and 31, the participants gave more responsibility to themselves with mean scores of 2.72 and 2.64

respectively. These items include the responsibilities for “*making sure they make progress outside class*” (item 20) and “*evaluating their course*” (item 31). In these items, the majority of the participants chose “completely mine” option. In particular, the results of items 20 and 31 show that more than 70% of the participants had a tendency to take more control for the responsibilities taken outside the class.

Table 4. Responsibilities

Frequency Percentages (%)					
Items	Completely the teacher's	Half mine, half the teacher's	Completely mine	X	SD
	1	2	3		
20. Make sure you make progress during lesson	2	89	9	2.72	.328
21. Make sure you make progress outside class	1	23	77	2.74	.466
22. Stimulate your interest in learning English	37	56	7	1.71	.598
23. Identify your weaknesses in English	20	52	28	2.09	.689
24. Make you work harder	16	44	40	2.34	.713
25. Decide the objectives of the English course	24	55	21	1.96	.675
26. Decide what you should learn next	62	31	7	1.45	.632
27. Choose what activities to use in your English lessons	53	46	1	1.49	.527
28. Decide how long to spend on each activity	61	30	9	1.48	.652
29. Choose what materials to use in your English lessons	61	35	4	1.43	.567
30. Evaluate your learning	39	50	11	1.72	.653
31. Evaluate your course	10	18	72	2.64	.660
32. Decide what you learn outside the class	26	62	12	1.87	.604

In the next part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked 6 questions about their perceptions of their decision-making abilities in a range of activities/ responsibilities included in the first part. In other words, they were asked to indicate how successful they would be if they were given the opportunity to make decisions about their own learning. They ranked their answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *very poor* to *very good*. Table 22 shows the percentages of the responses of the control group participants given to the individual items. As shown by the data, most of the responses are clustered under the „OK“ category of the scale. The activities that the participants rated themselves as „OK“ at managing were mostly in-class activities: “*choosing learning activities in the class*” (item 33), “*choosing learning objectives in the class*” (item 35) and “*choosing learning materials in the class*” (item 37). The data also

shows that the percentages of the participants who chose „*poor/very poor*“ categories were generally quite low as compared to the percentages in the other categories.

Table 5. Abilities

Frequency Percentages (%)							
If you have the opportunity, how good do you think you would be at:	Very poor	Poor	OK	Good	Very good	X	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
33. choosing learning activities in class?	3	5	44	38	10	3.45	.877
34. choosing learning activities outside class?	12	33	38	17	0	3.60	.914
35. choosing learning objectives in the class?	2	6	45	33	14	3.49	.892
36. choosing learning objectives outside the class?	1	7	31	35	27	3.77	.960
37. choosing learning materials in the class?	4	18	46	28	4	3.10	.869
38. choosing learning materials outside the class?	4	11	38	13	14	3.44	.995

In the fourth part of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the frequency of the autonomous learning activities they engaged in inside and outside the class. On a four point Likert scale, students were asked to indicate how often they carried out 8 out-of-class activities that require autonomy. Table 6 presents the frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations of each activity engaged in outside the class. The activities that attained the highest percentage in the “always” and „often“ categories were “*listening to songs*” (item 46) and “*trying to learn new words*” (item 41). Additionally, more than half of the participants said that they „always“ or „often“ *watched English TV programs and films* (item 43).

Table 6. Use of English

Frequency Percentages (%)							
In the last academic term, without having been assigned to do so, how often did you ...	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	X	SD
	5	4	3	2	1		
39. do grammar activities on your own	4	17	39	26	14	3.04	.905
40. do optional homework	11	12	36	26	14	3.04	1.014
41. try to learn new words	20	46	22	7	5	2.22	.990
42. use English on the internet (chat, search, etc.)	18	24	29	22	7	2.84	1.205
43. watch English programs or films	31	28	22	12	7	2.38	1.172
44. read materials written in English	8	11	34	38	9	3.16	.956
45. speak English with native speakers	18	6	27	33	16	3.50	.954
46. listen to English songs	42	27	19	10	2	2.19	1.136

The results suggest that the students considered their teachers to be neither the only authority nor the facilitator in the class, but falling somewhere in between. Also, they indicate that the

students consider themselves to be autonomous. The overall results show that the students had mid level of readiness for learner autonomy. Their general tendency was to take half of the responsibility “*stimulating student interest in learning English*”, and “*identifying their weaknesses in learning English*”, “*deciding on the objectives of the English course*”, “*evaluating your learning*” and “*deciding what you learn outside the class*”. Students were given Oxford’s SILL (1990) questionnaire with fifty strategies and asked to rank their employment of these strategies on a 5 point Likert scale that went from „*never or almost never*’ to „*always or almost always*’. The results suggest that the students in groups are aware of the language learning strategies that may help them take control over their learning process leading to better language proficiency. The fact that they sometimes use language learning strategies shows that they have weak control over their learning process. They are aware of the strategies that may provide them necessary help in their language learning process; however, they fail to use them effectively.

Table 6. Language learning Strategies

Part	Control Groups Strategy Pre- test	X	SD
Part A	1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	3.05	1.17
	2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.		
	3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help remember the word.		
	4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.		
	5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.		
	6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.		
	7. I physically act out new English words.		
	8. I review English lessons often.		
	9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.		
Part B	10. I say or write new English words several times.	2.89	1.17
	11. I try to talk like native English speakers.		
	12. I practice the sounds of English.		
	13. I use the English words I know in different ways.		
	14. I start conversations in English.		
	15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.		
	16. I read for pleasure in English.		
	17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.		
	18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.		
	19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.		
Part C	20. I try to find patterns in English.	2.95	1.14
	21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.		
	22. I try not to translate word-for-word.		
	23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.		
	24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.		
Part C	25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.		
	26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.		
	27. I read English without looking up every new word.		
	28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.		
	29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.		

Table 7. Language learning Strategies (continued)

Part	Control Groups Strategy Pre- test	X	SD
Part D	30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.		
	31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.		
	32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.		
	33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.		
	34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	3.34	1.06
	35. I look for people I can talk to in English.		
Part E	36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.		
	37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.		
	38. I think about my progress in learning English.		
	39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.		
	40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.		
	41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.		
Part F	42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.		
	43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	2.73	1.16
	44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.		
	45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.		
Part F	46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.		
	47. I practice English with other students.	3.16	1.10
	48. I ask for help from English speakers.		
	49. I ask questions in English.		
	50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.		

As the results described in Table 8 indicate, responsibility, ability and use of English sections of autonomy survey are related (46,5%) to the total strategy use. Thus, we might conclude that students who are autonomous use strategies. Students who are autonomous organize and evaluate their learning (Strategy D; 43,4%) and learn with others (Strategy F 43%). The strategies in groups D and F are the strategies that are mostly related to learner autonomy. Strategies to remember more effectively (Strategy A) are related to responsibility, ability and use of English sections of autonomy survey (23%). Responsibility, ability and use of English sections of autonomy survey are related to using all mental processes (Strategy B). Also, there is relationship between to compensate for missing information (Strategy C) and responsibility, ability and use of English sections of autonomy survey (13,2%). Responsibility, ability and use of English sections of autonomy survey are related to organizing and evaluating their learning (Strategy D; 43,4%). Also, there is relationship between managing emotions (Strategy E; 11,7%) and responsibility, ability and use of English sections of autonomy survey.

Table 8. The Results of the Multiple Regression Analysis of the Responsibility, Ability and Use of English Sections with Strategy Total

Part	Section	B	SH	β
Strategy Total	Responsibility	.717	.691	.095
	Ability	1.413	.677	.213
	Use of English	3.037	.553	.549
Strategy A	Responsibility	-.008	.170	-.005
	Ability	.189	.167	.138
	Use of English	.457	.136	.402
Strategy B	Responsibility	.439	.205	.187
	Ability	.583	.201	.283
	Use of English	.859	.164	.501
Strategy C	Responsibility	-.118	.144	-.096
	Ability	.282	.141	.260
	Use of English	.148	.115	.163
Strategy D	Responsibility	.041	.182	.021
	Ability	.210	.179	.123
	Use of English	.844	.146	.594
Strategy E	Responsibility	.056	.126	.053
	Ability	.097	.123	.104
	Use of English	.216	.101	.276
Strategy F	Responsibility	.308	.113	.257
	Ability	.052	.111	.049
	Use of English	.512	.091	.582

Discussion

The fact that most of the responses regarding teacher and learner roles tended towards the mid-point of the scales suggests that most of the participants came to the university without having been exposed to autonomous activities in their early education. Although they feel that they can take responsibility for certain areas of their learning, they still see the teacher as an authority and expert who makes most of the decisions about students' learning in the classroom. Consistent with students' general acceptance of teacher authority, students expect the teacher to make most of the decisions in the learning process as they do not feel that they have the abilities to make the right decisions about their own learning. The fact that they rated their abilities lower regarding responsibilities which mostly include the methodological aspects of their learning indicate their incompetence in making decisions about their own learning, at least within the formal classroom environment. Assuming such responsibilities is considered important if students are expected to have control over their learning (Benson, 2001; Cotterall, 2000; Holec,

1981; Little, 1991). However, we cannot say that the general picture on this issue is completely pessimistic, because only a very few of the participants felt that their decision making abilities would be poor if they were given the opportunity. As Holec (1979; 27) points out, “few adults are capable of assuming responsibility for their learning... for the simplest reason that they have never had the occasion to use this ability”. As Holec (1979) states, students can ultimately make crucial decisions in their learning if only their teachers gradually give them more responsibilities and train them to be more autonomous. This could be done by slowly increasing the dose of responsibility, allowing students to feel more competent in making their own decisions in their own learning.

Ellis (1994) states that learners who emphasize the importance of *learning* tend to use cognitive strategies (direct strategies), while the ones who emphasize the importance of *using* the language rely on communication strategies (indirect strategies). The overall results suggest that students emphasize both learning and using the target language. Also, the results suggest that there is relationship mostly between language learning strategy use and use of English. This supports the result that the students in this study emphasize using the target language. Thus, we may conclude that students’ autonomous behaviors may lead them to use their mental processes to study or practice English, and organize and evaluate their learning to cope with their weak points and learn with others. It can be said that with guidance and strategy training, they can be trained to have more control over their learning.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data reveals important pedagogical implications that can inform future language teaching practices in Turkey. Regarding participants’ learner autonomy, the results

show that preparatory students have some role expectations, which affect their perceptions of responsibility inside and outside the class. They still largely see the teacher as an authority figure in the classroom, who should take most of the responsibilities and make most of the decisions about their learning in the classroom context. This might be considered as the reason why students cannot show autonomous behaviors in the classroom.

As students regard the teacher as the authority in the class, showing autonomous behaviors may be considered as unacceptable by the teachers and the students themselves. Kennedy (2002), as a result of his study with Turkish prep students learning English indicates that promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classroom in Turkey is not an easy struggle and it would be a mistake to expect too much too soon from Turkish learners who have traditional experiences prior to entering English language classrooms.

They are aware of the strategies that may provide them necessary help in their language learning process; however, they fail to use them effectively. What we need to do is to train students since as Holec (1985) explains the aim of the training is to prepare learners to direct their own learning so that they may gradually move from a state of dependence on a teacher to the greatest degree of independence or autonomy possible in a particular set of circumstances. Tudor (1996: 37) describes learning training as “the process by which learners are helped to deepen their understanding of the nature of language learning and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need in order to pursue their learning goals in an informal and self- directed manner”. As this study shows learner autonomy and the use of language learning strategies are related. The more strategies the students employ or more frequently the higher level of autonomy they have by shouldering the responsibility of their own learning process.

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