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Fostering learner autonomy

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Abstract

This study aims to find out whether training learners on language learning strategies fosters their learner autonomy or not. It was carried out at Kocaeli University in 2013-2014 education year with Prep School students. It is an experimental study in which randomly chosen four experimental and four control groups take part. At the beginning of the fall term, language learning strategies and learner autonomy surveys were conducted as pre-tests to identify students’ use of language learning strategies and their level of learner autonomy. Then, the experimental groups were trained on language learning strategies for the two weeks and observed until the end of the first term on their use of the language learning strategies. The control groups did not receive the training. At the end of the first term, language learning strategies and learner autonomy surveys were conducted as post-tests. The literature on language learning strategies in Turkey suggests that employing language learning strategies provides students with the necessary help a teacher can give by making them teachers of their own through making them aware of the language learning process itself and their strengths and weaknesses. As this study concludes the more strategies the students employ or the more frequently more autonomous they might become by starting to shoulder the responsibility of their own learning process.

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Keywords: learner autonomy; language learning strategies; learner training

1. Introduction

Language is both a subject of study and a means of receiving a meaningful world from others and is at the same time “a means of re-interpreting the world to his own ends for the learner” (Barnes, 1976, p. 6). Since knowledge of language cannot be defined or even understood without taking into account of the goals and purposes of a person

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who is attempting to gain this knowledge successful language teaching must therefore start from the learner rather than the language. Moreover, the language learners must be made aware of the fact that they are the most important element in the learning process. In this way, they learn how to learn for the purposes they design for themselves.

As Dickinson (1987, p. 9) points out, “the key to understanding this is the concept of responsibility for learning. The learner has to learn the process of learning and to be able to manage the complex learning network of learning goals, materials, sequencing of the materials, deciding how materials shall be used, deciding on tasks to be done, keeping records and making evaluations in order to reach this level of being able to use language to “create meanings of a social kind” and to “participate in verbal contest and verbal display” (Halliday, 1978, p. 3). This organization of learning material and mapping pathways through it has been traditionally the responsibility of the teacher. Since there are many options today for language learners outside the classroom context, providing students with essential research strategies has become much more important than making them learn limited amount of knowledge merely in the classroom from the language teacher. In such a learning environment, the role of the teacher is changing from the status of a “genius” who knows all to a “guide” who shows where and how to access knowledge and how to adapt or adopt it. We cannot expect learners to make the leap from total domination in the school classroom to full autonomy in the university. According to Holec (1985) learner training should prepare students 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. Learning training is seen as taking learners “further along the road to full autonomy” (Voller, Martyn & Pickard, 1999). Thus, self-directed learning is the realization of a learner’s potential for autonomy. Therefore, emphasis should be focused on providing them with skills and raising an awareness for language learning strategies to teach how to learn languages.

2. Fostering learner autonomy

The focus of much research in learner autonomy is on defining how learners can take charge of their own learning and how teachers can help students to become more autonomous. Learner autonomy was first defined by Holec (1979). He 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 (p. 3).

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).

Fostering learner autonomy may be defined in simple terms as helping learners to become more independent by training them to use language learning strategies effectively in their language learning process, thus taking the responsibility to control, evaluate and monitor their language learning process. Dickinson (1992, p. 330) identifies six ways “in which the teacher can promote greater learner independence”:

1. Legitimizing independence in learning by showing that we, as teachers, approve, and by encouraging the students to be more independent;
2. Convincing learners that they are capable of greater independence in learning -give them successful experiences of independent learning;
3. Giving learners opportunities to exercise their independence;
4. Helping learners to develop learning strategies so that they can exercise their independence;
5. Helping learners to become more aware of language as a system so that they can understand many of the learning techniques available and learn sufficient grammar to understand simple reference books;
6. Sharing with learners something of what we know about language learning so that they have a greater awareness of what to expect from the language learning task and how they should react to problems that erect barriers to learning.

As put forward by Dickinson (1992), what teachers aim to achieve through training learners on language learning strategies is to provide learners with awareness on how to learn a foreign language on their own.

2.1. Research questions

This study aims to find out whether training learners on language learning strategies fosters their learner autonomy or not and is defined in question form as:

7. What is Kocaeli University Preparatory School (KOUPS) students’ level of learner autonomy?
8. What sort of language learning strategies do KOUPS’ students employ?
9. Is there any statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores of the control groups in terms of learner autonomy and language learning strategies?
10. Is there any statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores of the experimental groups in terms of learner autonomy and language learning strategies?

3. Method

The study is conducted at Kocaeli University English Prep School. The students are attended to B (beginner/elementary) and A (pre-intermediate/intermediate) proficiency level groups according to the results of the placement test at the beginning of the 2013-2014 academic year. This is an experimental study; conducted with four B (beginner/elementary) level groups and four A (pre-intermediate/intermediate) level groups experimental and control groups equivalent in proficiency level. The quantitative data was gathered via questionnaires.

Firstly, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford) pre-test was conducted to identify the strategy use of the students. Likert scale of five items was used. SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Rebecca Oxford has been a widely used inventory in the related research areas. Learner Autonomy questionnaire prepared by Karabiyik (2008) was used. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the questionnaire used in Karabiyik’s study was .888 for the whole questionnaire. Then, the experimental groups were trained on language learning strategies for the two weeks and observed until the end of the first term on their use of the language learning strategies. The control groups did not receive any training. At the end of the first term, language learning strategies and learner autonomy questionnaires were administered as post-tests. In Table 1, you can see the information about participants.

3.1. Strategy training

Training included activities based on the content to be covered in the syllabus of the 2013-2014 fall academic year and the parallel strategies that were identified to be taught. These activities were provided by the researcher in an attempt to train students in some language learning strategies and raise their awareness of cognitive and metacognitive strategies which would enable them to develop autonomy and improve their language skills. The activities in the strategy training process included materials and exercises focused on teaching reading, vocabulary, writing, listening and speaking strategies. These materials were retrieved from different books and sources and some of them were modified for training purposes based on the sample activities provided by Oxford (1990) to teach language learning strategies. The training was conducted in the first two weeks of the academic year (11-15 November, 18-22 November). Following the strategy training, students were observed until the end of the term on their use of language learning strategies. In this period, teacher-trainers helped students to transfer newly learned strategy knowledge to the materials in their course book by reminding them of which strategy could be used with the material, how it could be used and why it should be used. Students were often informed about the rationale of the strategy training activities to raise their awareness of the strategies.
4. Results

When the subjects were given the learner autonomy and language learning strategies pre-tests, it was seen that there was not a significant difference between the control and the experimental groups in terms of their learner autonomy levels and use of language learning strategies. The analysis showed that the experimental groups, especially the beginner level classes really benefited from the strategy training.

4.1. Learner autonomy

The analysis of the learner autonomy questionnaire results indicated that both control and experimental groups had weak control over their own learning process; that is, they have low level of autonomy. Firstly, the control and experimental groups considered their teachers to be neither the only authority nor the facilitator in the class, but falling somewhere in between. They consider themselves neither autonomous nor teacher-dependent, but falling somewhere in between.

Secondly, the overall results show that the students in control and experimental groups had mid level of readiness for learner autonomy. Thirdly, most of the participants reported that in their high schools, they were rarely engaged in activities that require autonomy which suggests that most of the participants came to the university without having been exposed to autonomous activities in their early education. Moreover, the results suggested that learners seemed to take more responsibility upon themselves for outside-of-class responsibilities such as making progress outside the class; deciding what they learn outside the class and making themselves work harder. By evaluating these findings, it can be said that Turkish learners, have some definite lines in their minds about teacher and student roles in the classroom. 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.

Finally, the results in “abilities” part indicated that participants considered their own decision making abilities to be good for the responsibilities taken mostly outside the class such as choosing learning activities outside the class, choosing learning objectives outside the class, choosing learning materials outside the class, and identifying their own weaknesses in learning English. On the other hand, they rated their abilities lower regarding responsibilities taken in the class. These responsibilities mostly include the methodological aspects of their learning as in the previous section. This result suggests that these students do not feel very competent in making decisions about their own learning, at least within the formal classroom environment.

4.2. Language learning strategies

With language learning strategies questionnaire, the participants were asked to indicate the frequency of their employment of the strategies given. 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 show that the control and experimental groups sometimes use the strategies to remember more effectively (part A). They reported that they sometimes use all their mental processes. They sometimes compensate for missing information (part C) They reported that they sometimes organize and evaluate their learning (part D). They sometimes manage their emotions (part E). They reported they sometimes learn with others (part F. The results suggest that the students in control 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.

Is there any statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores of the control groups in terms of learner autonomy and language learning strategies?

To find out whether there has been a change within the study process in the control group students autonomy level or strategy use, pre- and post-test scores of autonomy questionnaires of control and experimental groups were
analyzed using paired samples T-test. Autonomy questionnaire was analyzed section by section (responsibility, ability, use of English) to find out whether there has been a change in the autonomy level of students.

As the results described in Table 1 indicate, the pre-test mean score of the control group for the ability section of the autonomy questionnaire is 24.9 (SD = 3.4) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 25.3 (SD = 3.5). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is not statistically significant ($t_{(62)} = .599; p>0.05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility Section</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>.527</td>
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<tr>
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<td>25.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.6</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>.599</td>
<td>.551</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
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<td>25.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>62</td>
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<td>.110</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
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</table>

* $p < 0.05$

The results presented in Table 1 that the pre-test mean score of the control group for the ability section of the autonomy questionnaire is 20.7 (SD = 3.6) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 20.4 (SD = 3.5). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is not statistically significant ($t_{(62)} = .599; p>0.05$).

The pre-test mean score of the control group for the use of English section of the autonomy questionnaire is 25.2 (SD = 5.8) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 26.4 (SD = 4.6). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is not statistically significant ($t_{(62)} = -1.621; p>0.05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Questionnaires</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* $p < 0.05$

As shown by the data in Table 2, the pre-test mean score of the control group for the strategy questionnaire is 1.5 (SD = 24.7) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 1.2 (SD = 68.6). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is statistically significant ($t_{(81)} = 3.4; p<0.05$). The control group performed significantly better in the pre-test than in the post-test.

**Is there any statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores of the experimental groups in terms of learner autonomy and language learning strategies?**

As the results described in Table 3 suggest, the pre-test mean score of the experimental group for the responsibility section of the autonomy questionnaire is 25.2 (SD = 3.3) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 26.1 (SD = 3.5). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is not statistically significant ($t_{(67)} = -1.477; p>0.05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility Section</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
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</table>
As seen in Table 3, the pre-test mean score of the experimental group for the ability section of the autonomy questionnaire is 19.6 (SD = 4) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 20.3 (SD = 3.9). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is not statistically significant (t(67)= -1.004; p>0.05). The pre-test mean score of the experimental group for the use of English section of the autonomy questionnaire is 25.6 (SD = 5.5) and the post-test mean score of the control group is 26.7 (SD = 4.6). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is not statistically significant (t(67)= -1.286; p>0.05).

As the results described in Table 4 indicate, the pre-test mean score of the experimental group for the strategy questionnaire is 1.2 (SD = 61.6) and the post-test mean score of the experimental group is 1.3 (SD = 57.1). It was found out that the difference between the mean scores is statistically significant (t(81)= -2.3; p<0.05). The experimental group performed significantly better in the post test than in the pre-test.

5. Conclusion

Regarding participants’ learner autonomy, the results indicate 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. Although they are trained on language learning strategies which may help them to exercise control over their learning process and adapted strategies more frequently, they still cannot move towards more autonomous behaviors.

The literature on language learning strategies in Turkey suggests that employing language learning strategies provides students with the necessary help a teacher can give by making them teachers of their own through making them aware of the language learning process itself and their strengths and weaknesses. Odaci (2006) suggested that after the listening comprehension strategy training, experimental group had a significantly higher level of listening proficiency than the control group. However, at the beginning of the study there was no significant difference between two groups. Balkir (2007) stated that learner training and awareness building activities have resulted in a significant improvement in learners’ perceptions of responsibility and a moderate increase in their motivational level. Torun (2010) indicated that the experimental group was observed to use more vocabulary learning strategies after the treatment, while there was no statistical difference between the control and the experimental groups in terms of proficiency before the treatment. The subjects in the experimental group improved their vocabulary knowledge much more than the control group. As this study indicates, 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. If we include learner training in our curriculum, we can help our learners in fostering their autonomy.

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