

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

To assess the effectiveness of autonomous learning, today language teaching has witnessed a promotion of autonomous approaches in language learning and teaching. In order to find out similarities and differences between students' preferences, this paper drew on an empirical study among 152 third-years students of Hacettepe and Selcuk universities. To study students' preferences in self-autonomy for language learning, this study investigated students' preferences in autonomous learning with Likert scale. Results of this paper are expected to provoke a depth research on how to heighten students' self-autonomy in foreign language learning.

Key Words: learner autonomy, teachers' roles, students' roles, students' preferences in learning.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of individual autonomy has been central to European liberal-democratic and liberal-humanist thought since the 18th century, and was identified by Kant as the foundation of human dignity. Growth of interest in autonomous learning as an educational goal can be identified in changes that occurred in the twentieth century in social sciences, psychology, philosophy, and political science. The concept of autonomy in language learning is connected with the communicative approach both historically and theoretically. Gremmo & Riley (1995: 152-3) have argued that "the rise of autonomy in language learning in the 1970s and 1980s was connected to a rejection of behaviorist assumptions about the nature of second language acquisition".

It was developed with the works of Little (1991), and was influenced by researches from beyond the field of language education. In 1991 Little claimed that the capacity for autonomous learning presupposes that "the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning" (1991:40).

Little (1995) referred to changes in educational philosophy and technology, language-learning theory, political beliefs, communications and employment. He also pointed out that the recognition in learning is now more important than knowledge (cited in Finch, 2000). In language learning this humanistic trend produced a wide-range of series of investigations, and the new researches in learning proved that teacher is only responsible for presenting new information in a variety of ways and he/she should refer to learning styles as possible. It is up to the learner to take this information and process it. Once the new lesson is introduced, the student takes control of information and processes it; so that he/she "learns" it. So in language teaching, the "magic" is not in teaching techniques. The solution to the problem lies in student responsibility.

Language is essentially pragmatic and social; and it is as "a tool for communication", where individuals with personal needs and intentions, learn to express themselves whilst, at the same time, as competent members of their group, they share and maintain social reality. This approach to language provided the rationale for the "Communicative Approach" to language learning and teaching with its emphasis on communicative functions, individual needs, social norms and "autonomy" (Nunan, 2000).

Perhaps theoretically communicative theory and autonomy are connected with researches on learner's agendas and the effectiveness of instruction (Nunan, 1995). Nunan also has verified that in the classroom there is often a mismatch between what teachers and learners believe is being learned. He argued that "while the teacher is busily teaching one thing, the learner is very often focusing on something else" (1995: 135). Later other researchers have doubted in the effectiveness of direct instruction in language learning. Most of them have adopted the effectiveness of communicative approach in second language learning and its dependence upon the learner's self-directed efforts to process linguistic input. Nunan (1995) believed that second language learning will proceed most effectively if learners are allowed to develop and exercise their autonomy.

Moreover, Finch (2000) claimed teachers should prepare a non-threatening learning environment and allow the learners to follow their own learning path. Consequently discovering the new way of learning and acquiring learning skills are up to learners. This is the path of the autonomous learner, and provides a blueprint for the autonomous learning.

Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy was first introduced into the ongoing debate about L2 learning and teaching by Henri Holec in a report published by the Council of Europe in 1979 (Holec, 1981). According to Holec autonomous learners are capable of setting their own learning objectives, defining the "contents and progressions" of learning, "selecting methods and techniques to be used", monitoring the learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes (1981: 3). The ability to take charge of one's learning in this way it is "not inborn but must be acquired either by "natural" means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way" (ibid.). Also in 1995 Learner autonomy has been defined as a "capacity for active, independent learning and learners accepting responsibility for their learning and sharing in the decisions and initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process" (Little, 1995:4).

Furthermore, Little (1995) suggested that learners who take responsibility for their learning are more likely to achieve their learning targets and hence likely to maintain their motivation. This acceptance of responsibility has both socio-affective and cognitive implications: it involves at once a positive attitude to learning and the development of a capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning under conscious control. Learners who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programs of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, and evaluate and assess their own work. They are able to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures.

The effectiveness of self-instruction in language learning is unknown for most of the teachers and "very few of instructions are solidly based on research results or the results are inconclusive" (Little, 2000:23). Likewise, Little (1995), Tort-Moloney (1997), McGrath (2000), Smith (2000), Aoki and Hamakava (2003), Huang (2005), Sert (2006), Viera (2007), Smith and Erdoğan (2007) and Burkert and Schwienhorst (2008) provide evidence that teachers who themselves are not autonomous language learners may have a negative influence on the development of autonomy in their students.

Nunan (2000) stated that the importance of learner autonomy understood as the capability_ not an inborn ability _to govern and regulate one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions freely and responsibly. It helps learners to find their individual learning styles, and start to believe in their own abilities and, finally, be autonomous learners. Generally "it highlights an important continuing role for teachers in promoting the psychological attributes and practical abilities involved in learner autonomy and in engaging students' existing autonomy within classroom practice (Smith, 2008:2).

In order to highlight the importance of learner autonomy and promote autonomous learning, this study aims to discuss the concept of learner autonomy in large scale and deals with a) what differences do learner display in terms of autonomous learning? b) What should be done to promote learner autonomy in ELL and ELT settings? c) What is the importance of learner's preferences in autonomous learning?

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

A total of 152 Turkish ELT and ELL students participated in the study. The participants were from two different fields of study, 76 participants were third-year English literature students of Selcuk University, and 78 of them were third year English language teaching students of Hacettepe University, in other words they are future English language teachers.

Instruments

In order to investigate the learner autonomy of the subjects, the questionnaire designed by Zhang and Li in 2004 was used. It consists 20 items to explore students' preferences. The questionnaire has two parts. Apart from addressing and reference conventions, parts do not differ significantly. The questionnaires was based on *Likert* scale (1), strongly disagree, (2), disagree, (3), neutral, (4), Agree, (5), strongly agree), and it had high content validity and high reliability.

Procedures

The data are grouped into 20 different items based on third year university students' preferences. The purpose of this study is to identify similarities and differences between Hacettepe and Selcuk universities' students' preferences and subsequently the causes of the variation will be explored. In order to address the research questions, this case study compiled information from questionnaire. In analyzing the 20 items, a statistical technique (SPSS 16.0) is used to identify whether the mean and standards error of mean and standard deviation of two groups on a variable differed or not. The data collected from questionnaire were categorized into 8 tables, each tables look for students' tendencies in English language learning.

RESULTS

The below sections provide descriptions of students' preferences in English classes. These descriptions highlight different instructional approaches between university students, and how the students have adapted new approaches. Both universities students gave almost same answers to 11 items of the table; therefore the combination of two universities answers are showed in the below table. For the convenience of comparison, the five-point scale responses were merged into a Never (1) Rarely (2) Sometimes (3) Often (4) Always (5).

Table 1: self perception in language learning

ITEMS	Number=152					Mean	Std E M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5			
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well	1.9	1.3	14.9	41.6	40.3	4.17	.07	.87
2. I make good use of my free time in English study	4.5	16.2	29.9	42.9	6.5	3.3	.08	.97
3. I preview before the class	11.7	32.5	39.6	13.6	2	2.63	.077	.95
4. I find I can finish my task in time	2.6	7.8	27.3	35.7	26.6	3.76	.082	1.01
5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review, taking note, etc	9.1	8.4	37.7	26.6	18.2	3.37	.092	1.15
6. I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself	27.9	32.5	23.4	15.6	.6	2.29	.086	1.06
7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I make	3.9	16.9	37.7	31.2	10.4	3.28	.08	.99

progress								
8. I attend out-class activities to practice and learn the language	9.1	29.9	31.2	18.8	11.0	2.92	.091	1.14
9. During the class, I try to take chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc	7.8	16.9	26.6	37.7	11.0	3.28	.09	1.2
10. I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English study	1.3	7.8	11.0	40.9	39.0	4.09	.08	.97
11. I choose books, exercises which suit me.	.6	9.7	14.9	45.5	29.2	3.93	.076	.95

As the table reveals, students evaluate their abilities to behave autonomously positively. As it is seen in the table, the main percentage for most items is “4 / 5” columns. In responses to the first item the vast majority of respondents replied that they have ability to learn English well (81.9%), Only 3.2% aren’t satisfied of their ability.

In response to item 2, most of the students (50.4%) asserted they make good use of their free time in English study. In third item unfortunately 44.2% didn’t show tendency to utilize their time to reviewing the day’s work and finish a task in time. In response to item 4, by 62.3%, students give priority to option 4 and 5, they believe they can finish their task in time.

Keeping diary, writing review or taking note and analyzing their records help students to become sort of researchers who deliberately examine their own language learning, 44.8% concerned with these issues. The findings in items 6 and 7 implied that clear number of students (60 %) didn’t make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by them. In this subject they prefer their teacher’s directions. In the 8 section of the questionnaire participants were asked how often they had engaged in outside class learning activities which were considered to be possible signs of autonomous language learning behavior, 29.8% of students expressed their views in favor of more outside-classroom activities that would help them gain proficiency in English but 39% refuse.

In response to item 8 more than half of students didn’t prefer to attend out-class activities. A close look at the questionnaire showed that their unwillingness in engaging in these activities might be related to conditions they are in. For example, they may not have the opportunity of “reading newspapers in English”, “watching English TV programs” or “talking to foreigners in English”. In response item 9, 48.7 % of students responded they try to take chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion and role-play. In responses to items 10 and 11 of the questionnaire majority of respondents 79.9%, (Item 11) 74.7 % claimed that they know their strengths and weaknesses while studying English and know what books are proper for their progress in language learning.

Students’ Preferences in Autonomous Learning

Part II of questionnaire looks for students’ and teachers’ relationship, students’ preferences in error correction, their learning methods and so on.

Table 2: I think the learner-teacher relationship is that of:

	N	1)Receiver and Giver	2) Raw Material and maker	3)Customer and Shopkeeper	4)Partners	5)Explorer and Director	Mean	SD
H.U	76	13.15%	1.31%	2.63%	31.57%	51.31%	4.06	1.34
S.U	76	18.42%	14.47%	7.89%	26.31%	32.89%	3.41	1.53

In autonomous learning, the teacher plays central role as the presenter of new material and as the guide in helping the student learn the strategies to successfully acquire the foreign language. The finding of table 2 indicates most of the students of two universities did not rate teacher authority very highly. This finding is supported by the results of H.U students (51.31%) and S.U students (32.89%) that regarded their relationship with teacher like explorer and director. Furthermore, 31.57% of H.U and 26.31% of S.U students considered their relationship with teachers as partners. In general, the results of both universities show students didn't want to adopt a totally passive role in the learning process.

Table 3: I think my success or failure in English study is mainly due to:

	N	1)money	2)English studying environment	3) studying facilities(aids)	4)teachers	5)myself	Mean	SD
H.U	76	3.94%	22.36%	15.78%	5.26%	52.63%	3.78	1.38
S.U	76	3.94%	18.42%	21.05%	31.57%	25%	3.55	1.17

The data indicated that 31.57% of Selcuk students agreed with teachers' responsibility for their success or failure, while Hacettepe university students (52.63%) reported their responsibility for their learning. It clearly shows the main differences between Selcuk and Hacettepe universities students' preferences. 31.57% of the S.U respondents believed teachers as main factor in learning on the other hand; majority of H.U students gave the most responsibility to themselves and the least responsibility to teachers (5.26%) and money (3.94%).

Table 4: When the teacher asks questions for us to answer, I would mostly like to:

	1)wait for others' answers	2)think and ready to answer	3)Look up books, dictionaries	4)clarify questions with teachers	5)join a pair/group discussion	Mean	SD
H.U	15.78%	59.21%	3.94%	2.63%	18.42%	2.49	1.33
S.U	14.47%	31.57%	13.15%	15.78%	25%	3.06	1.45

Responses to table 4 reveals about 15.78% of H.U students and 14.47% of S.U students are concerned about group harmony in class and tended to avoid 'showing off'. Hacettepe university students showed nearly negative attitude towards clarifying questions with the help of teachers in class. Maybe they like to be self directed (59.21%) rather than teacher directed.

The 3.94% of students believe that asking questions for clarification in class may indicate that the student has not grasped a good understanding of what the teacher said. The way the questions raised by the teacher might be the cause of their silence (15.78% H.U and 14.47% S.U). The results show that S.U (25%) students have more self-confidence and their anxiety is lower than H.U (18.42%) students.

Table 5: When I make mistakes in study, I'd usually like the following ones to correct them:

	N	don't do anything	teachers	classmates	others	books or dictionaries	Mean	SD
H.U	76	6.57%	15.78%	26.31%	1.31%	50%	3.76	1.39
S.U	76	3.94%	31.57%	40.78%	5.26%	18.42%	2.21	1.12

Being corrected by either the teacher or other students does not seem to bother H.U students. The Frequency Table shows that 15.78% of H.U and 31.57%of S.U students preferred correction in the presence of the instructors instead of working independently. As can be observed a significant number of S.U students did not mind having their mistakes corrected by other students (40.78%).

Table 6: I think the following way is most useful in my English study:

	1)taking notes	2)mechanic memory	3) Doing exercises of grammar, translation, words etc.	4)classifying or grouping or comparing	5)group discussion	Mean	SD
H.U	7.89%	2.63%	40.78%	25 %	23.68%	3.56	1.13
S.U	13.15	9.21%	25%	36.84%	15.78%	3.33	1.24

The results of table show that there are significant differences between S.U and H.U preferences. H.U students preferred doing exercises of grammar, translation, words (40.78%) more than other factors, while S.U students show tendency for classifying or grouping or comparing (36.84%).

DISCUSSION

Nunan believed (2000) Critical events outside the classroom play a central role in shaping learners views of learning English. Students who see their limitation weakness in foreign language try to develop their weaknesses with reading, listening to songs, watching movies outside of the classroom. So, the understanding of learner autonomy as a capacity or attitude rather than as overt action is important; students' responses to table 1 indicate that students knew their capacity in language learning. Autonomy then is something which is internal to the learner and which is not necessarily tied to particular learning circumstances.

The results of table 2 reveals that most students wanted to be active rather than passive learners in the process of acquiring knowledge and they were reluctant to challenge teacher's authority in class and regarded teacher as a useful but not interfering resource. In other part students' comments illustrated that; some of S.U student accepted the power and authority of teachers. This preference certainly has an impact on their English language learning and classroom behaviors. However, it is worth noting that the results of this part is backed up by the findings in the follow-up item which some of H.U and S.U students regarded teachers as responsible for their failure or success.

Ho and Crookall (1995) suggested learner autonomy should be exercised within the context of specific cultures and teachers should take that into consideration when preparing classes. For instance, they may design a simulation to change the learning environment. The percentages of Hacettepe University students in table 2 shows they are more responsible for their learning, they can construct their own knowledge and are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective.

The responses in table 4 reveals students are less concerned about group harmony in class and tend to avoid 'showing off'. Most of the H.U students prefer to work individually, while S.U students are much more interested in group-work and searching for answer. These differences might be explained by the fact that S.U students because of their field of study are more teachers directed and need to be more clarified by teachers. Hacettepe university students like to be self- directed (59.21%) rather than teacher directed.

H.U students believe that asking questions for clarification in class would indicate that the student has not grasped a good understanding of what the teacher said. The way the questions raised by the teacher might be the cause of both group silence. Students are often concerned about their own linguistic accuracy or fearful of losing "face", consequently they speak very little in English class.

Both H.U and S.U students had a positive attitude towards correction with their classmates. The preferences in third section indicate that students found it to be effective to be corrected by teachers, classmates, books. The perceived effectiveness seemed to depend on different variables, such as the teacher's competence, the textbook, and the nature of the course taught. There is general agreement among researchers and

practitioners that having the teacher straightforwardly correct every error of students is not the most useful way of providing corrective feedback and that involving students in their own correction is helpful (Lalande, 1982; Hedgcock&Lefkowitz, 1992; Aljaafreh&Lantolf, 1994, cited in Hadley, 2003), or combination of teacher-, peer -, and self-evaluation might yield the most successful results.

The results of table 6 show that there are significant differences between S.U and H.U preferences. H.U students preferred doing exercises of grammar, translation, words while S.U students show tendency for classifying or grouping or comparing. Researches on this subject suggest that training in grammar and vocabulary alone does not result in linguistic competence (Rüschhoff& Ritter 2000, cited in Finch 2001). It is clear that here teacher-centeredness is commonly a dominant teaching method in the classroom.

To sum up the tables the most of the H.U students in this survey still stick to the traditional roles of students in class or have unclear perceptions of different methods of learning. It seems that the pendulum of their favorite teaching methods swings from teacher-centeredness to Student-centeredness; maybe they consider both approaches to be useful in their own way. Perhaps they still want someone to give them “the push” or to “keep track of” their progress. However, it would be inaccurate to deduce that “our students are mere passive learners”. We need to know the real cause of their preference

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study call for a step forward towards a teacher-student cooperation in designing syllabuses, doing course planning, and classroom activities. Mostly students were not inclined to reject the traditional way of teaching English. The results of the study show students tendency to well-planned combination of communicative and non-communicative activities that will enhance both effective teaching and learning at different fields. It should be noted that the findings should feed into classroom practice, and provide guidance for materials and syllabus revision and a pedagogical framework for developing learners’ autonomy.

So considering the results of current study, it is inappropriate for teachers to ignore learners’ needs in their classroom instruction. Teachers should guide students and demonstrate techniques they can use to process the foreign language learning. They should be aware of the student’s anxiety created by a tense classroom environment. In short, teachers need to create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and provide more opportunities for learners to practice in interactive group activities in order to reinforce the positive experience. Generally teachers should give them some ideas about how to be a good language learner by taking risks and using every opportunity to learn. As Kumaravadivelu (2003) has pointed out, “teachers must seek not alternative methods, but an alternative to methods”. Such an alternative would be based on their experience and awareness of learner needs.

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