LANGUAGE LEARNING ACTIVITIES OF DISTANCE EFL LEARNERS IN THE TURKISH OPEN EDUCATION SYSTEM AS THE INDICATOR OF THEIR LEARNER AUTONOMY

Asist. Prof. Dr. Dilek ALTUNAY
Mustafa Kemal University,
Faculty of Science & Literature,
English Language & Literature.
Tayfur Sökmen Campus
Alahan, Antakya, Hatay, TURKEY

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the noncompulsory language learning activities performed by a group of distance EFL learners in the Turkish Open Education System. Performance of these activities has been considered as an indicator of their learner autonomy. The data were collected through an online questionnaire and interviews. The study shows that in general learners do not demonstrate autonomous language learning behaviour. They prefer learning English in a relaxed environment particularly by engaging in entertaining activities, and through note-taking. However, they do not have sufficient interaction with their facilitator, other learners or speakers. Although the participants are distance learners, they do not prefer Internet-based activities. Conditions stemming from adulthood, lack of skills necessary to perform an activity, lack of awareness of some activities and learners' experiences in their previous years of education are some of the reasons for their unautonomous behaviour. The article also includes suggestions for teaching and future research.

Keywords: Autonomy, distance EFL learners, language learning, open education, adult learners

INTRODUCTION

The field of language learning and teaching first formulated the concept of autonomy in 1971 through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, which led to the foundation of the CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues-Centre for Research and Applications in Language Teaching) at the University of Nancy, France. The term autonomy is defined differently by different researchers in the literature. According to Littlewood, autonomy is "learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently" (Littlewood, 1996, p.97). Holec describes the term autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1981, p.3). For Dickinson (1992), autonomy means learning alone and active responsibility for one's own learning means independence. On the other hand, some researchers see interaction and collaboration as an important factor in encouraging learner autonomy (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Kötter, 2001; Little 2001; Murphy, 2007). Garrison & Archer (2000) mention the concept of cognitive autonomy. They state that although learning is largely the responsibility of the student, it does not imply social independence.

296

They emphasise that "somewhat paradoxically, cognitive autonomy may well depend upon collaboration and external support. The issue is whether students have the opportunity to collaboratively control the management of learning tasks" (Garrison & Archer 2000, p.102). Similarly, Benson & Lor (1998) point out the significance of social interaction for the development of cognitive processes of reflection and self-direction, and they suggest that guidance and collaboration or pedagogical dialogue (Little, 1995) are very important for the development of autonomy. Today, technological advancements allow interaction, collaboration and socialisation and hence encourage learner autonomy. In addition, literature shows that learners' degree of autonomy can be affected by their culture (Littlewood, 1999;Benson, 2001).

Autonomy is an important concept in education, but it has particular importance in open and distance education settings. One of the reasons is that in the distance learning setting most learners are adults. The art and science of helping adults learn is called andragogy by Knowles. One of the assumptions Knowles' theory of andragogy is (1980) based on is that adult learners are autonomous and they need to be free in order to direct themselves. The cornerstone assumption of andragogy is the voluntary nature of adult learning (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000). Knowles' andragogical model is based on the following assumptions: the need to know; the learners' self concept; the role of the learners' experience; readiness to learn; orientation to learning; and motivation. The basics of those assumptions are as follows:

> ➢ Adults feel the need to know the rationale behind learning something.
> ➢ Adult learners are generally self-directed. They have a self concept of being responsible for their own decisions.
> ➢ Adult learners are different than youths in terms of the quality and quantity of experience. The disadvantage is that adults may have biases and habits that are very difficult to change. Therefore, the adult educators are trying to find ways to open those learners' minds to new approaches.
> ➢ Adult learners are ready to learn what they need to know to deal with real-life situations.
> ➢ Adults are task or problem centred. Adults learn information and skills that they think will help them in real-life situations.
> ➢ Even if external motivators such as receiving a promotion, better salary, etc. encourage adults to learn, most are internally motivated (Knowles et al.,1998).

Another and maybe the most important reason for the particular importance of autonomy in distance language learning setting is the separation of teachers and learners. In other words, learners do not have face-to-face interaction with teachers. Therefore, in the distance learning setting, learners are involved to a much greater degree in self-management and environment management (White 1995), and are faced with numerous decisions and roles which are usually carried out by the teacher in traditional classrooms (White, 2003a). In the literature, researchers such as Gundogdu (1997), Kucuroglu(2000), Yumuk (2002), Kennedy (2002), Coban (2002), Pekkanlı-Egel (2003), Balcıkanlı(2008), Yildirim (2008), Ustunoglu (2009), Gomleksiz & Bozpolat (2012), and Kaya (2012) conducted research on learner autonomy with Turkish learners of English. However, there is no study which investigated the autonomous language learning behaviours of distance EFL learners registered in different distance higher education programmes in Turkey.

This study aims to fill this gap in the field. The study identifies the activities which are performed or not performed by Turkish distance learners of EFL with their own decision when those activities are not among the compulsory requirements of the course. The activities are considered as the indicators of autonomous language learning behaviour. Suggestions for teaching and future research are also offered at the end of the article to improve learner autonomy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies mentioned in this section investigated the language learning activities performed by university students. Those activities are considered as the manifestation of learner autonomy.

Spratt et al. (2002) collected data from 508 participants through a questionnaire, which had four sections, and small group interviews. The the questionnaire investigated the teacher and learner responsibilities, learners' opinions about their own abilities to act autonomously, learners' perception of their motivation, and the frequency of actual autonomous language learning activities used by the learners. In other words, the fourth section of the questionnaire investigated the actual activities learners engaged in outside or inside the classroom, which could be seen as manifestations of autonomous language learning behaviour. The study showed that out of 22 activities 10 were widely practised because the majority of learners stated that they engaged in them "sometimes" or "often". They found that except for noting down new words and their meanings, these activities could be more related to entertainment and communication. In addition, 12 activities out of 22 activities appeared to be less widely practised, which are related to more formal learning of English. The interviews revealed that lack of time, particularly the lack of motivation, are the reasons for not practising many activities. According to Spratt et al. (2002), teachers should build on activities that learners already engage in, rather than on those activities which would require learners to change their attitudes or behavior.

Yildirim (2008) investigated the 103 Turkish EFL learners' readiness for learner autonomy by using a questionnaire, which was adapted from Spratt et al. (2002).The subjects were first year students studying English in Anadolu University, Faculty of Education.The study indicated that learners seemed to be ready to take more responsibility in many areas of the language learning process. The majority of the participants, furthermore, generally engaged in some outside class learning activities. According to Yildirm (2008), being aware of the activities that students are engaging in helps teachers to create conditions to facilitate the use of these activities in order to encourage learner autonomy.

Kaya's (2012) study investigated the learner autonomy of the second year students registered in the Distance ELT program of the Anadolu University Open Education Faculty. Spratt et al.'s(2002) questionnaire was responded to by 162 students.

The study showed that the most common learner activities were: listening to English songs, watching English movies, noting down new things that have been learned and reading English notices. The activities not preferred by these learners were: writing English letters to penpals, attending a self-study centre, writing a diary in English and going to see a teacher about work. The study shows that learner gender is an important factor in choosing the type of activity.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions
The purpose of this study is to investigate whether distance EFL learners registered in the Turkish open education system have autonomous behaviours in learning English. The research questions of the study are:

> ➢ Which activities that are not included as course requirements are done by these learners?
> ➢ What are the reasons for the preference or ignorance of some activities?

Participants
The participants of the study were students registered in five different associate degree Distance Science Programmes offered by Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty. In total, 103 learners responded to the questionnaire. They were first year students who were taking the English language course in the 2010–2011 academic year. The learners were studying a beginner level course book. They were taking synchronous facilitation service (tutoring) in Adobe Connect environment. Participation in this service was not obligatory to pass the course.

Instrument
A 4-point Likert scale-based online questionnaire was used to collect data. It is the fourth section of the questionnaire which was used in class time by Spratt et al. (2002). The questionnaire aims at identifying the autonomous behaviours of the learners.

Procedure
The questionnaire, adapted because the participants are distance learners, was translated into Turkish and prepared on the Internet through the questionnaire server of the university.

The translated version was read by some learners other than the participants to check the clarity of the items. Towards the end of the academic year, the learners were informed of the online questionnaire through announcements made on the home page of their programmes on the Internet. The participants were asked to indicate how often they did the activities stated in the questionnaire in the 2010-2011 academic year. The questionnaire was accessible throughout the summer period and participants were able to fill it in till the beginning of the new academic year. The responses were automatically recorded. After analysing the responses given to the questionnaire, face-to-face interviews were conducted with some learners who were living in Eskisehir, where Anadolu university is located. The interview questions focused on the activities that were most frequently or least frequently done. Participants' responses were recorded through note-taking.

Data Analysis
The results of the questionnaire were transferred to an Excel file and each Likert point item was coded. Then the percentages of responses for each Likert point were calculated.

Limitation of the study
Since an online questionnaire was used, the number of participants depended on the number of learners who saw the announcement on the Internet. Therefore, the sample is limited with 103 participants who saw and responded to the online questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the questionnaire demonstrate the number and percentages of the participants who performed each activity on the basis of frequency. The table below shows the results of the questionnaire.

Table:1
Number and percentages of distance learners
engaging in language learning activities

	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Read grammar books on my own	2	2	28	27	30	29	43	42
2 Did non-compulsory assignments and had them checked by my facilitator or other speakers of English	1	1	5	5	17	17	80	78
3 Noted down new words/meanings	29	28	25	24	30	29	19	18
4 Wrote English letters to penpals (letters, e-mails, etc.)	7	7	21	20	15	15	60	58
5 Read newspapers, magazines, Internet sites in English	11	11	25	24	23	22	44	43
6 Watched English TV programmes	26	25	24	23	27	26	26	25
7 Listened to English radio	9	9	29	28	21	20	44	43
8 Listened to English songs	37	36	40	39	17	17	9	9
9 Talked to foreigners in English	7	7	17	17	39	38	40	39
10 Practised using English with friends	3	3	25	24	32	31	43	42
11 Wrote a diary in English	2	2	5	5	9	9	87	85
12 Used the English learning sites on the Internet	12	12	23	22	24	23	44	43
13 Collected texts (newspapers, brochures, etc.) in English	4	4	11	11	24	23	64	62
14 Asked questions to my facilitator in facilitation hours	3	3	11	11	15	15	74	72
15 Noted down new things that I have learned	29	28	28	27	24	23	22	21
16 Made suggestions to my facilitator	1	1	6	6	15	15	81	79
17 Used every opportunity to speak English	14	14	21	20	34	33	34	33
18 Discussed my problems in learning with my friends	13	13	15	15	30	29	45	44
19 Watched English movies	36	35	27	26	25	24	15	15
20 Did grammar exercises	16	16	22	21	29	28	36	35
21. Did English self-study in a group	11	11	18	18	16	16	58	56

The study shows that listening to English songs, watching English movies, noting down new things and noting down new words/meanings are the activities that the participants often do. It seems learners prefer learning by entertaining.

300

This finding aligns with the results of Spratt et al.'s (2002) and Kaya's (2012) studies. A learner stated the following in the interview:

"When I listen to a song, learning becomes enjoyable. Also, I find the translated versions of the songs in the Internet. When I see that I guessed the meaning correctly, it makes me happy. When I do an activity without being bored, I spend more time on it and I learn more".
"I like watching films in English, particularly the subtitled ones because I see the different meanings of the words in the subtitles"
"I become happy when I hear the words that I know in a song …. In the past, I was doing this just for pleasure. But now, I need to take language examinations so I'm doing this not only for pleasure but also for learning".

These findings support Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis, which states that a relaxed learning environment is necessary for acquisition to occur. Some learners do these activities not only for acquisition but also for conscious learning in an enjoyable environment. As the previous response from a learner indicates, even extrinsically motivated learners prefer learning in a relaxed and entertaining environment to learning through structured activities. It is surprising that although the subjects of the current study are distance learners, using the Internet for language learning is not one of the activities that they often do. A learner explained the reason for this:

"I use the Internet only for translation. If I'm not forced to use the Internet for learning, I don't do it. I need something or someone to force me to use it".
When a learner was asked whether she used ESL/EFL teaching sites on the Internet, she responded:
"Are there those types of sites? I'm not aware of them".

This means that some learners may not be aware of the English language teaching sites or resources on the Internet.

The results of the questionnaire reveal that most of the activities are not done by the participants. The least popular activities are: "wrote a diary in English, made suggestions to my facilitator, did non-compulsory assignments and had them checked by my facilitator or other speakers of English, asked questions of my facilitator in facilitation hours". The study shows that 85% of the participants of the current study have not written a diary in English. Similarly, this is an activity which around half of the students (51.9%) in Spratt et al.'s (2002) study stated that they never did. Also, in Yildirim's (2008) study, 51.5% of the participants stated that they never wrote a diary in English. In the current study, the percentage is higher. The reasons for not keeping a diary are the need to keep life private as an adult, lack of time, lack of such a habit in the first language and lack of confidence because of poor writing skills.The following statement is an example of a participant's privacy concerns:

"Since I am an adult, I do not want to mention my private life in a diary. I do not want anybody else to find and read it".
Other learners reported the following:
"I do not have time to do that".
"Even in Turkish I do not keep a diary. In addition, I'm not good at writing in English so I'm afraid not to express myself properly".

The former comment indicates that since some learners have limited time to study, they may not prefer some activities which take up their time. Most distance learners cannot receive formal education because they already have an occupation or because they have responsibilities which prevent them from going to a traditional university and doing activities that require them to give up their time.

The latter comment indicates that while choosing an activity learners transfer their habits in their first language to the target language. In addition, lack of skills necessary to perform the activity together with language anxiety and lack of confidence affect the choice of the activity.

The learners stated that they did not participate in the facilitation sessions because it was not necessary to pass the course and they did not do any homework. They stated that they would have participated in the sessions and have done assignments if they had been required to do so to pass the course. The learners who were involved in the facilitation sessions stated that they just observed the class but did not make any suggestions to the facilitator because they did not feel such a need. Some learners stated that they would not use the language in their profession. As one learner reported:

> *"If it had been a must, I would have done assignments …. I did not feel such a need. I think I will not use English in my profession"*

This comment indicates that some activities had to be compulsory for learners to engage in. This type of behaviour may be related to learners' previous habits stemming from learning in traditional classrooms. Another reason is possibly related to the field dependency of the learners. Learners who are field dependent are not inner-directed and an activity may need to be compulsory for them to perform it. Another reason may be that since the number of learners who take the exams is huge, learners take a recognition test and are not asked to write a composition. Therefore, the participants may not feel the need to improve their language, particularly their writing skills by writing a diary. The study also shows that 79% of the participants never made suggestions to their facilitator; 78% never did non-compulsory assignments and had them checked by their facilitator or other speakers of English; and 72% never asked questions of a facilitator in facilitation hours. It seems the participants view the facilitator as dominant and the decision maker in the virtual classes. Another reason may be that these participants may not be so interested in learning English and hence do not have any suggestions to make. It seems that the reason for the finding that most participants did not do non-compulsory assignments and did not ask questions to their facilitator is lack of intrinsic motivation, or lack of time because they are adult learners. Findings of questions 5 and 12 show that using the Internet for language learning is not a common activity of the learners. This may be because they are not aware of how they can use the Internet to improve their proficiency. This finding is similar to the findings of Wang & Hemsley (2008) and Altunay & Mutlu (2010). Spratt et al. (2002) state that "teachers seeking to promote autonomous behavior in the form of outside-class activities may have more immediate success if they build on those that students already engage in, rather than on those activities which would require students to change their attitudes or behavior" (Spratt et al., 2002, p.256). Considering this suggestion, learners' use of technology for language learning should not be promoted. However, the opposite can also be argued because technology, particularly the Internet, is the most important means of learning for distance learners.

Learners can be encouraged to become involved in different activities through the Internet. This can be done through tutoring sesions, coursebooks, dvds/cds distributed to the students, or online services offered to the learners. For example, they can be encouraged to become members of social sites or blogs and interact with other learners or native speakers in authentic environments. This can be particularly useful for distance language learners who cannot have face-to-face contact with their teachers, peers or native speakers. In the open education system in Turkey, unless learners are advised to do some new activities, they may choose to do the activities with which they are familiar. On the one hand, this is in keeping with the nature of distance education because learners are not forced to do specific activities and they continue with learning habits from their high school years with which they feel comfortable. On the other hand, they may not be aware of the varieties of activities that they can do. Therefore, new activities should be introduced to the learners by their facilitators, teachers or material writers. This can be challenging for material writers in the distance learning setting where course materials are the main vehicle for learner autonomy as stated by Murphy (2008).

In addition to increasing learners' awareness of different activities, learners' use of language learning strategies should be promoted. As stated by Hurd et al. (2001), the relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages over distance is complex. They argue that learners need to develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work autonomously. Yet, as some researchers state (e.g. Candy, 1991; Chamot, 1993; Cohen, 1998), presentation of strategies alone is not enough to promote learner autonomy. In addition to this, learners should be given the opportunity to try them out and they should become confident in using them in order to make appropriate choices.

Learner proficiency is another factor which affects learners' degree of autonomous behaviours. "To exercise control learners must have freedom to explore and make choices, they must have a sufficient level of proficiency to carry out learning activities and appropriate support" (White, 2003b, p. 151). Considering the factor of proficiency, it can be suggested that the learners could have performed the activities more often if their proficiency had been higher.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It can be concluded that the participants do not show autonomous language learning behaviours in learning English. This result contradicts Yildirim's (2008) study, which was based on learners on-campus, showing that they generally engaged in outside class learning activities. The possible reason for this difference is that the participants of Yildirim's (2008) study are learners in the ELT department and, therefore, most probably, they are more aware of autonomous learning activities as prospective teachers and have higher proficiency in English.As for the most commonly performed activities, participants of the current study prefer entertainment related activities such as listening to English songs and watching English movies. It is a surprising finding that participants are not involved in Internet related activities, whereas they are expected to do the opposite because they are distance learners. They need more interaction with their facilitator, other learners or speakers. Therefore, the benefits of Internet resources such as ESL/EFL teaching sites, particularly the open educational resources (OERs), and social media can be explained to the learners in the coursebooks, facilitation hours, or tv programmes.

Orientations through videoconferencing or face to face in some centres can be organised, and instructions which advise the students to read can be published in separate brochures to guide them, apart from the books. They can be placed on the book sets as a cover so that the students can first read them before opening and studying the books. These brochures should inform learners of the differences of the distance learning setting from the classroom setting, and encourage learner autonomy through some suggestions.

The suggestions stated above aim to increase learner awareness of different activities. Nunan (1997) also states that learner awareness is the first step in encouraging learner autonomy. The key point is that since distance language learners are adults and they have more diverse needs compared with children and youths, they should be encouraged but not forced to do specific activities. In other words, they should be free to choose the activities which best meet their needs, otherwise they do not act as autonomous learners. The reason for the unauatonomous behaviours can be learners' experiences in their high school years. In general, these students graduated from a traditional high school rather than an open high school and they are not used to organising their own learning. Therefore, teachers should give learners the opportunity for autonomous learning in high school years.

In the literature, researchers such as Cotterall (1999) and Usuki (2003) focused on learner beliefs and learner autonomy. Similarly, the distance language learners' beliefs as regards, for example, the role of the teacher and learner, effects of strategies on learning, etc. should be investigated. Littlewood (1996) suggests that students' level of motivation and confidence affect their willingness to act autonomously. Future studies should investigate level and type of motivation of the distance language learners in the Turkish open education system. For instance, do they think they need English in their professional life? Can they be more motivated if they take an ESP course for their occupation after taking a basic English course? Are they intrinsically or extrinsically motivated? In addition, some distance learners who work in a job may not always find time to do some activities. How many of the distance learners are in a profession that does not allow them time to study English? When those questions are answered, distance learners' needs and profiles will be better identified and then programmes and tools can be adapted to meet their requirements, increase their motivation and enhance their autonomy.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of thr AUTHOR

Dilek ALTUNAY is currently an assistant professor in Mustafa Kemal University, Department of English Language and Literature. Previously, she worked in Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty as a lecturer and assistant professor. She received her PhD degree from Anadolu University, ELT programme. She obtained her M.A and B.A degrees from Bilkent University, Turkey. She has experience in teaching English through virtual classrooms and videoconferencing. She worked as facilitator and course content developer for the linguistics and second language acquisition courses in the Distance ELT B.A programme offered by Anadolu University, and she worked for various international open and distance education projects. She is currently teaching general English, business English, written communication and translation courses. Her academic interests are second language acquisition, distance ELT, English for business, open and distance education.

Asist. Prof. Dr. Dilek ALTUNAY
Mustafa Kemal University,
Faculty of Science & Literature,
English Language & Literature.
Tayfur Sökmen Campus
Alahan, Antakya, HATAY
GSM: 0 535 959 58 99
E-mail:daltunay74@gmail.com

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