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96. The role of learner autonomy on vocabulary learning

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Abstract

Developing vocabulary is one of the important parts in foreign language learning. In other words, vocabulary is necessary not only for productive skills but also receptive skills. Thus, students have to continue vocabulary development beyond the classroom. Students have to plan, learn and monitor themselves while they are studying vocabulary. In order to achieve it, they need to be autonomous learners. Considering the effect of learner autonomy on language learning, this study aimed to identify to what extent Turkish EFL students were autonomous and how the learner autonomy affected their vocabulary learning. 26 preparatory class students participated in this study. Data were collected via learner autonomy scale, a pre-vocabulary test, a post- vocabulary test, and students' questionnaire with 1 open-ended question. Results showed that students could be categorized as moderately autonomous as the mean values of the items were more than 3.19 (±1.021). However, learner autonomy did not statistically significantly explain the variation in vocabulary learning. Learner autonomy explained 4% of the variation in vocabulary learning, which was a very small effect on vocabulary learning. As a suggestion for further studies, an experimental study could be designed to promote learner autonomy and language learning strategies and motivation as other independent variables could be examined in terms of vocabulary learning.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, vocabulary learning, preparatory class, foreign language

Kelime öğreniminde öğrenen özerkliğinin rolü

Öz

Yabancı dil öğreniminde kelime gelişimi önemli noktalardan biridir. Diğer bir deyişle kelime sadece üretici beceriler için değil alıcı beceriler için de gereklidir. Bu yüzden, öğrenciler sınıf dışında da kelime öğrenimine devam etmelilerdir. Kelime çalışırken öğrenciler kendi çalışmalarını planlamak, öğrenmek ve kendilerini gözlemlemek zorundadırlar. Bunu başarabilmek için, öğrenen özerkliğine sahip olmaları gereklidir. Öğrenen özerkliğinin dil öğrenmedeki etkisini göz önünde bulundurarak, bu çalışma öğrencilerin ne kadar özerk olduğunu belirlemeyi ve öğrenen özerkliğinin kelime öğrenimini nasıl etkilediğini bulmayı hedeflemiştir. Bu çalışmaya 26 hazırlık sınıfı öğrencisi katılmıştır. Veriler, öğrenen özerkliği ölçeği, bir ön kelime testi, bir son kelime testi ve bir açık uçlu öğrenci anketi ile veriler toplanmıştır. Sonuçlara göre, bütün maddelerin ortalama değerleri 3.19 (±1.021) olduğu için öğrenciler orta seviye özerk öğrenci olarak adlandırabilirler. Ancak, öğrenen özerkliği kelime öğrenimindeki değişimi istatiksel olarak anlamlı bir şekilde etkilememektedir. Öğrenen özerkliği, kelime öğrenimindeki değişimin ancak %4'nü açıklamaktadır. Bu da çok küçük bir etkidir. Daha sonraki çalışmalar için, öğrenen özerkliğini arttırmak için deneysel bir çalışma

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tasarlanabilir ve dil öğrenme stratejileri ve motivasyon gibi diğer bağımsız değişkenler kelime öğrenimi açısından incelenebilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Öğrenen özerkliği, kelime öğrenimi, hazırlık sınıfı, yabancı dil

Introduction

The notion of autonomy has been widely used after the work of the Modern Language Project of the Council of Europe and autonomous learners are defined as "learners are able to be in charge of their own learning" (Esch, 1996, p. 35). In language learning it is not easy but necessary as teaching in the classroom is restricted with time and students should know how to study on their own (Teng, 2019). Also, it is complex with its many aspects since responsibility of the learner covers the learning process, resources and language (Benson, 1996). Likewise, Balçıkanlı (2008a, p.4) notes the difficulties of being autonomous learner as in the following.

> Most adult learners have difficulties in carrying out learning by themselves due to the insufficient knowledge of how to learn or study a foreign language and the lack of knowledge and skills on how to develop their language competencies. Therefore, learners ought to be trained in such a way that they should be able to take control over their own learning processes. This current situation has urged the theoreticians and language teachers to focus on the key role of learner autonomy (LA) in the EFL setting.

Esch (1996) suggests five criteria to create learner autonomy: "Choice, Flexibility, Adaptability/Modifiability, Reflectivity and Shareability" (p.38). Additionally, Nunan (2003, pp.196-202) lists the steps for teachers to create learner autonomy.

1- Make instruction goals clear to learners
2- Allow learners to create their own goals
3- Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom
4- Raise awareness of learning processes
5- Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies
6- Encourage learner choice
7- Allow learners to generate their own tasks
8- Encourage learners to become teachers
9- Encourage learners to become researchers

Additionally, Balçıkanlı (2008b) offers the following suggestions to develop learner autonomy in the universities (p.283):

10- a) Syllabuses and assessment models of the universities should be redesigned in accordance with the principles of autonomy.
11- b) The course books to be followed at universities are required to be assessed on the basis of the criterion it encourages.
12- c) Some in-service training on learner autonomy should be put into practice.
13- d) Self-access rooms should be developed in order that the learners may have the opportunity to study there on their own far more effectively.

People can communicate through vocabulary and learning vocabulary is incredibly important in every stage of the foreign language learning (Abadi & Baradaran, 2013; Balcı & Çakır, 2012; Vela & Rushidi, 2016; Tran, 2020). "Vocabulary development is an essential aspect of gaining facility with understanding, speaking, reading, and writing any new language, and learner autonomy is an important factor in maximizing the development of an enhanced lexicon" (Almusharraf, 2018, p.161). Similarly, Balcı and Çakır (2012) add that "Vocabulary plays an important role in communication as well as the other components of language" (p.29).

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However, as stated by Haddad (2016, p. 786) "No doubt that a learner cannot learn all language vocabulary in university classes so he is forced to find other ways to learn vocabulary". So, students need to continue language learning outside the classroom on their own as they need to be exposed to language. In other words, their autonomy motivates them to study and monitor their learning process. Little (2001) notes that autonomous learners have advantages to use the learning opportunities as they choose what they want to learn and they monitor their own learning and finally they evaluate themselves. This is also supported by Haddad (2016) and it is noted that new technologies offer opportunities for learners and help them to learn vocabulary individually outside the classroom. However, teachers still have an impact on learning of students. For example, "they can teach vocabulary relevant to tasks in hand, judge and give instruction in strategies which help retention. Teachers should enhance autonomous learning because it is of great significance for their students in universities. Also they should teach strategies to learn vocabulary autonomously" (Haddad, 2016, p.788).

Previous studies on learner autonomy

In the literature there are numerous studies on learner autonomy in foreign or second language context (Abadi & Baradaran, 2013; Almusharraf, 2018; Balçıkanlı, 2008b; Dişlen-Dağgöl, 2022; Elizondo & Garita, 2013; Kartal & Balci, 2021; Korlu & Mede, 2018; Sedighi & Tamjid, 2016; Shams, 2013; Tilfarlioglu & Sherwani, 2018; Tseng, Liou &Chu, 2020; Vela & Rushidi, 2016; Tran, 2020; Yıldırım, 2008).

Before promoting autonomy in the classroom, students' readiness for learner autonomy was examined by Yıldırım (2008). He identified perceptions of both teachers and students. According to the results, students can be considered as ready to take their responsibility to learn on their own in Turkish context. In another study, Dişlen-Dağgöl (2022), who focused on the relationship between language learning autonomy and lifelong learning tendencies, collected data from English-majoring and non-English majoring students at university in Turkish context. The researcher concluded that language learner autonomy was statistically significant and positively correlated to lifelong learning.

Following studies worked on the effect of different vocabulary applications and hybrid learning on learner autonomy and vocabulary learning. Korlu and Mede (2018) investigated the effect of Quizlet, a kind of mobile application to learn vocabulary, on the students' autonomy in vocabulary learning. The study employed an experimental design with two classes in a preparatory program in Turkey. Results showed that this mobile application affected students' autonomy in vocabulary learning in a positive way. Additionally, Tseng, Liou and Chu (2020) examined the effect of a 3D virtual vocabulary learning program on learners' vocabulary learning and the relationship between learner autonomy and collaboration between students. Results showed that students' individual and autonomous use made vocabulary retention better rather than teacher-directed use. Shams (2013) conducted a study in which the impact of hybrid learning and learner autonomy on vocabulary language learning. He revealed that hybrid learning affected both learner autonomy and vocabulary in a positive way.

In the related literature the importance of learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies in terms of vocabulary learning were examined by Abadi and Baradaran (2013), Almusharraf (2018), Balçıkanlı (2008b), Elizondo and Garita (2013), Kartal and Balci (2021), Sedighi and Tamjid (2016), Tilfarlioglu and Sherwani (2018), Tran (2020), and Vela and Rushidi (2016).

Kartal and Balci (2021) examined the relationship between the vocabulary learning autonomy of Turkish ELT students and the vocabulary size. Results showed that students had a moderate level of learning autonomy and the mean score of vocabulary size was 77.14. Similarly, Balçıkanlı (2008b) carried out an experimental study with 12- week treatment in order to develop learner autonomy via different activities. According to results, students in the experimental group had a greater tendency to become autonomous learners than the students in the control group. Furthermore, Tran (2020) investigated EFL students' attitudes towards learner autonomy in vocabulary learning. Results indicated that students approved the importance of autonomy while they had low interest to study vocabulary in English on their own.

Almusharraf (2018) focused on female students and their teacher promoting learner autonomy and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Results demonstrated that teachers were aware of the benefits of learner autonomy and students could make use of teachers' practices in the classroom or outside the classroom. Also, Elizondo and Garita (2013) investigated the role of learner autonomy on the language achievement of six EFL learners found out that learning strategies and teachers affected students' language achievement.

Abadi and Baradaran (2013) had a study with 190 EFL learners in high, low and advanced proficient groups in order to examine the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and autonomy. Data were collected through two questionnaires and two language tests. Findings of the study demonstrated that there was a significant positive correlation between two variables in high and low proficient groups while in the advanced group the relationship was not strong. Furthermore, Vela and Rushidi (2016) conducted an experimental study in which one group kept vocabulary notebooks and other two groups did not have vocabulary notebooks. Results showed that students having a vocabulary notebook were much more successful than other students according to their vocabulary test scores.

Sedighi and Tamjid (2016) examined the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their autonomy by considering gender and using 70 students majoring in English Language Teaching. According to the correlation analysis, researchers concluded that the use of vocabulary learning strategies of İranian EFL learners was a statistically significant and positive related to learner autonomy in terms of male and female students. Similarly, Tilfarlioglu and Sherwani (2018) investigated the relationship among EFL learners' autonomy, self-esteem, and vocabulary learning strategies' choice by applying questionnaire to the 157 undergraduate EFL learners at Soran University in northern Iraq. The findings demonstrated that the relationship among the EFL learners' autonomy, self-esteem, and vocabulary learning strategies' choice of Iraqi EFL students was statistically significant. In addition, they revealed that EFL learners' autonomy and self-esteem contributed to both effective vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary learning strategies' choice.

As the aforementioned studies summarized above, learner autonomy in language learning, especially vocabulary learning is a must as students need to continue language learning outside the class. Thus, this study examined the level of learner autonomy and its effect on vocabulary development. Considering this aim, the following research questions were attempted to answer.

Research questions:

1-What is the learner autonomy level of Turkish EFL students in the preparatory class?

2- What is the relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning?

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3- What do the learners do in order to improve their vocabulary knowledge?

Methodology

This study was designed considering the procedures of parallel design which is one of the mixed-methods research designs. Quantitative data and qualitative data were gathered together. By means of this type of design data triangulation was also carried out (Mertens, 2010).

Setting and participants

Participants of this study were chosen based on the convenience sampling (Davis, 2015). That is, the accessible learners to whom the researcher was teaching English in the university preparatory class of School of Foreign Languages were involved in the current study after necessary permission received from the university ethics committee. 26 preparatory class students in a state university in Turkey took part in this study. However, 11 students participated in the last part of the study (questionnaire).

Data collection tools

In this study, four different instruments were used to collect data: Learner autonomy scale, a pre-vocabulary test, a post- vocabulary test and a questionnaire with 1 open-ended question.

Firstly, learners' autonomy level was measured through the learner autonomy scale with 5- Likert type survey (totally disagree, disagree, no idea, agree, totally agree) developed and adapted by Orakcı and Gelişli (2017). After determining the level of learner autonomy, a pre-vocabulary test which covers words listed in the coursebook's wordlist from Unit 3 to Unit 6 was administered to students in order to check their vocabulary knowledge. Considering students' answers, 41 unknown words were chosen to check. After studying these four units, a post- vocabulary test which includes only these 41 previously unknown words were asked again to check students' vocabulary retention. The list of words and the rate of correct and incorrect answers were attached in the appendix part. Finally, a questionnaire with 1 open-ended question (What are the ways you use to improve your vocabulary knowledge?) was given to students in order to reveal how they have learnt vocabulary individually.

Data analysis

Firstly, as for the learner autonomy scale, descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, standard deviation) were carried out. Secondly, for the vocabulary tests, percentages of correct and incorrect answers were calculated. Then, inferential statistic (regression analysis) was conducted to examine the relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning. Finally, one-open ended question was analyzed through content analysis in order to identify how students learn vocabulary.

Results

The first step of the study was to show the level of learner autonomy of students and the results of learner autonomy scale were demonstrated in the following Table 1.

Research Question 1: What is the learner autonomy level of Turkish EFL students in the preparatory class?

Table 1. Results of learner autonomy scale

Items	Number of respondent	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I want to choose the most appropriate activity that will help me to learn English.	26	4.46	.582
2. I want to take responsibility while learning English.	26	4.19	.634
3. I want my opinions to be considered while learning English.	26	4.00	.849
4. I want to talk about the subjects to be taught in English class.	26	3.69	1.087
5. I can identify my weaknesses while learning English.	26	3.77	.765
6. I can identify my strengths while learning English.	26	3.85	.925
7. I want to use the videos/CDs about my English lessons outside of the classroom.	26	3.81	1.021
8. I like taking risks to communicate in English.	26	3.35	.892
9. I can learn English only with the help of the teacher.	26	2.77	1.142
10. I voluntarily read English books at my level.	26	3.50	1.030
11. I can identify my own learning needs.	26	3.58	.945
12. I can evaluate my own work in English.	26	3.19	1.021
13. I want to have right to choose the activities carried out.	26	4.08	.628
14. If the teacher does not explain a subject in English, I am afraid that I will not be able to learn it.	26	2.92	1.129
Valid N (listwise)	26		

As shown in Table 1 above, learners can be categorized as moderately autonomous learners. All the mean values of the items are more than 3.19 (±1.021). The highest mean value is 4.46 (±.582), which includes "I want to choose the most appropriate activity that will help me to learn English". Only two items, which aim to identify the learners who cannot manage his/her learning without a teacher, have mean values of 2.77 (±1.142) and 2.92 (±1.129). That is, participants have a moderate level of learning autonomy. They can manage to take their responsibility while they are learning vocabulary.

In order to identify to what extent students' autonomy helps to learn the vocabulary, the following research question was answered.

Research Question 2: What is the effect of learner autonomy on vocabulary learning?

As Turkish equivalent of words asked in the pre-vocabulary test and 41 unknown words were chosen to check for the post-test, correlation between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning was run and results are shown below.

Table 2. Correlations between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning

Correlations		Learner autonomy	Vocabulary learning
Learner autonomy	Pearson Correlation	1	.209
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.317
	N	26	25
Vocabulary learning	Pearson Correlation	.209	1

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Sig. (2-tailed)	.317	
N	25	25

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As it is seen in Table 2 above, there is no significant relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning (r=.209, p.=.317). Also, the effect of learner autonomy on vocabulary learning was examined as in the following.

Table 3. Effect of learner autonomy on vocabulary learning

Independent Variables	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Standard Error	F Model
Learner Autonomy	.209	.044	.002	.18251	1.048

p<.05

Two bivariate regression analysis was conducted to see the effects of learner autonomy on vocabulary learning. According to the findings shown in Table 3 above, learner autonomy ($F_{(1,23)}=1.048$, $p=.317$) does not statistically significantly explain the variation in vocabulary learning. Also, learner autonomy explains 4% of the variation in vocabulary learning, which is a very small effect on vocabulary learning. Thus, apart from learner autonomy, other variables should be examined with regard to vocabulary learning.

Research Question 3: What do the learners do in order to improve their vocabulary knowledge?

Through vocabulary tasks included in extra printed or online language materials and online practice platform provided with the access code of the book, students can guide their vocabulary learning. However, in this part of the current study, what other things students use to plan their own learning or improve their vocabulary knowledge was investigated. Analysis of data gathered via one open-ended question shows that students keep vocabulary notebooks (n=6), prepare vocabulary cards (n=2) (on one side of the card is an English word and on the other side is Turkish meaning of the word), and vocabulary apps on their mobile phones (n=3) such as Voscreen and Tureng Vocabulary notebook. 11 students out of 26 students used the aforementioned tools for their vocabulary development.

Conclusion and discussion

This study aimed to identify to what extent Turkish EFL students were autonomous and how the learner autonomy affected their vocabulary learning. Firstly, learner autonomy scale was administered to students in order to reveal to what extent they are autonomous learners who can take their own learning responsibility. Then, a pre-vocabulary test was used to identify vocabulary knowledge of elementary students. Next, previously unknown vocabulary was tested through a post-vocabulary test. Finally, a questionnaire with 1 open-ended question was given to students in order to reveal how they have learnt vocabulary individually. This present study indicated the following results:

First of all, according the results of learner autonomy scale in this current study, students were in the moderate level of autonomy as all mean values in the scale are higher than 3.19 although Balçıkanlı (2008b) states "It is an indispensable prerequisite at universities since the learners, when they have become university students, do not have lots of study skills which will help them in their future career" (p.283). Shams (2013) revealed that way of teaching affect students' autonomy. In other words, hybrid learning fosters students' autonomy. Therefore, it could be concluded that these students had experience to plan, study, and evaluate their own learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as they experienced online learning. On the contrary, Kırmızı and Kıraç (2018) found out that "Students in conventional classes seem to value the following variables more than distance education students: independent work in language learning, language learning activities, selection of content, and objectives/evaluation. In contrast, distance education students value importance of class/teacher, role of teacher: explanation/supervision, and assessment and motivation" and they also add that "distance education programs may not have the capacity to develop learner autonomy" (p.2964).

Secondly, the rate of correct answers showed that students' autonomy helps them to learn the vocabulary. On the other hand, results of correlation showed that almost no relationship was found between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning. Also, two bivariate regression analysis showed that learner autonomy does not statistically significantly explain the variation in vocabulary learning and it explains 4% of the variation in vocabulary learning. Therefore, other variables should be examined with regard to vocabulary learning.

Finally, information about students' ways of vocabulary learning was collected through a questionnaire with 1 open-ended question. Their answers could be categorized as in the following. 6 students keep a vocabulary notebook, which is supported by Vela and Rushidi (2016) and they found out that having a vocabulary notebook is an effective way to learn vocabulary and it promotes learner autonomy as students record the words and review them regularly.

2 students prepare vocabulary cards (on one side of the card is an English word and on the other side is Turkish meaning of the word), and 3 students use vocabulary applications on their mobile phones (n=3) such as Voscreen and Tureng Vocabulary notebook. This finding is in line with the studies of Korlu and Mede (2018) and Liou and Chu (2020) who examined the effect of applications on learner autonomy and vocabulary learning. Furthermore, virtual environment programs for vocabulary learning suggested by Tseng, Liou and Chu (2020) can be used to foster learner autonomy. Furthermore, for a long-term vocabulary retention, pair work activities can be offered.

As stated by Abadi and Baradaran (2013), "Language learning is a lifelong effort. It is important to help learners become aware of the value of independent learning outside the classroom so that they can learn continuously, and maintain it after they have completed their formal studies" (p.184). This could be achieved if students know the benefits of autonomy.

To sum up, vocabulary knowledge in foreign language learning is so important for both productive and receptive skills and students should improve their knowledge beyond the classroom on their own. They need to monitor their own development. This could be managed if they are autonomous learners. Thus, teachers should help them become autonomous through a variety of activities and tasks.

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Limitations and suggestions

This study was restricted with vocabulary learning of 26 students and a future study could focus on a larger scale with an experimental design with the tasks and activities to promote learner autonomy. Also, besides autonomy, language learning strategies and motivation as other independent variables could be examined in terms of vocabulary learning as this study showed that only a small part of vocabulary learning was affected by learner autonomy. Also, the impact of teachers on promoting autonomy in vocabulary learning should be examined for further studies.

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Statement of contribution rate

The whole process was conducted by the only declared author of the article.

Declaration of conflict of interest

There is only one author in this study.

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Appendix 1: The rate of correct and incorrect answers

Words	Wrong (%)	Correct (%)
Talkative	69.2	30.8
Unkind	50	50
Serious	19.2	80.8
Shame	80.8	19.2
Carpet	57.7	42.3
Rug	92.3	7.7
Sink	92.3	7.7
Sofa	53.8	46.2
Washbasin	88.5	11.5
Pharmacy	42.3	57.7
Baker's	46.2	53.8
Accountant	92.3	7.7
Butcher's	61.5	38.5
Dry cleaner	46.2	53.8
Greengrocer's	69.2	30.8
Newsagent	92.3	7.7
Memory stick	96.2	3.8
Trainers	92.3	7.7
Awesome	26.9	73.1
Pear	80.8	19.2
Garlic	61.5	38.5
Onion	23.1	76.9
Bean	69.2	30.8

Pea	88.5	11.5
Cabbage	84.6	15.4
Lettuce	76.9	23.1
Aubergine	92.3	7.7
Corn on the cob	96.2	3.8
Grape	46.2	53.8
Cereal	84.6	15.4
Prawn	96.2	3.8
Bill	73.1	26.9
Order	84.6	15.4
Frying pan	57.7	42.3
Mint	73.1	26.9
Fork	65.4	34.6
Spoon	57.7	42.3
Valentine Day	34.6	65.4
Halloween	11.5	88.5
Independence day	80.8	19.2
Women Day	3.8	96.2