THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTONOMY PERCEPTION AND CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between autonomy perception and classroom behaviors of students learning English as a foreign language. Descriptive research was used in the study. Proportioned random sampling was used to choose the sample of the study. The sample included 560 university students. The data of the research was gathered with Autonomy Perception Scale and Classroom Behaviors Scale. Significant relationship was found between autonomy perception and classroom behaviors.

Key words: *Autonomy perception, Classroom behaviors, foreign language, English learning*

YABANCI DİL OLARAK İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRENENLERDE ÖZERKLİK ALGISI VE SINIF İÇİ DAVRANIŞLAR ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİLER

Özet

Bu araştırmanın amacı yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenenlerde özerklik algısı ile sınıf içi davranışlar arasındaki ilişkileri incelemektir. Araştırmada betimsel yöntem kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın örneklemi oranlı yansız atama ile belirlenmiştir. Örneklemde 560 üniversite öğrencisi yer almıştır. Araştırmanın verileri Özerklik Algı Ölçeği ve Sınıf İçi Davranışlar Ölçeği ile toplanmıştır. Özerklik algısı ve sınıf içi davranışlar arasında anlamlı ilişkiler bulunmuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: *özerklik algısı, sınıf içi davranışlar, yabancı dil, İngilizce öğrenme*

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Introduction

Active learning and the instructional techniques which may support it have been mostly studied by researchers in the last three decades. Active learning and related instructional methods are learner centered. Therefore, learners are supposed to take most of the learning responsibilities. The learner who takes this responsibility has his/her personal needs and goals. He/she is aware of these specific needs and goals and arranges his/her learning process accordingly. These terms remind us of the term autonomy which is one of the most crucial conditions of successful language learning. Learner autonomy is defined as "the capacity to take charge of one's own learning" (Benson, 2001:8) and autonomous learning is learner's using this capacity. According to Dickinson (1993) autonomous learners have five characteristics. First, autonomous learners are aware of the learning material, its goal and why the teacher does particular activities in the classroom. Second, they are able to set their own goals. Third, they are the individuals who choose and practice appropriate learning strategies. They know which strategies are more effective for them. Fourth, they use particular strategies. For example, autonomous language learners know how to make of use of any kind of clues which may support a text written in a foreign language before reading all of it. They make use of pictures, titles and captions. They relate all this information with their previous knowledge. They ask themselves questions about the text before reading it. Finally, autonomous learners are capable of self-assessing their performance. In order to understand the term better, Little (1994:81) noted on what autonomy is not:

- Autonomy is not a synonym for self-instruction; in other words, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher.
- In the classroom context, autonomy does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; it is not a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can.
- On the other hand, autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is not another teaching method.
- Autonomy is not a single, easily described behavior.
- Autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners.

Autonomy is an essential characteristic for a good language learner. Especially for those who learn a language as a foreign language do not have the opportunity to hear or use the language in the real world. Therefore, it is their own responsibility to create and be in environments where the target language is used. Although language teachers or professional consultants may help the learner, he/she should be responsible for his/her own learning. The importance of autonomy in language learning can be observed in Omaggio's (as cited in Wenden, 1991) definition of a good language learner. Good language learners are aware of their learning styles and strategies and know how to adapt them for different learning conditions. They

know about their strengths and weaknesses. They use the opportunities to communicate in the target language. They are risk takers and good at using clues and making predictions. For example, in reading comprehension, they use syntactic and contextual clues for unknown vocabulary. They try to understand the relationship between the language rules. They monitor their and others' learning processes. They try to think within the target language as much as possible. All these characteristics indicate that good language learners are also autonomous learners.

Motivation is one of the key elements in autonomy. According to Dörnyei and Skehan (2005) motivation is related to why people think and behave in particular ways. Motivation is responsible for why an individual decides on a particular activity, for how long he/she will be willing in practicing it and how much effort he/she will spend. Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) stated that motivation leads learners towards autonomy and it functions as a pre-condition for it. However, they also added that the relationship between two terms is dynamic and functions in both directions depending on the type of the motivation.

Behaviors of students in classrooms reflect their attitude, motivation, strengths, weaknesses, learning styles and also autonomy. Appropriate evaluation of this reflection by teachers may assist learners to improve their learning skills. Teachers may observe their students systematically and fill in forms about them. Stipek (2002) included many items related to autonomy in such a form. Here are some examples:

The student,

1. studies autonomously.
2. likes challenging learning tasks.
3. participates in non-obligatory learning tasks.
4. tries to improve his/her learning skills no matter how better he/she is than the others.
5. he/she does not ask for direct answers for questions. He/she asks for help to support his/her autonomy.

Some students display disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Disruptive behaviors may be defined as behaviors which influence the learner's own learning and other learners' learning negatively and hinder social interaction in the classroom (Chandler and Dahlquist, 2002). One of the causes of these behaviors is learned helplessness. Most of these students say "I cannot...". They do not participate in the lesson or listen to the explanations of their teachers. They are discouraged easily and never volunteer to answer questions or they find excuses in order not to answer questions (Santrock, 2004). Learning the causes of these behaviors may help teachers to lead their students towards autonomous learning.

There are studies in Turkey related to autonomy. For instance, Yumuk (2002) studied with 90 university students who attended English translation lessons. In her study, the students were encouraged to use the Internet to improve their translation skills. At the end of the treatment students became aware of their responsibilities in the process and had a more autonomous point of view. Tayar (2003) studied with vocational school students who had English courses for specific purposes. These students did not know how to learn more effectively. They were not aware of the importance of learning strategies. They were dependent on the teacher and had low levels of autonomy. In another study carried out by Koçak (2003) English language learners had problems in self-monitoring and self-assessment. These students were unwilling to speak in the target language during the class hours. Moreover, they did not prefer reading magazines or books in the target language or making use of individual learning opportunities.

Researchers have long been interested in the term learner autonomy. However, it is difficult to define the term. As Little (1994:81) noted "autonomy is not a single, easily described behavior". Therefore, this study aimed to strengthen the existing definitions and determine the dimensions of it. In addition, it aimed to investigate the relationships between autonomy and classroom behaviors of learners as a first step in fostering learner autonomy.

Methodology

Descriptive research was used in the study. Discerning what is happening in Turkey and making generalizations about the situation in language learning is the aim of the study.

Research Question

Is there a significant relationship between autonomy perception and classroom behaviors of language learners?

Participants

The population of the study was intermediate-level English language learners attending the preparatory courses in the School of Foreign Languages at Dokuz Eylul University in 2006-2007 academic year. There were 2701 students in the population. Proportioned random sampling was used to choose the sample of the study for heterogeneity. First, the population was divided into sub-populations and then the sample which represents the whole population was chosen randomly. There were 238 females and 322 males, a total of 560 students in the sample of this study. There were 503 under-graduate students 57 graduate students.

Research Instruments

Perception Scale and Classroom Behaviors Scale were used in the study. Both scales were developed after reading the related literature and asking the opinions of experts in the field. After statistical analysis, the items which did not fall into any dimensions were omitted. As a result, there were 38 items in the Autonomy Perception Scale with four sub-scales, namely: taking language learning responsibility, using meta-cognitive strategies, English activities outside of the school, associating language with real life. Cronbach Alpha Reliability of the whole scale was 0.90. There were 31 items in the Classroom Behaviors Scale with two sub-scales, namely: individual and interactive dimensions of behaviors. Cronbach Alpha Reliability of the whole scale was 0.88. The reliability results of both scales indicated a satisfactory level of reliability for the present study.

Data Analyses

First of all, the participants were divided according to their levels of autonomy perceptions. This division was done using the raw scores in normal distribution (commonly referred to as a bell curve). According to normal distribution, the standard scores of measurements above the average have (+) value whereas those below the average have (-) value. In this study, the students who had 105 or lower scores were considered to have low autonomy perception. The students who had 125 and higher scores were considered to have high autonomy perception.

Table 1. *Means of Levels of Autonomy Perception and Standard Deviations*

Level of Autonomy Perception	N	M	Sd
Low	163	91.37	10.36
Medium	236	115.83	5.83
High	161	138.83	10.53
Total	560		

As Table 1 shows, 163 students had low, 236 students had medium and 161 students had high levels of autonomy perception.

The Pearson Moments Product Correlation Coefficient Test was used to determine the correlation between autonomy perception and classroom behaviors. The results can be seen in Table 2. There seem to be a significant correlation between autonomy perception and classroom behaviors both according to the scores based on the whole scale and according to the sub-scales.

Table 2. *Autonomy Perception and Classroom Behaviors Pearson Correlation Test Results*

Variables	n	M	Sd	r	p	Significance Level
Autonomy(General)	560	115.25	20.01	0.64	0.00**	Significant
Behavior (General)						
Responsibility	560	83.13	11.98	0.69	0.00**	Significant
Behavior (General)		108.12	16.13			
Eng.act. out.school	560	23.40	5.72	0.21	0.00**	Significant
Behavior (General)		108.12	16.13			
Use of meta-cog.sk.	560	32.76	4.66	0.43	0.00**	Significant
Behavior (General)		108.12	16.13			
Assoc.real life	560	8.79	3.23	0.23	0.00**	Significant
Behavior (General)		108.12	16.13			
Autonomy(General)	560	115.25	20.01	0.55	0.00**	Significant
Individual		77.37	12.75			
Autonomy(General)	560	83.13	11.98	0.65	0.00**	Significant
Individual		77.37	12.75			
Eng.act. out.school	560	23.40	5.72	0.11	0.01*	Significant
Individual		77.37	12.75			
Use of meta-cog.sk.	560	32.76	4.66	0.33	0.00**	Significant
Individual		77.37	12.75			
Assoc.real life	560	8.79	3.23	0.17	0.00**	Significant
Individual		77.37	12.75			
Autonomy(General)	560	115.25	20.01	0.58	0.00**	Significant
Interactive		26.40	5.58			
Responsibility	560	83.13	11.98	0.49	0.00**	Significant
Interacative		26.40	5.58			
Eng.act. out.school	560	23.40	5.72	0.36	0.00**	Significant
Interactive		26.20	5.58			
Use of meta-cog.sk.	560	32.76	4.66	0.48	0.00**	Significant
Intercative		26.40	5.58			
Assoc.real life	560	8.79	3.23	0.31	0.00**	Significant
Interactive		26.40	5.58			

*p<0.05
**p<0.01

The difference in classroom behaviors between students with high and low levels of autonomy was also analyzed. Some example scale item results can be seen in Table 3:

Table 3: *Descriptive Statistical Results of Students Having Low and High Autonomy Perception Levels*

Item	Behaviors	Low Autonomy Perception		High Autonomy Perception	
		M	Sd	M	Sd
1	Interested in other things	3,11	0,97	2,34	0,87
2	Focusing on teacher's explanations	3,80	0,94	4,61	0,54
3	Chatting with friends during the lecture	3,21	1,07	2,65	1,00
4	Taking notes for new vocabulary	2,78	1,30	4,20	0,91
5	Looking forward to the break time	3,86	1,01	2,67	0,95
6	Using dictionary	3,11	1,14	4,16	0,86
7	Listening to classmates	3,72	0,92	4,34	0,71

As Table 3 shows, the students having low autonomy perception have more negative classroom behaviors compared to the students having high autonomy. In order to understand the significance level of this difference, the means were compared using *t*-test. The results can be seen in Table 4:

Table 4: *Means of Classroom Behaviors Scale of the Students Having Low and High Autonomy Perception and t-Test Results*

Levels	n	M	Sd	df	t value	p value	Significance Level
Low	163	95.55	15.43	322	-15.61	0.00**	Significant
High	161	119.48	11.87				

**p<0.01

Table 4 presents the *t*-test results between the students having low and high autonomy perception. The data suggests that the students who have high autonomy perception have more positive classroom behaviors compared to the students having lower autonomy perception. The difference between these two groups is statistically significant.

Results and Discussion

According to the results of the study, 163 of the participants had low, 236 of them had medium, and 162 of them had high levels of autonomy perception. It appears that most of the students are ready to learn autonomously. This result is not consistent with Tayar (2003) and Koçak's (2003) studies, according to which the students were lack of autonomous learning. However, the sample used by Tayar (2003) was different from the one used in this study. Another result of the study is that the stu-

dents' scores were higher as far as their individual behaviors are concerned in comparison with the interactive behaviors. In addition, when their negative and positive behaviors were compared, the students with higher levels of autonomy perception tended to display more positive behaviors in the classroom. As Bren and Mann (1997) and Omaggio (as cited in Wenden, 1991) noted, autonomous learners are good at using opportunities in learning environments. Briefly, autonomy perception and classroom behaviors influence each other in a cause-effect relationship. Knowing about how autonomous learners behave may help them improve their autonomous learning skills.

Suggestions

1. Language teachers and the curriculum should encourage students to participate in language activities outside school.
2. Lessons and learning material should be associated with real life.
3. Students should be taught meta-cognitive strategies to support learning autonomously.
4. Classroom behaviors of students should be observed systematically, and teachers themselves should be autonomous to be good models for their students.
5. Teachers should encourage their students to participate in setting goals, choosing the content, and the assessment of the learning process to foster autonomy.
6. To support positive classroom interaction cooperative learning, self-assessment, and peer-assessment activities may be included in the curriculum.
7. Autonomous learning may be included in the curriculum of education faculties.

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