FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This study aims to foster learner autonomy through the activities to be exploited at Preparatory School, Gazi University. In order to attain this goal, two classes were selected randomly, each of which consists of twenty learners studying English from various faculties at Gazi University, as experimental and control group. Prior to the implementation phase, Learner Autonomy Questionnaire, made up of three parts, was administered to both groups so as to reveal possible levels of autonomy they possessed. Whereas the experimental group was instructed in the autonomy implementation, the control group continued their education without any modification. After the 12-week implementation process, the same questionnaire was administered to both groups once again. The results from both groups were gathered and analyzed by the use of student and paired sample t-test to demonstrate whether any change would exist between the groups. At the end of this process, the statistical results were analyzed and interpreted. The results displayed that the learners in the experimental group scored higher than those in the control group, and showed a strong tendency towards autonomy than the control group did with a few exceptions. In the light of these results, syllabuses of the preparatory schools should be redesigned in accordance with the principles of learner autonomy, the course books to be followed at preparatory schools should be assessed whether they encourage autonomy or not, some in-service training should be fulfilled and finally self-access rooms should be developed in order that the learners may have the opportunity to study there on their own far more effectively.

Key Words: Learner Autonomy, EFL, Autonomous Activities, Preparatory School.

İNGİLİZCE'NİN YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRETİLDİĞİ SINIFLARDA ÖĞRENEN ÖZERKLİĞİNİ ARTTIRMAK

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı aktiviteler kullanılarak Gazi Üniversitesi Hazırlık öğrencilerinde öğrenen özerkliğini arttırmaktır. Bu amaca ulaşmak için yirmi kişilik deney ve kontrol grubu rasgele seçilen iki sınıftan oluşturulmuştur. Gruplar, Gazi Üniversitesi'nin çeşitli fakültelerinde okuyan ve İngilizce eğitim alan öğrencilerden oluşmaktadır. Uygulamaya başlamadan önce, üç bölümden oluşan Öğrenen Özerkliği Anketi öğrencilerin olası özerklik durumlarını belirlemek amacıyla öğrencilere verilmiştir.Deney grubuna özerklik uygulamasıyla eğitim verilirken, kontrol grubu değişiklik olmaksızın eğitimine devam etmiştir. 12 haftalık uygulamadan sonra, aynı anket öğrencilere bir kez daha verilmiş ve her iki gruptan elde edilen sonuçlar, gruplar arasında bir farklılığın olup olmadığını belirlemek için çiftli örnek t ve öğrenci t testi kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Bu aşamanın sonunda, istatistiksel sonuçlar değerlendirilmiş ve yorumlanmıştır. Sonuçlar deney grubundaki öğrencilerin birkaç istisna dışında kontrol grubundakilerden daha yüksek puanlar aldığını ve kontrol grubundan daha fazla bir özerkliğe sahip olduğunu göstermiştir.Bu sonuçlar ışığında, İngilizce'nin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği sınıflarda öğrenen özerkliğini artırmak için, üniversitelerde uygulanan hazırlık müfredatlarının özerklik ilkelerini temel alarak yeniden düzenlenmesi, okutulmakta olan ders kitaplarının özerkliği destekler nitelikte olup olmadığı konusunda değerlendirilmesi, üniversitelerde görev yapmakta olan okutmanların öğrenen özerkliği konusunda bilgilendirilmek için hizmet içi eğitime alınmasının kaçınılmaz olduğu ve öğrencilerin kendi başlarına daha etkili bir şekilde çalışmalarına olanak tanıyacak çalışma odalarının düzenlenmesi gibi önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğrenen Özerkliği, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce,Özerklik Aktiviteleri, Hazırlık Okulu.

1. Introduction

It is a fact that adults do not know how to diagnose their own needs for learning, formulate their own learning objectives, identify learning resources and planning strategies for taking the initiative in using those resources, assess their own learning, and have their assessments validated (1). Moreover, it is obvious that the learners somehow are not able to perform the learning process as they lack the knowledge of how to achieve this on their own, which requires some guidance and assistance. It is also recognized that students arrive at university with different experiential backgrounds and learning achievements, but we know that they have few autonomous dispositions which higher education requires in learning. As a consequence of this existing situation, learner autonomy is a prerequisite to higher education. Holec (2) underlines the importance of autonomy by mentioning "insist on the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives." As well as Holec, many educators in history attached great importance to the necessity of autonomy in education. It is by all odds that the concept of "autonomy" has been given an increasing attention because of the way it can promote a situation where the learners' ability to learn is improved (3). Therefore, learning how to learn has become a very crucial component that educators have to take into account in order to keep up with the conditions of the changing world.

While glancing at the pertinent literature on autonomy, one can easily recognize a lot of studies promoting learner autonomy in EFL settings. Although there are numerous autonomy studies (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) conducted in Turkey, one may possibly come across no experimental studies to develop autonomy in the foreign language classrooms. In view of the necessity of learner autonomy in foreign language classrooms, the aim of this study is to foster autonomy of EFL learners by encouraging them to take the responsibility for their own learning within the factors such as teacher and learner roles, classroom setting, activities, syllabus, and materials.

2. Method

Forty learners, twenty of whom were in the experimental and twenty of whom were in the control group, were chosen as the subjects of this study. While all the students in the experimental group belonged to the same age category ranging from 18 to 23, the students in the control group were between from 18 to 26 years old. The majority of the learners graduated from Anatolian High School both in the experimental and control groups. The learners were studying at various faculties of Gazi University, and many of whom had prep-class experience.

Data was collected by means of a three-part questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire was about the general information regarding the participants. As for the second part, the researcher developed it by focusing on the aspects mentioned in Camileri's (12) questionnaire. The original questionnaire is made up of 13 questions concerning learner autonomy, but the researcher developed a new questionnaire with 15 statements. The relevant questions "How much are you involved in decisions on the methodology of the course?" and "How much are you encouraged to find out learning strategies by yourself?" were to investigate whether the principles of autonomy were

carried out in the actual classroom. The third part of the questionnaire was developed by Demirel (13). Some statements were removed and it was compiled by the researcher. The statements such as "I can learn English grammar on my own/without a teacher" and "If I can not learn English in the classroom, I can work on my own." were based on the key components of autonomy. Both questionnaires were designed in form of likert-type scale, and responses range from '1'= "I totally disagree" to '5'= "I strongly agree".

The degree of autonomy was measured via learner autonomy questionnaire before the experimental treatment. Both experimental and control group had the same education with the same teacher and for the same amount of time. With the experimental group, the lessons were carried out through the principles of autonomy and activities while the lessons of the control group were conducted via ordinary teaching methods. During this period, some significant adjustments were carried out in the actual classroom atmosphere of the experimental group such as the teacher roles, materials, activities, projects, journals, learner logs, learner contract and portfolios. This implementation process took 12 weeks. The same questionnaire was administered to both the control and experimental groups following the experimental treatment so as to reveal whether any change would exist between the control and the experimental groups.

The data was analyzed by using the Statistical Program for Windows version 12.0. The total scores were compared by Mann Whitney U test to find out the difference between the experimental and the control groups in the pre-test. Apart from the Mann Whitney U test, independent sample t-test, paired-sample t-test and student t-test were utilized to identify whether the experimental group displayed a tendency towards autonomy.

3. Findings and Interpretation

The Cronbach's alpha values of the data gathered from the second part of the questionnaire developed by the researcher were calculated to find out their reliabilities. As a consequence of the calculation, it was revealed that the second part had a high reliability. The Cronbach's alpha value of this questionnaire was 0, 88. As to the third part developed by Demirel (13), even though reliability and validity of this questionnaire had been previously assessed, its reliability was calculated, and the Cronbach's alpha value was 0, 87, which pointed out that both instruments used in this study were found to have relatively high reliability.

Table 1.   The Relation between the Experimental Group in the Post-test in Terms of Previous Preparatory School Attendance

	post-test second part	post-test third part
Mann Whitney U	31,5	30,5
Wilcoxon W	167,5	40,5
Z	-0,047	-0,142
P	**0,962***	**0,887***

*p>0, 05

When the relation between the experimental group and the previous preparatory school attendance is examined, we can state that there is no meaningful difference both in the second part (p=0,962>0, 05 Mann-Whitney U test) and the third part (p=0,887>0,

05 Mann-Whitney U test). At the beginning of the study, it was assumed that there would be a relation between the degree of autonomy and the previous preparatory school attendance as it is widely accepted that the learners with a long history of language learning may display more autonomy than those with shorter one. However, when the calculation was made, it was observed that it was not the case. The reason for this finding may be that the learners who had English Prep School attendance previously may not have been instructed in a way which encourages but hinders autonomy.

Table 2.   The Relation between the Experimental and Control Group for the Second Part in the Pre-test

	second part	third part
Mann Whitney U	207	1,118
P	**0,937***	**0,270***

*p>0, 05

As Table 2 displays, the experimental and control group had no difference in terms of how much autonomy they had before the treatment. It concludes that both groups had the same degree of autonomy when the experimental treatment commenced, which made the study more meaningful.

Table 3. The Relation between the Pre and Post-test in the Control Group

Control Group	Pair 1	second part	-,271	0,789*
	Pair 2	third part	,859	0,400*

*p>0, 05

Table 3 illustrates the results of the control group after three months (p=0,789>0, 05 independent sample t-test) for the second and third part (p=0,400>0, 05 independent sample t-test). As indicated in the table, the control group who had not been taught through the autonomy implementation did not undergo much change within three months. The reason why there was no change between the pre and post-test in terms of control group may be accounted for the importance of the experimental treatment.

Table 4. The Relation between the Experimental and the Control Group in terms of the Post-test

Group		t	p
Experimental	second part	-7,847	0,001*
	third part	-5,366	0,001*

*p<0, 05

As Table 4 shows, a meaningful difference exists between the experimental and the control groups in terms of the post-test, which signifies that the degree of autonomy in the experimental group was higher than that of autonomy in the control group. This, thus, concludes that the treatment provided for the experimental group increased the total score and the learners in the experimental group became more autonomous than those in the control group.

4. Discussion and Result

The experimental group showed significant differences in the mean values of both second and third part through the paired samples t-tests' findings. The development of learner autonomy can easily be seen when the pre and post test are statistically compared to one another. The results compare favorably with the findings of the control group as control group does not display significant differences in the pre and post-test regarding the promotion of autonomy.

Comparing our results with the results of the study carried out by Lee (14) whose aim was also to promote learner autonomy, we can state that the experimental treatment did not work efficiently as the period was much shorter than the present study. Unlike the study of Lee, this study took more than eight weeks, which is more appropriate in the literature. According to the conclusion drawn by Lee, creating a self-directed learning programme does not in itself enable learners to become self-directed. However, in the present study, not only a self-directed learning programme was created but also the activities were made during the implementation phase, which may have helped the learners in the experimental group display more autonomy.

Although the subjects do not share the same features with those in the study carried out by Egel (6), we can compare the results of her study with the present study. In her study, the subjects were young learners studying at primary school, grades 4 and 5. Also, the implementation of European Language Portfolio (ELP) was carried out to the experimental group to promote learner autonomy. As we can conclude from the results of the study, it is stated that the promotion of autonomy has been achieved through ELP implementation. The present study took twelve weeks to finish, and at the end of the treatment, we can come to a conclusion that the learners in the experimental group have become more autonomous than the control group. Consequently, the results of the present study are in harmony with those of Egel's research.

Cotteral (15) identified six important variables in the promotion of learner autonomy. They are the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, the learners' sense of self-efficacy, important strategies, dimensions of strategy-related behavior and the nature of language learning. Some similar factors which may have had an effective impact on the promotion of autonomy during the implementation stage should be discussed comprehensively.

4.1. Teacher's counseling integration in a more systematic way

The majority of students are still being taught in ways which promote dependence and leave them ill-equipped to apply their school-learnt knowledge and skills to the world beyond the classroom (16). From this view, it would be easy to conclude that it is the teacher who plays the central role to make the learners become more autonomous in the foreign language classrooms. In order for self-access language learning to be successful, teachers must prepare their students to accept more responsibility for their learning than they may be accustomed to (17). According to Lee (14), if, as teachers, we are to succeed in promoting learner autonomy, we need to understand and consider how our learners perceive autonomous learning and their responsibilities in learning. Therefore, it is very important for the teachers to become aware of their own and their learners' beliefs and attitudes when they are attempting to promote learner autonomy. At this point, the teacher's role greatly altered with regard to quite a few aspects for the period of the autonomy implementation in the experimental group. Above all, the

teacher attempted to create an atmosphere in which the learners could feel more responsible for their own learning instead of doing her job in a very traditional manner. The teacher paid more attention to the learners' needs and interests. While the classroom rules were formulated, the learners' ideas were taken into consideration a lot. Moreover, the learners were involved in decisions on the methodology of the course.

4.2. Portfolios, Learning Logs, Journals, Learner Contract

Portfolio, described as a purposeful collection of a student's work that provides evidence of the student's skills, understandings or attitudes, can provide information about students' views of their own learning and the strategies they apply (18). Moreover, learners use their portfolios to collect evidence of their achievements over a period of time and thus present for assessment what they consider to be the best picture of their abilities (17). What's more, portfolios may promote student involvement in assessment, responsibility for self-assessment and for their own learning. In order to benefit from the portfolios in this aspect, the teacher, at the beginning of the semester, asked their learners to keep portfolios in which the learners would put their writing assignments, exercises, the songs they listened to, and the poems they tried to translate. Thus, the portfolios which enabled the learners to keep their progress by collecting what they produced were crucial in promoting learner autonomy since they had the opportunity to assess themselves.

Learning logs are the structured student journals because learning logs include prompts that the student has to complete and the learner is directed towards critical thinking about his learning process (6). Learners themselves can use their learning logs for self-assessment, to monitor their progress towards achieving their personal goals or the objectives of other content areas, and to identify areas of linguistic or non-linguistic difficulty through learner logs (18). These reflective skills, which the learners use while keeping a learning log, will aid the students' development of learner autonomy, which helped them to be aware of their learning goals and improvement.

Harmer (19) suggests that many teachers ask students to keep journals or diaries of their learning experiences, in the hope that their students will then reflect on their lessons, explore their successes and difficulties, and come to a greater understanding about learning and language. By keeping a written account of their work and their reflection on it, learners gain deeper insights into their learning processes (17). The study performed in Scandinavia revealed that journals enabled the learners to keep an individual record of the learning undertaken and assessed how well or badly particular tasks were done, and thanks the journals and more, they became more autonomous than they were (20). Likewise, journals played a great role in promoting learner autonomy in the experimental group for the reasons mentioned above.

Learner contract is widely accepted as an important tool in fostering autonomy since learning contracts provide a vehicle for making the planning of learning experiences a mutual undertaking between a learner and any helper, mentor, or teacher (21). They are effective in assisting adults in understanding their learning interests, planning learning activities, identifying relevant resources, and becoming skilled at self-assessment (22). In short, the learners who have no clear idea or objective about learning should be provided with the learner contract leading them to the correct path. For that reason, an agreement between the teacher and learners was made so that the learners could recognize their responsibilities very well before the treatment in the experimental group.

4.3. Activities

It is a common belief that what has been stated above may not be adequate for the learners in the experimental group to become more autonomous than the control group. In order to achieve that more effectively, some activities designed to foster autonomy with a focus on several aspects were implemented in the classroom in order that the learners would be encouraged to take their responsibility for their own learning. The activities carried out in the actual classroom were about the motivation, learner strategies, self-awareness and self-monitoring. Whereas some were adapted from the earlier products (23, 24), others were created by the researcher himself. It would be possible to state that the activities did work a lot to promote autonomy in the actual classrooms thanks to the aspects mentioned above.

As an inevitable consequence of what has been mentioned so far, autonomy should be developed at universities for the learners who have just commenced their academic education since it will lead them to become competent enough to take the responsibility for their own learning. Learners need metacognitive skills such as power of reflection, decision-making and independent action since learners are required to take responsibility and find their own methods of gathering, synthesizing and evaluating information called high-order thinking skills at university. 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. Through the autonomy implementation, this situation could be improved so that they might not face any difficulty in doing their academic career. While we are aiming to foster autonomy at universities, several key points are to be considered.

a) Syllabuses and assessment models of the universities should be redesigned in accordance with the principles of autonomy.

b) The course books to be followed at universities are required to be assessed on the basis of the criterion it encourages.

c) Some in-service training on learner autonomy should be put into practice.

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.

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