



An Investigation of Students' Learning Conceptions in Voluntary English Preparatory Programme¹

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL students' learning conceptions in the context of voluntary English preparatory programme. It is known that students hold specific beliefs as to what learning is, which is referred to as conceptions of learning (Ramsden, 1992). The quality of their conceptions affects their approaches to learning and thus their learning outcomes (Bowden & Marton, 2004). Some conceptions are often linked with low order thinking skills such as memorization, reproduction, and rote learning while others are associated with higher order thinking skills such as integrating and making meaning for oneself. Students' conceptions of learning are context specific and this changeable nature of the conceptions gives educators a chance to influence students' beliefs of learning and the way they approach learning. This study is significant in that investigating the students' conception of learning can lead to the achievement of effective and fruitful learning. This study employs qualitative methodologies in the investigation of students' conceptions of learning English as a foreign language. Participants of the study are students who are attending voluntary English preparatory programme at Düzce University and Namık Kemal University. Data were collected using a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire followed by interviews with students who displayed variations in their conceptions. In the analysis of the data, qualitative techniques were implemented. After the initial coding and elimination steps, students' conceptions of learning were categorized using a hierarchy of conceptions of learning proposed by van Rossum and Schenk (1984). The results indicated that the majority of the participants had reproductive conceptions of learning such as increase in knowledge, memorizing and applying, while only a small number of them were constructive conceptions such as understanding and changing as a person.

Keywords: Conceptions of Learning, English as a Foreign Language, Learning.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL students' learning conceptions in the context of voluntary English preparatory programme. It is known that students hold specific beliefs as to what learning is, which is referred to as conceptions of learning (Ramsden, 1992). The quality of their conceptions affects their approaches to learning and thus their learning outcomes (Bowden & Marton, 2004). Some conceptions are often linked with low order thinking skills such as memorization, reproduction, and rote learning while others are associated with higher order thinking skills such as integrating and making meaning for oneself. Students' conceptions of learning are context specific and this changeable nature of the conceptions gives educators a chance to influence students' beliefs of learning and the way they approach learning. This study is significant in that investigating the students' conception of learning can lead to the achievement of effective and fruitful learning.

Methods

This study employs qualitative methodologies in the investigation of students' conceptions of learning English as a foreign language. Participants of the study are students who are attending voluntary English preparatory programme at Düzce University and Namık Kemal University in 2017-18 Academic year. Data were collected using a

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semi-structured open-ended questionnaire followed by interviews with students who displayed variations in their conceptions. In the analysis of the data qualitative techniques were implemented. After the initial coding and elimination steps, students' conceptions of learning were categorized using a hierarchy of conceptions of learning by van Rossum and Schenk (1984).

Results

The results indicated that the majority of the participants with a percentage of 86.8 had reproductive conceptions of learning such as increase in knowledge, memorising and applying, while only a small number of them had constructive conceptions such as understanding and changing as a person.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results are in line with the studies conducted in similar settings in Turkey. Dikmeli and Cardak (2010) investigated 86 biology students' conception of learning and found out that majority of the students had reproductive conceptions of learning such as increase in knowledge and acquisition of facts and procedures. In the same way, Erdogan (2012) conducted a study to scrutinize math students' conceptions of learning and reached similar results. In his study, a good number of the students regarded learning as applying, increase in knowledge, and memorizing. Similarly, Sadi (2014) explored 108 students' conceptions of learning and came up with comparable results indicating that majority of the students had reproductive conceptions of learning. When the results reported in Turkey were considered, it can be argued that regardless of the context, Turkish students have a tendency to see learning as something that happens to them. They can be taken as the consumers of knowledge from the teacher or other sources. The students who attend preparatory classes are in their first year at university and they hold on to their studying habits at high school. When the educational system in Turkey is concerned, students need to take several high-stakes tests which call for a reproductive approach to learning such as acquiring as much information as possible, remembering, and applying where necessary. Secondly, the nature of language learning requires memorizing, especially in the first stages. However, even if this is the case, it should be done with an intention to understand rather than reproduction. Keeping in mind that conceptions of learning are affected by the context they are formed, teaching activities need to be designed so that they can promote higher order thinking skills such as understanding, making meaning for oneself and seeing things in a new way.

İsteğe Bağlı İngilizce Hazırlık Öğrencilerinin Öğrenme Anlayışlarının İncelenmesi¹

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı isteğe bağlı İngilizce hazırlık programına devam eden öğrencilerin öğrenme yaklaşımları hakkında bilgi edinmektir. Öğrencilerin öğrenme anlayışları adı verilen, öğrenmenin ne olduğuna dair belirli inançları olduğu bilinmektedir (Ramsden,1992). Bu anlayışların kalitesi öğrencilerin öğrenmeye yaklaşımını, dolayısıyla öğrenme çıktılarını etkiler (Bowden & Marton, 2004). Bazı öğrenme anlayışları ezberleme ve başkasına aktarma gibi düşük düzeyde düşünme becerileriyle ilişkilendirilirken, diğer öğrenme anlayışları ise çıkarımda bulunma ve ilişki kurma gibi daha yüksek düzeyde öğrenme aktiviteleriyle ilişkilendirilmektedir. Öğrencilerin öğrenme anlayışları konuya özel olmakla beraber bu anlayışların değişken yapıları eğitimcilerle ilişkilendirilmektedir. Öğrencilerin öğrenme anlayışlarını şekillendirebilme imkânı tanımaktadır. Bu çalışmada nitel araştırma modeli benimsenmektedir. Araştırmanın katılımcıları Namık Kemal Üniversitesi ve Düzce Üniversitesinde isteğe bağlı İngilizce hazırlık sınıfına devam eden 292 öğrenci oluşturmaktadır. Öğrencilerden önce açık uçlu bir anket formu doldurmaları istenmiş, daha sonra anlayışlarında kayda değer farklılıklar bulunan 10 öğrenciyle yüz yüze görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veri analizinde van Rossum ve Schenk (1984) tarafından kategorize edilmiş öğrenme anlayışları hiyerarşisi, tema olarak kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar öğrencilerin büyük oranda düşük düzey öğrenme anlayışlarına sahip olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğrenme Anlayışları, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce, Öğrenme.

1. Introduction

The quality of higher education has gained the attention of many researchers in the past several decades. One of their focus has been on how students learn. Investigations carried out by Gothenburg Institute in 1970's revealed that there were qualitative differences in how students approach learning tasks. They identified two approaches to learning, namely deep approach and surface approach which influence the way students go about learning, thus their learning outcomes.

Students who take a surface approach to learning and studying tend to be emotionally reluctant, have an intention to get the task out of the way with minimum effort, engage in low cognitive level activities, rely on rote learning, and focus on isolated facts, while students who adopt a deep approach tend to engage in the tasks meaningfully, focus on main ideas and underlying meaning, engage in high cognitive level activities, and have more positive feelings towards the tasks (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

It was found out that students with the same perceptions of the same course might have different approaches to learning and claimed that this was due to the difference in their conceptions of learning and the conceptions of themselves as learners (Richardson, 2010). For that reason, students' conceptions of learning have a say in their approaches to learning and their academic achievement.

Conceptions of learning are basically the beliefs students hold about learning which encompass "knowledge and beliefs about oneself, learning objectives, learning activities and strategies, learning tasks, learning and studying in general, and about task divisions between students, teachers, and fellow students in learning processes" (Vermunt & Vermetten,2004, p.362). In their studies, Saljo (1979), Giorgi (1986), and Marton et al. (1993) identified six distinct ways of seeing learning by students as listed below (cited in Marton, et al. 1997): Learning as

- an increase in knowledge
- memorizing
- acquiring facts, procedures, etc., which can be retained and utilized in practice
- the abstraction of meaning (understanding)

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- an interpretive process aimed at understanding of reality (seeing something in a different way)
- a change in a person (Benson and Lor,1999, p.463).

This distinction is depicted in a hierarchical order by Van Rossum and Schenk (1984) and they propose that the first three conceptions are related to surface approach, whereas the last three conceptions are related to deep approach to learning as can be seen in Table 1.

Table1

A hierarchy of Conceptions of Learning by van Rossum and Schenk (1984)

| Level | | |
|-------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Increasing one's knowledge | |
| 2 | Memorizing and reproducing | Reproductive (surface approach) |
| 3 | Applying | |
| 4 | Understanding | |
| 5 | Seeing something in a different way | Constructive (deep approach) |
| 6 | Changing as a person | |

First three conceptions imply remembering factual information often through rote learning. Students with these conceptions of learning regard education as the process of accumulating the separate pieces of knowledge provided, ready-made, from a teacher or other source (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). On the other hand, the last three conceptions of learning focus on understanding and integrating knowledge. Students with these conceptions of learning tend to be more active and see learning as something that they do.

Conceptions of learning lie in the core of students' approaches to learning as they influence how students deal with academic tasks. Constructive conceptions of learning end up in a deep approach and thus it affects the quality of students' learning outcomes. As Saljo claims, conceptions are context specific and they are affected from its specific social setting, where students try to interpret what is required of them in a particular situation on the basis of past experiences (cited in Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). This changeable nature of conceptions of learning gives educators a chance to influence students' beliefs of learning and the way they approach learning.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 292 students from School of Foreign Languages Departments at Düzce University and Namık Kemal University in 2017-2018 academic year. In both institutions, students attend voluntary based English programme for a year before they start their undergraduate studies in their departments. In qualitative studies, the representativeness of the sample is not a major concern. The main goal of qualitative sampling is to find members who can provide rich and varied insights to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2012). Researchers who conduct qualitative studies make use of purposeful sampling methods, which requires selecting sites and participants that can best provide help in understanding the phenomenon. For that reason, in the selection of the participants, convenience sampling was used.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In the study, data were collected qualitatively in two steps. In the first step, 292 students were asked to fill in an open-ended questionnaire. Later on, the conceptions the students hold were identified based on their responses to the questionnaire. In the second step, 10 students who displayed variations in their conceptions were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their conceptions. In the interviews, they were asked to clarify and specify how they perceived learning and to articulate some specific incidences of their experience in the learning process.

As the study was qualitative in nature, data were analyzed using grounded theory. The responses of the students to the questionnaire were read repeatedly and coded by both researchers to determine the

learning conceptions of the students until a full agreement was reached between two researchers. To ensure the reliability of the study, the students' conceptions were determined based on related literature and the hierarchy of conceptions of learning proposed by van Rossum and Schenk (1984). Once the learning conceptions of the students were identified, frequencies were calculated manually.

3. Results

In total 292 students took part in the study from both institutions. After the analysis process, five conceptions of learning were identified as seen in Table 2. Results showed that a majority of the students had reproductive conceptions of learning.

Table2

Frequency of the Students' Conceptions of Learning

| Learning Conception | Number of Students | Percentage |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Increase in knowledge: | 53 | 18,15 |
| Memorising | 87 | 29,79 |
| Applying | 113 | 38,69 |
| Understanding | 14 | 4,7 |
| Changing as a person | 25 | 8,5 |

To illustrate, almost 39 % of the students regarded learning as applying, 30% of them as memorizing, and 18, 15% of them as increase in knowledge. On the other hand, only a minority of students had constructive conceptions of learning. 4, 7 % of the students perceived learning as understanding, while 8,5 % of them saw it as changing as a person.

As stated above, about 18% of the students described learning as acquisition of facts and procedures, which shows that they focus on a quantitative increase in knowledge. The following quotations exemplify how these students see learning.

"In my opinion, learning means knowing something that I don't know."

"To me, learning is acquiring facts from several sources as much as possible."

"Learning new thing and expanding your knowledge store."

The excerpts from students' responses show that they do not take active roles in learning but focus on the act of learning itself.

Responses of 87 students indicated that they saw learning as remembering information and memorising. This type of students tend to rely on rote-learning as can be seen from the following excerpts.

"It means putting pieces of knowledge into your memory to use it where necessary."

"Learning means being able to answer questions on a given topic."

"To me, learning is recalling a piece of information for a long time."

As claimed by Entwistle and Peterson (2004), memorization when it is practiced with an intention of mastering unfamiliar concepts in certain contexts such as learning languages can be used by deep approach students as a first step towards developing understanding. What distinguishes surface memorizing from deep memorizing is the habitual and unreflective use of memorization with an intention to reproduce the material presented by the teacher (Kember, 1996).

A good number of students with 39% regarded learning as applying. These students tend to go beyond the first two conceptions. In addition to getting pieces of information and storing it, they have an intention to put it into practice.

"Learning means putting what you have learned into real life practice."

"Equipping yourself with knowledge and using it correctly."

"Using what you have learned when you encounter a problem."

The responses of the 14 students implied that they had more complex conceptions of learning. As can be seen from the quotes below, these students tend to stand away from the knowledge they are acquiring.

“Learning means understanding the logic behind something.”

“In my opinion, learning is having a new perspective and being able to make comments on a given topic.”

“Learning is a process to me. A process of construing the outcomes of the things you do right or wrong as you learn.”

25 students’ responses to the questionnaire showed that they saw learning as a change in a person. The students with this conception tend to make meaning out of what is acquired by them.

“It is something like developing oneself or become more mature.”

“In short, learning means a change in your perspective to life, behaving in a different way.”

“Learning is a change in your point of view, how you see yourself and things around you. “

In-depth interviews supported the results gathered from the questionnaire. However, there were some inconsistencies in some students’ conceptions. Although their responses to the questionnaires implied constructive conceptions to learning, data derived through the interviews showed that they rather had reproductive conceptions. To illustrate, the following quotation implies that the student regarded learning as a change in a person. “Learning is not making a mistake once again. If something is wrong, you don’t do it again. It means learning to me.” However, when he was asked the question “How do you understand that you learn?”, the response showed that he saw learning as remembering and reproduction as can be seen from the following quote: “I can understand it in the exams. If I can answer the questions correctly it means I have learned.”

4. Discussion

Although the students’ conceptions of learning have been a subject matter of research in many areas such as science, engineering and nursing around the world, it has not gained much attention in ELT setting. Several studies have been conducted to investigate students’ conceptions of learning in Turkey yet in different contexts. To illustrate, Dikmeli and Cardak (2010) investigated 86 biology students’ conception of learning and found out that majority of the students had reproductive conceptions of learning such as increase in knowledge and acquisition of facts and procedures. In the same way, Erdogan (2012) conducted a study to scrutinize maths students’ conceptions of learning and reached similar results. In his study, a good number of the students regarded learning as applying, increase in knowledge, and memorizing. Similarly, Sadi (2014) explored 108 students’ conceptions of learning and came up with comparable results indicating that majority of the students had reproductive conceptions of learning.

When the results reported in Turkey were considered, it can be argued that regardless of the context, Turkish students have a tendency to see learning as something that happens to them. They can be taken as the consumers of knowledge from the teacher or other sources.

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the learning conceptions of the students attending voluntary based English preparatory programme at Düzce University and Namık Kemal University. According to the results, a majority of the students had reproductive conceptions of learning such as memorizing, acquiring facts and procedures, and applying. The students who attend preparatory classes are in their first year at university and they hold on to their studying habits they had at high school. When the educational system in Turkey is concerned, students need to take several high-stakes tests which call for a reproductive approach to learning such as acquiring as much information as possible, remembering, and applying where necessary. Secondly, the nature of language learning requires memorizing, especially in the early stages. However, even if this is the case, it should be done with an intention to understand rather than reproduction. Keeping in mind that conceptions of learning are affected by the context they

are formed; teaching activities need to be designed so that they can promote higher order conceptions such as understanding, making meaning for oneself and seeing things in a new way.

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