AN EVALUATION OF GERMAN STUDENT TEACHERS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to evaluate German student teachers within the context of learner autonomy. A Likert-type questionnaire including 23 items is developed to gather data and carried out on the students in German Language Teaching (GLT) Department, in Education Faculty at Dicle University. Three different variances are discussed: learning strategies, learning styles, anxiety and expectations. According to the findings, the students learn better in teacher-based classrooms. They do not have enough knowledge and positive experience on the student-based activities such as group works and research papers. The students do not follow a proper schedule to study, they do not study daily regularly, and they only study hard when they have examinations. It is found out that studying alone is a common habit. Instead of the expectation of being trained well in their branches, most of the students attend lessons to get a faculty diploma. If an education notion which is based on learner autonomy is anticipated, first of all, it should be realized in teacher training programmes.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy, learner-centered instruction, student teacher, learning strategies, German teacher.*

INTRODUCTION

Learner-centered instruction is a concept which has been emphasized and accepted most in the education discussions recently. It has many reasons such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, etc. Today, with this approach, concept of learning gains much more importance than concept of teaching (Carneiro, 2007). Within this frame, lifelong learning, interactive teaching, communicative teaching, learner autonomy, etc. can be among the most valid concepts in the field of education. The common point of those concepts is that they bring students in the foreground. A learner's conditions, his motivation, his aims and expectations are considered to be main factors which influence the success of education (Wicke, 2004; Rampillon, 1994).

In the societies where traditional and authoritarian dispositions are considered important, there are normative values- whose absolute correctness are adopted beforehand- which should be given to an individual. Since, in the traditional methods, the activities that lead students to think or to a research are not presented; the opportunities to use knowledge, to solve problems, in short, to reconstruct knowledge are not given, the students graduate with knowledge that they have memorized. In such a learning environment where the students are passive, a teacher is active as a transmitter, and the content is important. However, the teacher assumes a guidance role since the notion is to train an individual who is a researcher and who has strong skills in solving problems in modern learning environments. The main point of education is to lead the students to think and to make a research. Therefore, the student should be active at

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every stage of education.

Education has acquired an international attribute in this era. So the countries should always renew their education policies and make the necessary reforms. Each country should pay attention to their own peculiar qualitative and quantitative conditions, and the factors that affect their education systems should be taken into account (Türkoğlu, 2005). In our country which pays too much effort in order to be a member of a modern world, the important reforms have been made recently in the field of education. The activities of education in Turkey have been adapted to the ones in European Union (EU) member countries since Turkey has been in the transition period to EU membership. Increasing the duration of compulsory primary education to eight years and even the preparations of planning to increase it to eleven years, revising teacher education, updating teaching programmes and lessons contents can be seen the positive improvements in the field of education. These arrangements which are called restructuring require a new understanding not only from the point of schools, teachers and programmes but also of learners.

The students are now considered to be an active element of the learning process. This understanding is denoted with some concepts such as learner autonomy, self-arrangement, independent learning, self-regulated learning and active learning. (Holec, 1988; Zimmerman, 1990; Smith, 2003)

The theoretical basis of learner autonomy is based on the construcktivism and the cognitivism (Bimmel and Rampillon, 2000; Açıkgöz, 2005). Both of them offer suggestions not for teaching process but for learning process. According to this understanding, learning is an active process through which a student gives a form to it and takes responsibility of it. In this process the student should make his own decisions and take the responsibilities. In order to develop these skills on the student, the strategies of structuring one's own learning process, awareness, and evaluation should be employed. Here it is emphasized that the student should take the responsibility of his own learning and make decisions concerning this process. One of the main purposes of education is to make the students acquire decision-making abilities for him. The student will be ready to learn for lifelong who makes correct decisions on how to realize learning, how much he has learned, what he lacks, how he will concentrate, when and from whom he asks for help, and how he will perceive, etc. Learner autonomy is not only an education vision but also a necessity in terms of learning psychology (Möller and Sappik, 2008). Because information is always renewed in our times, and it seems impossible to carry out a learned profession for lifelong without making any change. Therefore, the acquisition of the skills of information learning should be considered to be a general purpose of the education (Wolff, 1997; Apeltauer, 2010).

European Council Living Languages Department has adopted an education psychology which emphasizes learner autonomy, and which makes a learner contribute to education process while planning, application, and evaluation in foreign language learning. Learner autonomy does not mean that the learner controls everything in the education. However, it means that the teacher carries out a task through which he meets the learner's needs during inside and outside classroom activities. So, the learner will participate in the learning process actively and will be able to decide what, when, and how to learn. At the same time, it also enables to gather realistic data at the stage of evaluation. Independent learning concept plays an important role both in self-language learning and in learning in school within the context of developing strategies and applications (Tönshoff, 1997). This approach also enables to gather realistic data at the stage of evaluation. For this purpose, piloting has been made in many countries and the scientific

findings have been collected. Similarly, piloting have been started in Turkey as well and the preparations of "Language Development File" which promotes learner autonomy have been kept on (Demirel, 2005).

It is possible to encounter various problems in each country at the stage of adopting learner autonomy as an education psychology and arranging education system according to this understanding. Some educationalists make connections between the political structure of the countries and their education, and also advocate that each education notions may not achieve the same success in each country. For example, according to Bimmel and Rampillon (2000), the notion of learner autonomy can only be applied in the democratic societies. It is seen impossible for the learners to participate in the education process actively in non-democratic countries. Each country has its own peculiar education applications resulted from its own historical, cultural, geographical conditions, etc. It is not easy to change these applications. It is almost inevitable to experience the great difficulties during the times of education reforms. If some amendments are anticipated in a country's education system, it is necessary to know that country's peculiar education applications and its traditions of learning and teaching. Only in that way the possible issues can be overcome. We have already mentioned that the studies which promote learner autonomy in the foreign language learning in Turkey have been started. Within this context, it is necessary to determine the learning habits, study styles and expectations of Turkish students. The results which will be gathered will shed light on the future studies.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to evaluate Turkish student teachers within the context of learner autonomy in parallel with the opinions given above. It is aimed to determine the student teachers' learning habits, study styles, and expectations in order to gather objective data about the educational applications in terms of the education notion in Turkey and learners. Within this context, it is aimed to find out answers to the following research questions: What are the learning habits of our students? Which learning strategies and styles do they prefer during the classroom studies and the individual studies? What kind of anxiety do they have in the educational environments? What kind of relation is there between teaching notion in the schools and the students' evaluations according to the findings which will be gathered, and is it necessary to make an amendment in teaching notion? How should the future teachers be educated in order to apply an education notion based on the learner autonomy?

METHOD

The method of this study is a descriptive survey model. It is predicted that the appropriate data gathering mean is applying a questionnaire in order to collect the students' opinions clearer, more concrete and statistically. In addition, by interviewing with the students their thought about the subject matter are collected in detail, and during the evaluating those data are benefited from. The population of the study includes 170 students attending GLT department in Ziya Gökalp Education Faculty at Dicle University in 2010-2011 academic year. The sample of the study comprises 150 students selected randomly. The sample constitutes the %88 of the population. A data gathering mean including 23 items is developed for this study. Before preparing the propositions on the data gathering mean, 10 students attending GLT department were asked to write their own opinions about their learning methods, studying styles, anxieties and expectations.. In order to determine the opinions of the students, at the end of the evaluation, a Likert-type scale was developed. Three various variables are taken into account. The propositions prepared for each variable are placed randomly in the questionnaire. The choices are presented in a fivefold rating (I totally agree, I usually agree, I agree, I agree a little, I never agree). In order to provide the reliability and the validity of the questionnaire

which is prepared in Turkish, the questionnaire, first of all, is polite to a group and some propositions are changed and clearer and more understandable. The final form of the scale is applied to the sample group in the classroom. The data are analyzed with SPSS 12.0 programme and are evaluated with the frequency and the percentage.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are given statically in tables and the evaluations are made according to the data in those tables.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions and Opinions on Learning Styles

	I totally agree		I usually agree		I agree		I agree a little		I never agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I learn lesson subjects better in classroom	51	34,0	49	32,7	23	15,3	21	14,0	6	4,0
I learn a lesson better when a teacher teaches it	59	39,3	55	36,7	26	17,3	10	6,7	0	0,00
I learn better in a group work	23	15,3	33	22,0	43	28,7	39	26,0	12	8,0
I learn better when I study on my own	40	26,7	33	22,0	37	24,7	30	20,0	10	6,7
I learn better when only a foreign tongue is used	16	10,7	24	16,0	39	26,0	39	26,0	32	21,3
I learn better when explanations are made in Turkish	73	48,7	28	18,7	26	17,3	16	10,7	7	4,7
I learn better if I prepare a research paper concerning lesson subject	35	23,3	39	26,0	38	25,3	24	16,0	14	9,3
I learn better if a lesson is associated with actual topics	92	61,3	34	22,7	15	10,0	6	4,0	3	2,0

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that traditional classroom environment is predominant in learning styles. While the percentage of the ones who think that they learn subjects better in classroom environment is 67%, the opponents' percentage is 18%. As a result of an understanding of a teacher-based teaching, the percentage of the ones who think that they learn better when a teacher   is 76%, however, the percentage of the ones who do not agree with it is 6.7%. As known, in a teacher-based instruction concept students become passive, they do not join the preparations of lessons and the teaching process, they only memorize given subjects and available information and then they reproduce the same in the examinations. However, the evaluation related to group works which require more participation of students is considered to be negative. Only 37.3% of the students say that they learn better in group works. Here, another important issue is what kind of experience the

students have concerning group works. Students may naturally prefer a model in which a teacher is active if teachers do not guide students in group work activities and if students who do not have any experience cannot carry out hard tasks. It can be said that in our schools group works are not carried out as they should be. It does not become a successful and purposeful activity to let students have all responsibility after assigning subjects to them. These activities are not break times for teachers but they are the activities in which students can benefit from various experiences to show their creativeness. For this reason, in order to reproduce standard lesson plans, preparing activities which are unique to group work keep teachers busy as well. Group works necessitate to make more preparations for teachers. Clarity and comfort of traditional teacher attitude, teachers' not having enough knowledge and experience on group work, not being able to provide appropriate physical conditions in schools make it difficult to surrender traditional classroom activities.

The 39% of the students claim that "they learn better when they study on their own." While these students prefer being taught by teachers, they particularly study for the examinations alone. Because this study style which means memorizing knowledge does not include activities such as evaluation, interpretations, discussion, etc. Besides, these data also show that the students do not have any study habits except for the lessons. The question of whether a foreign language lesson should be carried out only in the target language or benefited from the other previously learned languages has always been a discussion topic for many teaching methods. Today it is emphasized that students should make benefit from their whole background knowledge while acquiring new knowledge. Within this context, the opinion of benefiting from the mother tongue in foreign language lessons is supported according to the data. The 68% of the students state that " I learn better if the explanations are made in Turkish" whereas approximately the other 27% advocate that they learn better when only a foreign language is spoken in a lesson. Typically, this situation may change according to the content of a lesson. For example, various applications can be used while teaching German Grammar, German Speaking or German Literature lessons. However, if comparative studies are included, then using two languages in a lesson makes it more meaningful and useful. Otherwise, despite the fact that using only a mother tongue in a foreign language lesson enable learners to understand the explanations better, it may also hinder to develop some language skills such as listening-comprehension, pronunciation, and speaking.

Activities such as preparing research papers are not common in schools where the traditional teaching is dominant. It cannot be said that this activity is carried out as important as it should be in Turkey. However, half of the students claim that they learn better when they prepare research papers. The percentage of the hesitant is relatively high. It can be said that since this application is not used so common, it is not easy to decide. Research studies provide students with some skills such as studying independently, make up their own minds, and organizing their own studies.

Associating a lesson with actual topics not only promotes students' motivations but also facilitates learning. 84% of the students share this idea as well. Particularly, in foreign language lessons the importance of the actual topics increases. Because learning a foreign language means learning different worlds, and conveying feelings and opinions to others. Since the actual topics associate a lesson with world, it facilitates learning much more.

According to the data in Table 1, it can be said that our students are familiar with a teacher-based classroom environment and their habits also become distinctive in that way. However, they are also aware of some student-based activities such as group works and research papers. In other words, it is anticipated that there will be no difficulty in case of employing a

student-based teaching, on the contrary, an increase in success can be achieved.

Table 2. Learning Strategies Employed By The Students

	I totally agree		I usually agree		I agree		I agree a little		I never agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I cannot concentrate on a topic when studying alone	14	9,3	7	4,7	21	14,0	33	22	75	50,0
I reproduce the learned subjects periodically	29	15,3	32	21,3	36	24	45	30	8	5,3
I ask others for a subject that I do not understand	75	50	35	23,3	26	17,3	7	4,7	7	4,7
I study regularly............. hours a day. (Write a number)	39	26	27	18	15	10	6	4,0	1	0,7
I usually prefer to study examination times	37	24,7	37	24,7	28	18,7	25	16,7	23	15,3
It cannot be said that I have a correct daily study schedule	36	24	28	18,7	37	24,7	27	18	22	14,7
I am not in need of studying more since I understand lessons well	5	3,3	15	10	18	12	33	22	79	52,7
I make research in a library and on the internet concerning lesson subjects	28	18,7	33	22	34	22,7	32	21,3	23	15,3
I think it is good enough to use only lesson book for studying	6	4	9	6	24	16	30	20	81	54

In Table 2 it is aimed to determine the students' studying styles and learning strategies. 72% of the students think that studying alone motivates them more. The percentage of the ones who say that they cannot motivate while studying alone is only 14%. Memorizing only standard knowledge and carrying out no group work activities in classrooms prevent the students from cooperative learning. The students who study alone think that they can ask the others only for the parts that they do not understand. That is why, approximately 75% of the students employ the strategy of asking others.

Reproducing the learned subjects periodically is realized by only 36.6% of the students. Because the percentage of the ones who state that they have a daily study schedule is 32.7%. The distribution of daily study hours can given in the following order: 1 hour (27%), 2 hours

(18%), 3 hours and more (14.6%), and the rest 40% never studies. The students usually prefer studying when they have examinations instead of making a study schedule and studying daily regularly. While 49.4% state that they only study during the examination period, the percentage of the ones who have no idea about it is 18.7%. In other words, the percentage of the ones who do not limit themselves to examination times is approximately 30. It is also possible to determine it with our experience in educational practices. It is observed that students try to study hard for long hours in the terms of examinations, however, those efforts usually turn out be useless and ineffective studies since too many subjects are to be studied. It can be said that among the main reasons of this common habit are not being able to make students active in teaching process and to give responsibilities to them. Besides, examinations are usually made to measure the standard knowledge. Almost all of the examinations that students have to take until they are placed in a university are tests and they mostly measure the memorized knowledge. Since creative measure means are not employed, such as interpretation, evaluation, problem solving, etc., it is considered enough to study only examination times for the purpose of memorizing the given knowledge. The students do not claim that their reason for not studying regularly is not that they understand lessons well. 74.7% of the participants do not share this idea. Of course, in a concept of education through which subjects and knowledge are determined beforehand, a lesson book will have an absolute dominance. Many students can get high grades just by memorizing a lesson book in the examinations. However, the percentage of the students who think that it is not enough to study only with a lesson book is 74%. Also, 40.7% of these students make research concerning lesson subjects on the internet and in the libraries. It is seen that the students do not limit themselves despite the fact that the lesson book is given too much in this education concept. The reason of it can be various such as wanting to get rid of monotony of the lesson book and considering the other knowledge instruments more entertaining and attractive. Whatever the reason is, the evaluation of the future teachers on this topic is hopeful for a better education.

According to the data gathered from the sample, our students do not follow a regular study schedule. They do not study daily regularly, only the examination times they try to study hard. It is found out that habit of studying alone is common. It may be said that they do not have any definite learning strategies according to these findings. Almost none of the cognitive and social strategies are employed. It is necessary to make the students conscious of this subject.

Table 3. Students' Affective Opinions Such As Motivation and Anxiety

	I totally agree		I usually agree		I agree		I agree a little		I never agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I study subjects more carefully which will be useful for daily life	73	48,7	41	27,3	22	14,7	12	8,0	2	1,3
I would study harder if I was appointed in my field	95	63,3	18	12	14	9,3	9	6,0	14	9,3
I do not have any anxiety like 'What will I become when I graduate'	24	16,0	9	6,0	13	8,7	21	14	83	55,3
Any successful student can find a job in a field related to a foreign language after graduation	60	40	34	22,7	30	20	21	14	5	3,3
Knowing that, after graduation, I won't be able to find a job in my field hinders my success	66	44	26	17,3	20	13,3	22	14,7	16	10,7
I chose this department since I especially wanted to be a German language teacher	22	14,7	11	7,3	29	19,3	24	16,0	64	42,7

Affective features like motivation and anxiety are the main factors that affect learning environment. These factors play important roles in students' success level in a definite subject or in a field. A strong relation can be made between students' motivation in a subject and their expectations from it. A subject that cannot meet the expectations causes problems in motivation. This opinion is shared by 76% of the students.

The common point of the propositions in Table 3 is related to the anxiety which will appear after graduation. As known, the graduates of German language department are appointed to be teachers in their field. This reality also affects interest in lessons in the department negatively. According to the data, 75.3% of the participants advocated that they would study harder if they were appointed to be teachers in their field. In addition, 75% of them have anxiety on what they will do after graduation. In the past almost all of the graduates used to find a job in the governmental institutions. Having a diploma was enough to get a job. However, just having a diploma has not been enough to find a job in the recent years because of an increase in the number of the universities, privatizing due to globalization, and pursuing new economic policies. The university graduates are subjected to various examinations to be chosen. While these developments occur very fast, it is seen that habits and expectations in the society change more slowly. In other words, it is right to say that a transition period has been being experienced in order to establish the new concept. Our students have to prepare themselves for this new situation.

The proposition of 'knowing that, after graduation, I won't be able to find a job in my field hinders my success is agreed by 61.3% of the participants. A decrease is seen here when compared to others. The students are aware that there are a lot of factors that influence their

success and they also know that giving all responsibility to anxiety of finding a job after graduation is an easy way. Therefore, this can be evaluated as an important factor, however, it may also be considered to be an escape from responsibility by focusing on this factor. Because only 22% of the students selected this department especially in order to be a German language teacher. That is to say, the majority of the students attend a university in order not to have a good profession but to have a university diploma. On the other hand, giving a 40-credit-English lesson in the department, and appointing the old graduates as English language teachers affect German lessons negatively. It is emphasized that this situation should be evaluated since it is in contradiction with the departments' aims.

When the data are examined in Table 3, it is seen that students' affective features like motivation and anxiety are very complex. It is clear that they do not adopt the programme in which they are educated and that they do not have any expectations from this field. It is almost impossible to carry out the teaching programme with such a negative motivation and anxiety level. Therefore, it can be seen a must to take some precautions which will influence their inner and outer motivation about their professional field.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that student teachers are used to traditional classroom environment and, therefore, their learning habits take shape according to it. They do not have enough knowledge and experience on group works and preparing research papers. If an education concept which is based on learner autonomy is anticipated, first of all, student teachers should be educated according to this concept.

The students do not stick to a regular study schedule, do not study daily regularly, and only during the examination times they try to study hard. It is determined that studying alone is very common. It can be said that the students do not have definite learning strategies according to the findings. Almost none of the cognitive and social strategies are employed. The awareness of the students should be increased on that subject.

Lesson subjects are learned better if they are taught by teachers in the classroom. The students prefer the techniques which do not require much effort and which they are familiar with. As a result of it, a group of students appears who do not want to take any responsibility in learning and who do not participate in forming the lessons. Any teaching environment, which does not cause the students to prepare themselves and also in which the students reach the subjects easily without any effort, can be evaluated as laziness. But the worse is to carry this laziness to professional life and even to the all sides of life.

Most of the students attend a university only to get a university diploma instead of the expectation of being educated well in their field. A lot of problems result from this reality during the teaching process and after graduation. It is inevitable to change the concept which is common in the society on this matter.

It is observed that the foreign language learners develop their perceptive and reproductive skills, however, they do not develop productive skills. As a result, a group of students are encountered who memorize the subjects and reproduce them exactly and, therefore, become successful in written examinations, however, they do not express their feelings and opinions in the target language with their own sentences. It is seen that the students who are not only successful on the exams but also have good grades prevent from communicating with the others, and that they cannot use what they have learned. It is not denied that the main reason

of it is the traditional way of teaching. Pursuing a concept which is based on learner autonomy in foreign language teaching may solve the problems mentioned above.

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