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Fostering learner autonomy

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Abstract

This study aims to find out whether training learners on language learning strategies fosters their learner autonomy or not. It was carried out at Kocaeli University in 2013- 2014 education year with Prep School students. It is an experimental study in which randomly chosen four experimental and four control groups take part. At the beginning of the fall term, language learning strategies and learner autonomy surveys were conducted as pre- tests to identify students' use of language learning strategies and their level of learner autonomy. Then, the experimental groups were trained on language learning strategies for the two weeks and observed until the end of the first term on their use of the language learning strategies. The control groups did not receive the training. At the end of the first term, language learning strategies and learner autonomy surveys were conducted as post- tests. The literature on language learning strategies in Turkey suggests that employing language learning strategies provides students with the necessary help a teacher can give by making them teachers of their own through making them aware of the language learning process itself and their strengths and weaknesses. As this study concludes the more strategies the students employ or the more frequently more autonomous they might become by starting to shoulder the responsibility of their own learning process.

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1. Introduction

Language is both a subject of study and a means of receiving a meaningful world from others and is at the same time “a means of re-interpreting the world to his own ends for the learner” (Barnes, 1976, p. 6). Since knowledge of language cannot be defined or even understood without taking into account of the goals and purposes of a person

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who is attempting to gain this knowledge successful language teaching must therefore start from the learner rather than the language. Moreover, the language learners must be made aware of the fact that they are the most important element in the learning process. In this way, they learn how to learn for the purposes they design for themselves.

As Dickinson (1987, p. 9) points out, “the key to understanding this is the concept of responsibility for learning. The learner has to learn the process of learning and to be able to manage the complex learning network of learning goals, materials, sequencing of the materials, deciding how materials shall be used, deciding on tasks to be done, keeping records and making evaluations in order to reach this level of being able to use language to “create meanings of a social kind” and to “participate in verbal contest and verbal display” (Halliday, 1978, p. 3). This organization of learning material and mapping pathways through it has been traditionally the responsibility of the teacher. Since there are many options today for language learners outside the classroom context, providing students with essential research strategies has become much more important than making them learn limited amount of knowledge merely in the classroom from the language teacher. In such a learning environment, the role of the teacher is changing from the status of a “genius” who knows all to a “guide” who shows where and how to access knowledge and how to adapt or adopt it. We cannot expect learners to make the leap from total domination in the school classroom to full autonomy in the university. According to Holec (1985) learner training should prepare students to direct their own learning so that they may gradually move from a state of dependence on a teacher to the greatest degree of independence or autonomy. Learning training is seen as taking learners “further along the road to full autonomy” (Voller, Martyn & Pickard, 1999). Thus, self-directed learning is the realization of a learner’s potential for autonomy. Therefore, emphasis should be focused on providing them with skills and raising an awareness for language learning strategies to teach how to learn languages.

2. Fostering learner autonomy

The focus of much research in learner autonomy is on defining how learners can take charge of their own learning and how teachers can help students to become more autonomous. Learner autonomy was first defined by Holec (1979). He describes an autonomous learner in various aspects. An autonomous learner is capable of

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc)
- and evaluating what has been acquired (p. 3).

Autonomous learners have the capacity to determine realistic and reachable goals, select appropriate methods and techniques to be used, monitor their own learning process, and evaluate the progress of their own learning (Little, 1991). According to Dam (1990), an autonomous learner is an active participant in the social processes of learning and an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows. Autonomous people are intrinsically motivated, perceive themselves to be in control of their decision-making, take responsibility for the outcomes of their actions and have confidence in themselves (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Bandura, 1989; Doyal & Gough, 1991).

Fostering learner autonomy may be defined in simple terms as helping learners to become more independent by training them to use language learning strategies effectively in their language learning process, thus taking the responsibility to control, evaluate and monitor their language learning process. Dickinson (1992, p. 330) identifies six ways “in which the teacher can promote greater learner independence”:

1. Legitimizing independence in learning by showing that we, as teachers, approve, and by encouraging the students to be more independent;
2. Convincing learners that they are capable of greater independence in learning -give them successful experiences of independent learning;
3. Giving learners opportunities to exercise their independence;
4. Helping learners to develop learning strategies so that they can exercise their independence;
5. Helping learners to become more aware of language as a system so that they can understand many of the learning techniques available and learn sufficient grammar to understand simple reference books;

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