



Learner Perceptions of Role in Learning English

Dr. Halil Küçükler¹, Prof. Dr. Birsen Tütüniş²

¹Balıkesir University, Department of Foreign Languages, Turkey

²Istanbul Kültür University, Department of Foreign languages, Turkey,

Abstract: *The present study investigated learners' perceptions of their role in learning English. The study was conducted at Balıkesir University in the 2014-2015 academic year. The aim of the study was to find out the extent to which graduate (Master of Arts) students believe in autonomous learning. The Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) was used to collect data from the participants. The result of the study showed that only 25.6% of the graduate students believed in autonomous learning. This suggests that not many students believe that much of their learning should occur without the teacher.*

Keywords: learners' perception, autonomous learning, language learning

INTRODUCTION

The concept learner autonomy has been embraced for many decades now. It basically means the ability to take control of one's learning. Drawing from Holec (1983), Benson and Voller (1997) defined learner autonomy as the "the ability to take charge of one's learning by determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition by properly speaking; and evaluating what has been acquired" (p. 1). This simply means that teachers can teach students English right from primary and secondary school and university and graduate level but it is the learners' own obligation, not the teachers', to develop initiative of autonomous learning in order to enhance their foreign language proficiency development.

Learners always need to engage in critical reflection of their learning, make important learning decisions to determine learning initiatives and activities, and undertake independent learning action (Sakai, Takagi, & Chu, 2010). Thus, the learner takes responsibility of own learning by planning, organizing, and monitoring own learning process, of course with the help of the teacher (Joshi, 2011). The learner is aware of own learning styles and strategies, takes an active role in learning tasks at hand, is willing to take risks such as communicating in the target language at all costs, engages in self-criticism so as to reject assumptions as well as rules that do not apply.

Autonomous learning concept is derived from the learner-centred model of learning, which shifts the focus of teaching/learning from the teacher to the learner. The learner-centred learning model emphasizes that a learner should have the right to determine the direction of own learning. It advocates for giving learners some degree of

autonomy to exercise control over their own learning while also ensuring that there is supportive engagement with the teachers (Smith, 2008).

Both learner-centred learning model and autonomous learning concept are founded on the constructivist theory of learning. The theory of learning posits that knowledge cannot be acquired through classroom teaching alone but must also be constructed or built by the learner. In language learning context, this means that language learning does not just involve internalising sets of target language rules, structures, as well as forms, but also integrating own experience as well as world knowledge in the learning of the target language or completing task at hand. Thus, learning within the context of constructivism involves giving the learner some degree of power to take charge of own learning as well as encouraging learners to employ active learning strategies to construct knowledge and to reflect on them and talk about them (Candy, 1991; Thanasoulas, 2000). Similarly, autonomous learning concept assumes greater learner independence in the learning of the target language. According to the constructivist view of learning, the learner plays a key role in the learning process, which involves constructing and reorganising knowledge (Reinders, 2010).

Drawing from the constructivist learning theory and autonomous learning concept, it can be argued that successful language learning requires being proactive in learning the target language as well as being self-motivated to learn the language. According to Gardner (2007), a learner's perception about autonomous is likely to influence his/her motivation to continue to practice autonomous language learning.

The purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which graduate (Master of Arts) students believe in autonomous English language learning. Limited proficiency in English has been noted to affect the ability of graduate students in Turkish universities to publish academic papers. Autonomous learning could help them improve their English language proficiency. Therefore, study attempts to answer the following research question:

To what extent do graduate students believe in autonomous learning of foreign languages?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopted descriptive research design. This research design basically refers a research designed to describe the target population. It involves collection of quantitative information that can tabulated along a continuum in numerical form. This means collecting data that describes the issue under investigation and then organizes, tabulates, and describes the issue. The data collected was mainly descriptive data. Survey research approach was employed to collect data from the sample population.

Participants

The study was carried out during 2014-2015 academic year for graduate students, all of whom were enrolled for Master of Art programmes in Social, Science and Health Institutes at Balikesir University.

Research instrument

The research instrument for this study was adapted from PLSPQ was developed by Reid (1987). The instrument has been found to have good internal reliability. The survey items have acceptable Cronbach's alpha values though some items have been found show reliabilities level below Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) criterion of acceptable alpha, which is at $\alpha = .70$. This has however been attributed to the small number of items in the PLSPQ instrument and the function that each item serves.

Data collection

Primary data was collected from participants using PLSPQ research instrument. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants and collected from them after they had filled them. The responses were recorded in Ms Excel.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated in order to draw inferences. The descriptive statistics included frequencies and proportions or percentages. These were presented in graphical formats to show summaries of the data collected for particular survey items.

RESULTS

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Figure 1: A lot of learning can be done without a teacher

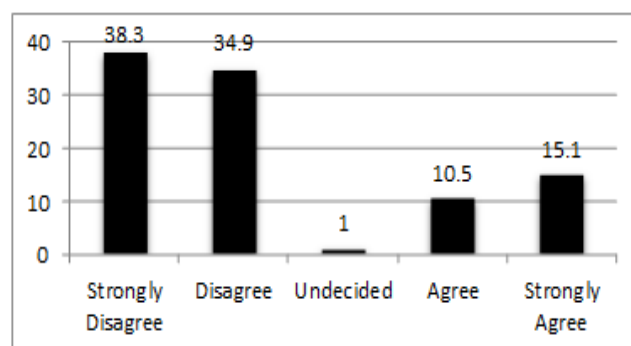


Figure 1 shows that 38.3% of the participants strongly disagree and 34.9% disagree that a lot of learning can be done without a teacher. In total, 73.2% of participants are dependent on the teacher. They do not believe that a lot of learning can be done without a teacher. The figure shows that 25.6% of the participants agree that a lot of learning can be done without a teacher. Also, 1% of them demonstrate uncertainty of how they can learn without a teacher. Hence, this presents that teachers have a role to play in enhancing the learning of language.

TEACHERS HAVE TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ENGLISH

Figure 2: Belief that teachers have to be responsible for making students understand English

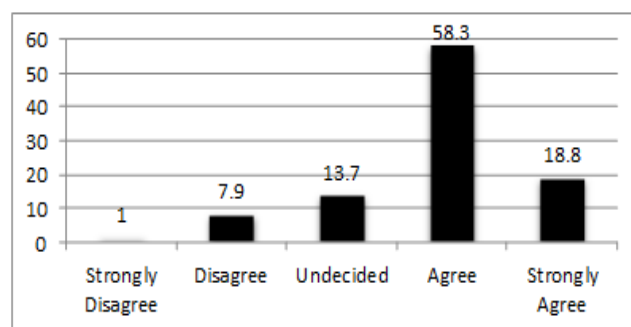


Figure 2 shows that 58.3% of the participants agree that teachers have to be responsible for making their students understand English. Majority of the graduate students,

77.1%, put responsibility of their English language learning on teachers. The figure demonstrates that teachers have a role in making students comprehend English. However, 8.9% of them disagree that it is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that students acquire proficiency in English. 13.7% of the participants were however undecided.

TEACHERS SHOULD POINT OUT THE STUDENTS' ERRORS

Figure 3: Belief that teachers should point out the students' errors.

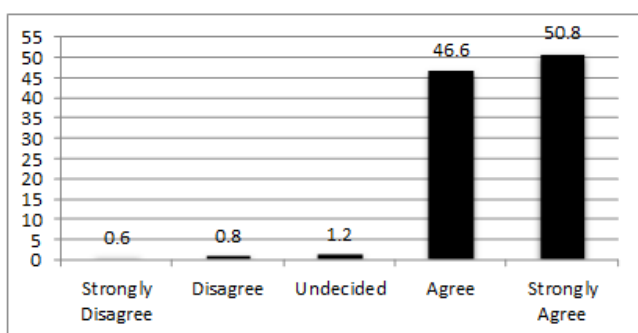


Figure 3 shows that over half (50.8%) of the participants strongly disagree and 46.6% agree that teachers should point out students' errors. This also shows that more participants are dependent on their teachers to a great extent. Based on the analysis of the figure, it is evident that 97.4% of the participants are in agreement that teachers should point out the students' errors. On the contrary, 0.6% of them do not agree that it is the role of a teacher to highlight mistakes. The implication here is that teachers have a significant role in enhancing students' performance.

TEACHERS SHOULD TEACH THE 'WHAT' AND THE 'HOW' OF ENGLISH

Figure 4: Belief that teachers should teach the 'what' and the 'how' of English

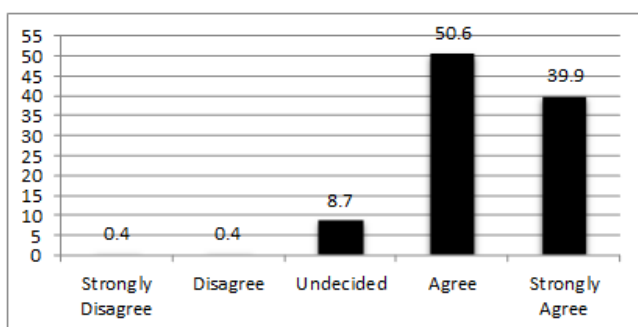


Figure 4 shows that 50.6% of the participants agree and 39.9% strongly agree that teachers have to teach not only

“what” but also “how” of English. This is another result of dependence on teachers. It is observed that teachers 90.5% of the participants agree that teachers ought to teach the ‘what’ and ‘how’ aspects of English. Understandably, 0.8% of them are not in agreement that teachers employ these techniques to studying language. However, in relation to the role of teachers, it is evident that their major role is to point mistakes.

1.5 TEACHERS HAVE TO PROVIDE EXAM ORIENTED NOTES AND MATERIALS

Figure 5: Belief that teachers have to provide exam oriented notes and materials.

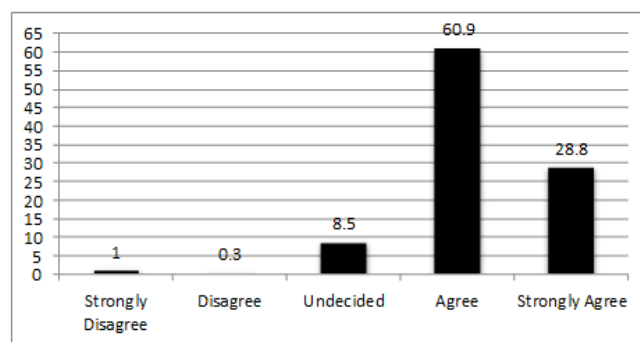


Figure 5 shows that 60.9% of the participants agree and 28.8% strongly agree that teachers have to provide exam oriented materials. A keen assessment of the figure indicates that 89.7% of the participants agree that teachers provide notes that are exam oriented. However, 1.3% of them do not prefer this approach to learning at all. 8.5% of the participants depict uncertainty on the use of this approach to learning.

STUDENTS' FAILURE IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE TEACHERS' CLASSROOM EMPLOYMENT

Figure 6: Belief that students' failure is directly related to the teachers' classroom employment

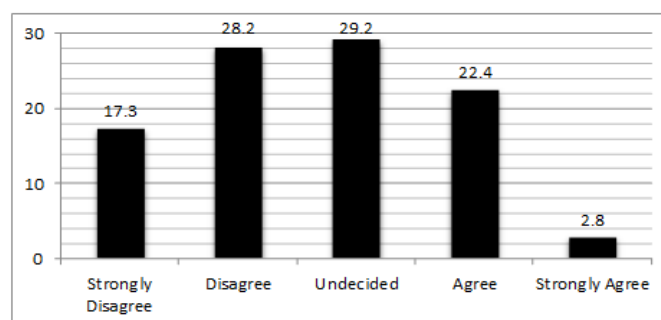




Figure 6 shows that 29.2% of the participants are undecided about whether or not the failure of the students is related to the teacher. However, 28.2% of them disagree with this opinion. It is evident that students have a clear vision for learning English but they prefer to learn English with great support from the teacher. The figure shows that 25% of the participants are of the opinion that students' failure is related to the teacher's ability to deliver in class. Additionally, 17.3% of them are in disagreement that teachers' classroom activities affect the failure of students. This suggests that there is no relationship between student's failure in class and teacher's activities in class.

SUMMARY

It is clearly seen that students have a clear vision to learn English but they prefer to learn English as being dependent on a teacher. 73.2% of participants do not believe a lot of learning can be done without a teacher. However, 25.6% believe that learning can be done without a teacher.

DISCUSSION

Autonomous learning has spurred independence and created awareness among students (Lee, 2011). The level of autonomy among the students at this university is about 34%. About a quarter of the graduate students can be said to believe in autonomous English language learning. However, they were just 45.3% autonomous in finding their own ways of practising English. In addition, it was noted that the students use a lot of self-study material in order to enhance English.

Students ought to evaluate themselves in order to learn better. Autonomous learning requires the learner to engage in self-reflection to be able to continuously reorganise their learning (Reinders, 2010). In this case, the extent to which the learner can evaluate them is likely to be represented by 64.5%. Apart from evaluating themselves students are obliged to mostly study what has been mentioned under the course because studying English course is actually for exam purpose (Duroc, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that English language learners are slowly accepting autonomous learning concept and are adopting aspects of the concept. However, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution due to the limitations associated with the sample population and the research instrument. The sample population comprised

graduate students from a particular faculty within a university. Besides a convenience sample was used. As such, the results are not generalizable. The amount of information collected was limited by the research instrument which has just 6 survey items. This limited the types of statistical analyses that could have been applied to make statistical inferences. Therefore, future studies on this issue should consider using a large sample from many institutions. Such studies must also consider using a more comprehensive research instrument.

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