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## THE EFFECT OF THE EXPLICIT STRATEGY TRAINING ON LEARNER AUTONOMY

*Case study*

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## Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the effect of the explicit strategy training on the students' autonomy in foreign language learning and to seek for their attitudes towards such training. The research lasted for fourteen weeks at the 2018-2019 academic year. Data were collected through the Course Evaluation Questionnaire, the Student Autonomous Learning Capacity Questionnaire, the learner diary, the researcher's diary and semi-structured interviews. The SALCQ was administered twice first at the beginning and secondly at the end of the training so as to identify any increases in the learners' capacity of autonomy. The results revealed that the strategy training helped learners enhance their capacity of autonomy in some factors. The study disclosed that the students held positive attitudes towards the training as it provided opportunities for the students to employ LLSs more effectively, deal with learning related problems, enhance self-directed out of class activities, to develop language learning skills and to monitor their learning process in an effective way by raising their awareness of strategy use and self-confidence. Furthermore, the strategy training provided opportunities for the students to reflect on their learning methods, classroom activities along with their classroom behaviour and how learning could be made easier.

*Keywords:* language learning strategies, learner autonomy, explicit strategy training, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Foreign language learning has been mainly dealt with the learners' needs and put them in the centre of learning in recent years contrary to the traditional teacher-centred learning, which gives priority to the effectiveness of the teacher on the improvement of the learner in the classroom. Collins (2009) asserts that the teacher's role is related with providing help for the learner to be a facilitator in learning environment while the learner needs to take more responsibility for their own learning, which constitutes the main principle of learner autonomy. The learner has been in the centre of learning in the domain of foreign language education as a result of this autonomous learning has been gaining more importance. Language learners need to be willing to take their own responsibility for the learning process and autonomy starts at this stage if they want to be successful and proficient in learning. Learner autonomy does not occur naturally, on the contrary, it is an interactive process between human beings. Investigating the influence of learner autonomy on the learners' improvement in English language learning and seeking for the different ways to cultivate this effect is essential in this study.

Researchers give various definitions of learner autonomy such as Holec (1980) defines autonomy as an ability to take responsibility of learners' own learning while Cotterall (1995)

views autonomy as a capacity to “to set goals, create and utilize practice opportunities, and evaluate progress” (cited in Smith & Craig, 2013, p. 253). According to Benson and Voller (1997), “autonomy is an innate ability but prevented from institutional education” (cited in Nunan, 2003, p. 193). Nevertheless, as Esch (1996) emphasizes that learner autonomy does not mean learning without any guidance from outside (cited in Joshi, 2011). Additionally, Collins (2009) states the teacher’s role is also important in learning, yet; the teacher should take the role of the facilitator when the learner is the person who takes charge of more responsibility. As can be seen from the definitions aforementioned, learners have an ability from their childhood to learn autonomously. In other words, as Little (2007) stresses, it is natural for people (cited in Ounis, 2016) and it is possible to enhance it. According to some researchers, learners who are assumed to be autonomous have common characteristics (Breen & Mann, 1997; Hughes, 2003; Dickinson, 1993). For Dickinson (1992), autonomous learners can set goals, select and use strategies consciously (cited in Çakıcı, 2014, p. 35). Hughes (2003) thinks that they have the capacity to control, reflect on and make plans about learning. Moreover, Breen and Mann (1997) explain that they have the capacity to learn independently and enthusiastically.

In order to enhance the students’ capacity of autonomous learning, the teacher’s role (Camilleri, 1997 as cited in Şanal, 2016; Cotteral, 1995; Voller, 1997 cited in Han, 2014; Xu & Xu, 2004; Nguyen, 2012) and the learner’s role (Joshi, 2011) should be taken into consideration along with reflection on learning (Reinders, 2010; Qing, 2013) and using language learning strategies effectively (Oxford, 2003; Chamot & O’Malley, 1990; Cohen, 2002; Lai, 2009; Rubin, 1987). Çakıcı (2015) acknowledges that cooperative learning, evaluation tests, diaries, self reports and learning strategies are among the ways cultivating learner autonomy. As one of the ways, language learning strategies play an important role in fostering learner autonomy. Rubin (1987) and Oxford (1990) classify them into two as direct and indirect strategies while Chamot and O’Malley (1990) categorize them into social/affective, metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Furthermore, for Stern (1992) cognitive, management and planning, cognitive, interpersonal, communicative-experiential and affective strategies are among language learning strategies (cited in Hismanoğlu, 2002).

Learner training is the name given to the ways employed to foster the autonomy of the learner. It is assumed that there is a close relationship between learner training, in other words, strategy training and learner autonomy (Harris, 1993; Cohen, 1998; Wenden, 2002 cited in Benson, 2001). Wang (2016) and Oxford (2002) assert that explicit strategy training needs to be consisted of teaching strategies in classroom since “learning cannot be achieved if learners do not use learning strategies so that autonomous learning may result in all talk, no action” (Wenden, 1991, p. 29). Accordingly, training in strategy use helps learners reflect on the reasons, which affect learning and investigate the useful language learning strategies (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989).

Since learner autonomy is closely correlated to the students’ needs and their active involvement in learning, the Strategy Based Instruction, SBI, (Cohen, 2003) and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (Chamot and O’Malley, 1996) were followed in the study. SBI promotes learner-centred teaching in which the learners are encouraged to be aware of their weak and strong sides while learning a language and to overcome learning difficulties. Therefore, they will have the capacity to monitor, improve and finally evaluate their learning (Cohen, 2003). Similarly, CALLA (Chamot & O’Malley, 1996) also promotes to increase the capacity of the learners’ autonomy through the implementation of strategy training (cited in Wang, 2016). In this approach, there are six stages consisting of preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, expansion and assessment to be followed during the training program (Wang, 2016). Preparation stage is concerned

with raising the learners' awareness of strategy use while presentation stage contains to explain and model the target strategy. Furthermore, practice stage focuses on the learners' prior knowledge and its practice, evaluation stage provides opportunities for the learners to monitor and make an evaluation of their performance in a group or in pairs, expansion stage make students use the strategies in new contexts (Wang, 2016) and finally, assessment stage supports learners to utilize self assessment, self report and reflection (Chamot & Robbins, 2006).

Based on the information given above, this study intended to examine how to increase students' capacity of autonomy through the explicit strategy training and to encourage the learners towards independent learning with the use of the training. For this purpose, the following questions were asked:

1. Does involvement in explicit strategy training result in an increase in the students' autonomy?
2. What are learners' attitudes towards the explicit strategy training?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in the academic year of 2018/2019 at a preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. The participants of the study were 22 English preparatory class students and 14 of them were female and 8 of them were male. The participants were placed into the classes according to the result of the placement test which was held at the beginning of the first semester of the academic year. They were categorized according to their level of CEFR. The students had 24 hours of courses in a week consisting of listening and speaking skills (4 hour), reading and writing skills (4 hour) and main course (16 hour). The present study was conducted in 4-hour reading and writing skills class.

### 2.2. Instruments

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explain and model the target strategy. Furthermore, practice stage focuses on the learners' prior knowledge and its practice, evaluation stage provides opportunities for the learners to monitor and make an evaluation of their performance in a group or in pairs, expansion stage make students use the strategies in new contexts (Wang, 2016) and finally, assessment stage supports learners to utilize self assessment, self report and reflection (Chamot & Robbins, 2006). Based on the information given above, this study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments. The Student Autonomous Learning Capacity Questionnaire, the SALCQ, (Xu, Peng & Wu, 2004) and the Course Evaluation Questionnaire, the CEQ, (Marques, 2000) were used as quantitative data collecting tool while qualitative data tools involved learner diary, researcher's diary and semi-structured interviews. All the items in questionnaires and interviews were asked in Turkish as the focus of the study was not on the participants' English proficiency level.

### 2.3. Data collection and Analysis

Regarding the analysis of the data, quantitative data were subjected to SPSS, statistically analyzed and presented in the tables. Moreover, qualitative data were recorded and analyzed descriptively.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Does involvement in explicit strategy training result in an increase in the students' autonomy?

The SALCQ was administered before and after the explicit strategy training so as to find out whether involvement in explicit strategy training results in an increase in the students' autonomy considering pre-test and post-test results. Table 1 presents the results of the first section of the SALCQ regarding the students' understanding instructors' teaching objectives and requirements.

Table 1. *Understanding instructors' teaching objectives and requirements*

Items	Test	Mean	SD	Sig.
1. I understand the course requirements and the class requirements.	Pre-test	4.45	.80	.853
	Post-test	4.50	.74	
2. I am able to turn the teacher's teaching objectives into my own learning objectives.	Pre-test	3.82	.90	1.000
	Post-test	3.82	.73	
3. I know it's very important to study hard according to the course objectives.	Pre-test	4.32	.78	.446
	Post-test	4.14	.83	
4. I know why the teacher would use a certain class activity to improve my language skills.	Pre-test	4.09	.61	.296
	Post-test	4.27	.55	
5. I feel I can keep up with the progress of the course.	Pre-test	3.86	.94	.448
	Post-test	4.09	.92	

The mean scores of pre- and post-test results of the section indicated that the participants enhanced their autonomy in understanding the requirements of the course and the class and the reason for why a certain class activity was done by their instructor after the strategy training. Moreover, they increased their capacity of keeping up with the progress of the course. However, it was necessary to help the learners study more in terms of the course objectives.

Table 2 below presents the students' capacity of autonomy in setting up personal learning objectives and study plans before and after the implementation of the strategy training.

Table 2. *Setting up personal learning objectives and study plans pre-test and post-test results*

Items	Test	Mean	SD	Sig.
6. Besides the class tasks and assignments, I will make my own English study plan.	Pre-test	3.95	.84	.348
	Post-test	4.18	.73	
7. I make my own study objectives according to my own situation.	Pre-test	4.27	.94	.234
	Post-test	4.50	.74	
8. I adjust my study plan if necessary.	Pre-test	4.45	.67	.204
	Post-test	4.68	.48	
9. I make a time plan to study English.	Pre-test	3.77	1.06	.672
	Post-test	3.64	1.00	
10. I set up my English study objectives according the <i>Official English Syllabus of the School</i> .	Pre-test	2.82	1.09	.809
	Post-test	2.72	.94	

In general, it was apparent that the learners had capacity to organize their learning process with regard to the results of the pre-test of this section. The students had higher capacity in adjusting their study plan if necessary and making their own study objectives according to their own situation than making a time plan to study English and setting up their objectives according to the syllabus of the school. These findings disclosed an overall increase in the participants' capacity of making study plans and setting up personal learning objectives. However, the students needed to be encouraged to manage their own learning along with setting goals in learning English language.

Table 3 presents the results of the students' capacity of autonomy in using learning strategies in an effective way.

Table 3. *Using learning strategies in an effective way pre-test and post-test results*

Items	Test	Mean	SD	Sig.
11. I understand foreign language learning strategy in general.	Pre-test	3.91	.75	.047
	Post-test	4.36	.49	
12. I use listening strategies when I practice my listening skills.	Pre-test	3.59	.90	0.19
	Post-test	4.22	.61	

13. I use communicative strategies when I practice my oral English.	Pre-test	3.64	.73	.007
	Post-test	4.27	.46	
14. I use reading strategies when I do English reading.	Pre-test	3.45	.86	.006
	Post-test	4.18	.66	
15. I use writing strategies when I write in English.	Pre-test	3.59	.85	.013
	Post-test	4.22	.81	

Pre-test of section three regarding students' use of language learning strategies effectively obtained lower scores. Nevertheless, the results of the post-test demonstrated a considerable increase in using the strategies effectively with the mean score of 4.25. Concerning the findings, it was evident that the explicit strategy training influenced the students' use of LLSs as one aspect of the autonomous learning. This finding supported the idea that the learners could be autonomous in learning English if they were more involved in strategy use (Balçıkanlı, 2010).

Table 4 presents the students' capacity of autonomy in monitoring the use of learning strategies.

Table 4. *Monitoring the use of learning strategies pre-test and post-test results*

Items	Test	Mean	SD	Sig.
16. I adjust my listening learning strategies if I find they are not suitable for me.	Pre-test	4.14	.89	.724
	Post-test	4.22	.87	
17. I adjust my communicative learning strategies if I find they are not suitable for me.	Pre-test	4.09	.75	.589
	Post-test	4.22	.81	
18. I adjust my reading learning strategies if I find they are not suitable for me.	Pre-test	4.09	.87	.029
	Post-test	4.55	.51	
19. I adjust my writing learning strategies if I find they are not suitable for me.	Pre-test	3.95	.84	.010
	Post-test	4.59	.50	
20. I evaluate my learning approaches in order to find the problems of my study.	Pre-test	4.05	.65	.665
	Post-test	4.14	.56	
21. I change my learning approach when I find it inappropriate	Pre-test	4.23	.75	.724
	Post-test	4.14	.83	
22. I am aware of whether my learning approaches are suitable to myself or not.	Pre-test	3.86	1.03	.010
	Post-test	4.59	.50	

The findings of section four indicate that it is possible to increase the students' capacity of adjusting the strategies in language skills. Additionally, their awareness of learning approaches could be increased with the help of the strategy training. It is possible to say that

the learners are ready to overcome the difficulties they meet in their learning process, which supports their autonomous learning. As a consequence, these results show the enhancement in the learners' independency in learning English.

Table 5 presents the students' capacity of autonomy in monitoring and evaluating the English learning process.

Table 5. *Monitoring and evaluating the English learning process pre-test and post-test results*

Items	Test	Mean	SD	Sig.
23. I find opportunities to learn English outside class..	Pre-test	4.32	.72	.693
	Post-test	4.40	.73	
24. I find ways to conquer those affective factors that might have negative influence on my English study.	Pre-test	4.09	.68	.544
	Post-test	4.22	.69	
25. I try to take advantage of the learning resources available.	Pre-test	4.05	.79	.229
	Post-test	4.32	.65	
26. I try to use the new knowledge when I practice my English..	Pre-test	4.55	.60	.648
	Post-test	4.64	.58	
27. I try to cooperate and learn together with my classmates.	Pre-test	3.73	.98	.880
	Post-test	3.77	1.06	
28. I realize the learning mistakes I've made during my study process.	Pre-test	3.82	.91	.116
	Post-test	4.27	.70	
29. I know the reasons why I make mistakes and will take actions to correct them.	Pre-test	4.09	.81	.874
	Post-test	4.14	.94	
30. I try to use appropriate learning approaches to make myself a better language learner.	Pre-test	4.50	.67	.648
	Post-test	4.41	.51	
31. I check whether I've finished my study plans when I try to finish a learning task.	Pre-test	3.14	1.04	.135
	Post-test	3.59	1.05	
32. I check whether I've learned the previous knowledge when I try to finish a language learning task.	Pre-test	3.91	.87	.021
	Post-test	4.36	.58	



Concerning the results of section five, the learners should be trained specifically to find and use appropriate learning approaches so as to succeed in learning English. The students increased their capacity to check whether they have learned the previous knowledge when they try to finish a language task with the mean of pre-test (M= 3.91) and post-test (M= 4.36) following the strategy training. It is a statistically significant difference as the p value was .021.

### 3.2. What are learners' attitudes towards the explicit strategy training?

In order to give response to the second research question which was asked to identify the students' attitudes towards the strategy training, the CEQ, learner diary, semi-structured interviews and researcher's diary were utilized. According to the entries of the diaries, the participants presented their views about the target strategy use as can be seen from the following extracts:

"When I used inferencing strategy I applied some methods. Firstly, I tried to understand the text and then focused on the words that might help me select the main idea. I omitted the irrelevant words and chose the one left behind." (PF14- Learner diary)

"Visualizing strategy had been probably one of the best I could use effectively not only in writing and reading in English in an effective way but also improving my speaking and listening skills." (PM20-Learner diary)

The students utilized a series of reading strategies, which were used by successful readers such as skipping irrelevant words, identifying the grammatical category of words or guessing meaning from the context (Hosenfeld, 1984 as cited in Wiriyakarun, 2008). Furthermore, the most popular out of class activities employed by the participants were identified as listening to music in English, reading books and watching series or films in English. Meanwhile, using mobile applications, making jokes and using audio dictionary were selected as the least popular activities done by the learners. The following recording shows the student's choice of doing a specific activity:

"I had started to watch a series called the Haunting of the Hill House. First, I could feel myself more comfortable while watching it with subtitles to be sure that I understood correctly but later, I tried to watch it without subtitles and I succeed in understanding most of the dialogues." (PM18-Learner diary)

The learners also report that they use mind mapping strategy effectively with the percentage of 77.3 %, visualizing strategy with the percentage of 72.7% and scanning with the percentage of 68.2 %.

The results of the semi-structured interviews indicate the participants' positive attitude towards strategy training. Specifically, the participants are aware of the concept of learner autonomy and regard themselves autonomous learners:

"Autonomous learning helps me know myself better because I am alone and I have some responsibilities to do. Therefore, I must think and act on my own and do my best. It is didactic and an effective method to use." (PF11-Semi-structured interviews)

The participants give two major roles to the teacher as facilitator or resource facilitator and a guide who considers students' opinions and learning needs:

"I believe that my autonomy can be improved more with the help of a guide who can direct me in learning. I think the teacher should direct me in learning process rather than he or she just teaches me something." (PF13- Semi-structured interviews)

The CEQ demonstrates that all of the students agree that the course provides them to reflect on their learning methods. Reflection is something that autonomous learners need to have (Hughes, 2003) and to be focused on (Little, 2007). Additionally, 95.5% of the students state that they can tell the teacher what they would like to learn, 90.9% of them report that the course provides opportunities for them to evaluate their learning methods, to monitor their learning and to learn how to organize their ideas into a composition.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present study revealed the close relationship between participants' autonomy and their improvement in language learning strategies (Ceylan, 2015) and the use of LLSs effectively (Channuan & Wasanasomsithi, 2012; Lai, 2009; Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005; Park, 1997; Tam, 2013). The more the students increased their autonomy the more proficiency they would have in learning a language (Dafai, 2007). As the strategy training was a way to be used to cultivate autonomy of the students (Course, 2017; Gholami & Bria, 2013), this study focused on the effect of the explicit strategy training on the enhancement of learners' autonomy. The first research question attempted to find answers whether the explicit strategy training increased the participants' autonomy. Specifically speaking, considering the results of pre- and post-test results of the SALCQ, it was possible to increase learner autonomy in understanding teachers' teaching objectives and requirements, setting up personal study plans and learning objectives, using and monitoring learning strategies effectively and monitoring and evaluating their English learning process.

The second research question sought for the students' attitudes towards the explicit strategy training. With this aim, the semi-structured interviews, the learner diary, the CEQ and the researcher's diary were benefited. The learners' responses given to the semi-structured interviews indicated their highly positive attitudes towards the training (Çakıcı, 2017). The themes emerged from the students' answers about self-assessment of autonomy could be summarized as increasing the awareness of autonomy, improving reading skills and self-study skills and desire for more responsibility. The students considered their teacher to involve in conducting learning, monitor their progress, act as a guide and care for learners' ideas. The students highlighted that the strategy training provided help for them to use various LLSs, improve their language skills, metacognitive skills and awareness of learning weaknesses. Additionally, the students used learner diary and technology to monitor their learning progress. Furthermore, the learner diaries disclosed that the students made efforts to use self-directed activities not only in the classroom but also out of it as "autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom" (Sinclair, 2008 as cited in Pichugova, I. L., Stepura, S. N. & Pravosudov, M. M., 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, the participants gained awareness of strategy use in learning a language and used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies in an effective way. Such activities as learner/teacher dialogues, goal-setting handout, and the use of library/study room seemed to assist learner autonomy. The learners were ready to take control of their learning, which was the preliminary principle of autonomy but they needed to be encouraged and felt more confident in learning English.

#### 5. Implications and suggestions

The present study whose main aim is to encourage learners to be more autonomous in learning a language through the strategy training proposes to design the strategy instruction for EFL learners in the syllabus of the school concerning learners' and teachers' awareness of autonomy. Additionally, the syllabus of the course in which the training is involved should be prepared regarding the principles of autonomous learning. As the development of autonomy is a dynamic process, further studies need to be conducted through a longer period of time. Furthermore, cognitive and metacognitive strategies in developing reading and writing skills

are benefitted from so as to increase the learners' autonomous learning capacity of the strategy training. Nevertheless, the strategy training can also be involved in listening and speaking skills courses along with social and affective language learning strategies to enhance learner autonomy.

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## ENDNOTE

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