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Breaking the chains: autonomous learners

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Abstract

This action research, conducted at Istanbul Sehir University, was designed to find out how students can be autonomous learners if they are given a chance outside the classroom to reflect on their learning process via keeping a learning journal. The questions of the study were “How do students perceive the role of the teacher?” “How do they perceive the role of themselves?” and “Is it possible to make them more autonomous learners?” The participants of the study were 20 high school graduates, who recently started their university degree programs. They were asked to keep a learning journal on daily basis. At the completion of the module (seven weeks), the journals were collected and the entries were analyzed. A concordance program- Antconc, was used for text analysis.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the concept of learner autonomy has been a buzzword, especially in foreign language learning as language learning encompasses the learner being active and in the center of the learning process. The concept of ‘learner autonomy’ was first introduced and developed by Henry Holec, director of CRAPEL, in the early 1970s. Holec defined the notion of ‘learner autonomy’ as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning,” and added “it is not inborn but must be acquired by ‘natural’ means or (most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way” (Holec, 1981:1). It is worth mentioning that Holec’s report entitled ‘Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning’ published by the Council of Europe in 1979 focused on adult education and was based on the notions of ‘developing individual’s freedom’, ‘increasing sense of awareness’ and moving from being ‘the product of his society’ to being ‘producer of his society’ (Holec, 1981:1-3) and thus aiming at promoting a lifelong learning. In 1990s, with the influence of ‘constructivism’ and ‘learner- centred theories’ the concept of ‘learner autonomy’ started to appear in curriculum studies and since then has become one of the indispensable goals of any curriculum. Since Holec coined the term ‘learner autonomy’, many other

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definitions have been offered, however, the definition we adopted for this study is it is the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (Little 1991:4). By adopting Little’s definition of ‘learner autonomy’, we will limit our focus to observe whether there is a change in meta-cognitive strategies that students adopt and whether their attitude and motivation towards learning has gone through a transformation. Cook states that meta-cognitive strategies “are about learning rather than learning strategies themselves”. (Cook, 1993:114) The autonomous learner shows initiative regarding learning, and shares in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which learning is achieved (Schunk, 2005). In that sense, aiming at fostering learner autonomy is in a way providing opportunities or an environment to lead students move from applying cognitive strategies to the second step of applying meta-cognitive strategies; integrating cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. Fostering the development of learner autonomy rests on the pedagogical claim that in formal educational contexts, reflectivity and self-awareness produce better learning (Pintrich, 2000). Motivation and self-efficacy are also considered to be closely related to learner autonomy as these notions play a crucial role in either fostering or inhibiting learner autonomy. Autonomous learners are believed to be intrinsically motivated and this is mostly associated with setting personal goals. Meece (1994:25) indicates two achievement goals:

. learning oriented/task oriented: These learners seek to improve their level of competence.
. performance oriented/ ego oriented:. These individuals are likely to view their abilities as stable traits that can be judged in relation to others.

It is observed that performance oriented/ego oriented learners’ motivation tends to be a short-term motivation and depends on the task, environment or the other individuals in class. Nonetheless, performance oriented learners still tend to be more autonomous learners and follow decision making strategies. On the other hand, inability to set personal goals which is directly related to intrinsic motivation is agreed to serve as one of the crucial reasons for underachievement or being trapped in an image of being an underachiever. Krouse and Krouse (1981) state that there are three main reasons for underachievement:

. skill deficit
. personality dysfunction (impulsiveness, fear of failure, high need for approval)
. deficiencies in self-control

As seen, the underlying reasons for underachievement are more to do with beliefs, values, attitudes and motivational aspects rather than the learner’s potential to be able to do the task or perform in a foreign language. It is of great importance to lead students to comprehend and reflect on the reasons why they fail or underachieve and enable them to see the fact that personal beliefs, attitudes and values towards learning need to be deconstructed in time and with effort and decision making and independent action should follow. Teachers’ guidance in this process plays the most important role in relation to creating a friendly and low threat environment to be able to work in collaboration towards the goals because it is considered that student achievement; student motivation, academic confidence and learning strategies determine learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000).

2. The Study

2.1 Method

This study is an action research. Action research is a term used to describe the process of identifying a puzzle in the classroom, collecting, and interpreting data. This process is beneficial to teachers and students since it is concerned with improving the immediate learning environment (Finch, 2001). The puzzle in this case is the participants, who, being fresh graduates of high school, do not have many qualities of autonomous learners; instead they expected all learning to come from the teacher. As a requirement of university studies, they have to take the responsibility of their own learning, thus, a paradigm shift was needed. On the first day of their module, the instructor-researcher asked them to keep a learning journal. Throughout the module, the instruction was geared to foster autonomy.

2.2 Research Question
The research question for this particular action research was: “Is it possible to make a paradigm shift in students that start their foundation program at university so as to foster their autonomy in the process of learning?” It has been regarded that students come to university with the set notion that the teacher is the owner of the teaching and learning process. The underlying rationale for this notion is that all Turkish students take a central university entrance exam to be eligible to study at tertiary level. In order to better prepare themselves for this exam, 52.97% of all test-takers attend private courses, where the teacher takes the responsibility of the teaching-learning process (MONE, 2009). This tendency continues at university level.

In order to change this paradigm, the instruction throughout the module was designed to foster learner autonomy. While doing this, four determinants of autonomy, as pointed out by Eccles & Roeser (2003; cited in Thanasoulas, 2000), was adopted as indicators of the paradigm shift. These are student achievement, motivation, academic confidence and learning strategies.

2.3 Participants
20 students that started their college degree programs were asked to keep a learning journal everyday for seven weeks - until the completion of a module. However, at the end of the module, 12 students who regularly wrote entries were taken into consideration and only those students and their journal entries constituted the data of this research.

2.4 Data Analysis
The data analysis process was two-fold: First, the subject pronoun change was examined through a concordance program: AntConc. It has been assumed that the subject/pronoun used at the beginning should be “the teacher” or “we”, meaning the class and myself. However, by the end of the study it was expected that the pronoun would turn into “I” as the participants were expected to take more action in their learning. The journal entries started as of 4 October and the last entry was 19 November. Secondly, a total of 47 days of data entries of 12 participants were analyzed using a grounded theory approach that employed further focused codes to explore connections and generate theoretical hypotheses that are discussed in the findings below. The data was examined under two headings: Changes in meta-cognitive strategies, and changes in attitudes and motivation.

3. Findings
3.1 Change in Subject/pronoun

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th>Week 7</th>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>65</td>
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Table 1. Change in subject/pronoun

Table 1 illustrates the number of the uses of subject pronouns ‘I’, meaning ‘the class and myself’ and ‘we’, meaning ‘the class and the teacher’. In week 1, the total use of the subject pronoun by all 12 participants, ‘we’ or ‘the teacher’ was 126 times, whereas the total use of the subject pronoun ‘I’ was 76 times. Except for the four
participants, P1, P4, P8 and P11 (P is the abbreviation for participant), the rest of them (8 participants) intimately connected their learning experience with the teacher, the classroom activities and environment. In week 3, the results show a similar tendency as the participants’ total use of subject pronoun ‘we’ or ‘the teacher’ was 111 times and much higher than the use of the subject pronoun ‘I’. It can be said that in week 2, the participants’ dependency on their teachers and classmates continues except for two participants (P2 ‘we’:8/‘I’:9, P11 ‘we’:5/‘I’:6), however even these participants show a strong dependence on their teachers. In the following weeks, a different tendency can be seen as the total number of the uses of subject pronoun ‘I’ increased dramatically (week 5 ‘we’: 54/‘I’:115, week 7: ‘we’44/‘I’:142). In week 5, 10 out of 12 participants started to change the way they approach learning and to take charge of their own learning. In week 7, except for one participant (P12) 11 of them showed a tendency toward taking more action on their learning.

3.2 Change in Meta-cognitive Strategies
With the development of autonomy, learners are expected to take action on their learning and develop some meta-cognitive strategies. As pointed out by Cook (1993) meta-cognitive strategies are ‘strategies about learning rather than learning strategies themselves’. Here, we have taken into consideration three of the meta-cognitive strategies that Cook (1993) indicates: self-monitoring, self-evaluation and planning. After monitoring and evaluating themselves, learners attempt to use a certain strategy, and come up with a plan to overcome their weaknesses.

[P1/week 1] “Today we talked about phobias, I learnt different types of phobias such as acrophobia and arachnophobia.”

[P1/week 3] “There were some points that I had missed about essays last week. I completed them and I understood my mistakes about thesis statement.”

[P1/week 3] “After today everyday I will listen to a video to improve my listening skills and I will watch a film twice a week. I started.”

As it can be seen above, P1 was not aware of these meta-cognitive strategies in week 1. He had a tendency to report the learning took place in the classroom. However, in week 3, he started to self-monitor. He indicated that he missed out on some points, and evaluated his learning identifying the problematic areas. In week 3, it is clear that he had a plan about how to achieve his objective.

[P9/week 3] “Today I watched a film and I listened to new songs in English.”

[P9/week 4] “Today we learnt passive structures. At home I did some extra practices to learn better.”

[P9/week 5] “Today we did listening practice. Also we did some practice about dates and numbers. This was very good for me because I had a problem with dates and numbers but now when I hear I’ll write it down quickly.”

As it is shown above, P9 indicated that she was doing some extra work outside the class in week 3, however she was not sure how to monitor or evaluate this. However, in weeks 4 and 5, she started to monitor and evaluate (I had some problems with dates) her learning process and took actions (extra study), and plan (writing down quickly) for further improvement.

3.3 Change in Attitude and Motivation
Attitude and motivation are closely related terms that have an impact on student autonomy. Attitudes, as it is pointed out by Brown (1987, cited in Thanasoulas, 2000) ‘part of one’s perception of self, of others and of the culture in which one is living (or the culture of the target language)’ shape how learners see themselves and their second language learning process. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993:3) state that motivation has three parts: ‘desire to do the task, directed effort and satisfaction with the task’. Considering these views, it is assumed that as
learners take charge of their own learning and become more autonomous, their attitudes will change and their motivation and self-esteem will increase.

[P3/week 3] “...At 10 pm I am planning to exit from library with feeling happy for finished my responsibilities.”
[P3/week 4] “Today I wrote too bad essay in process writing. I mean I searched the topic too much I didn’t have anything to write with my own words. Even though I had a good outline, I didn’t write.”
[P3/week 4] “I listened to Pink songs. Learning new words will help me I believe.”
[P3/week 5] “Today I woke up and came to university library. I read my books until 2 pm. After that I prepared for my presentation till 7 pm. When I came to class, I looked some resources from the Internet. I don’t plan to write an essay I want to be natural. I will try to speak when I close my eyes.”
[P3/week 5] “I had an oral presentation today. I think I succeeded that because I wanted to be natural so that I didn’t prepare writing a paper.”

As it is shown above, P3 indicated the effort he put into accomplishing his tasks and expressed a sense of satisfaction with his accomplishments. Also, it was clear that there was some indication of growing self-esteem as he decided how to approach some of the tasks because he would like to speak English fluently.

[P11/week 2] “I decided to watch all the movies of one director and then I would pass the another one and I decided to do it in English; yes maybe I don’t understand them all but one day it will help me; I hope so...”
[P11/week 7] “Back to journal because I couldn’t do my homework but I love this language and it is better to write here. I was watching movies of director Tim Burton and I understood nearly all of them.”

As it is shown above, in week 2 P11 mentioned his plan of watching movies, however, he conveyed a sense of inefficiency. He was concerned about his abilities and his success in the future. In week 7, it was clear that there existed a big change in his attitude, as he expressed his sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Even though he couldn’t do his homework, he stated ‘how much he loved this language’, which showed a high level of self-esteem and a positive attitude.

[P2/week 3] “I said to myself I will start tomorrow but I am saying today now. I am at class now and waiting for the lecture. I will annoy my teacher because I did not do my homework but I will do it today and I will apply my plan beginning from today. I ordered ‘Understanding and Using English Grammar’ yesterday from Homer bookstore. I will start reading an English book. I will read three English books per week.”
[P2/week 4] ”Today we got an essay project I am so happy because I wrote my first serious essay; it has an intro, two body paragraphs and a conclusion. I think my English is improving. The book I started yesterday can be very useful for me about planning my time. My English is getting better everyday and I am so hopeful about the future.’

As it is shown above, P2 identified his weaknesses and indicated his study plan about doing some extra grammar study and reading. He had the desire and he was ready to put his directed effort in it. In week 4, the same participant also expressed a sense of accomplishment. He was satisfied with his process, he believed that he had good writing skills and he was improving his reading skills, which indicated an increasing level of self-esteem.

4. Conclusion
This action-research was undertaken to foster students’ autonomy in their learning process. The action-research conducted on this sample group validates the assertion that autonomy is an innate skill that is possible to foster. According to American social psychologist Deci, for any individual to be able to reach ‘a sense of self-fulfilment’, autonomy is one of the three basic needs that should be addressed and satisfied. He posits that when
we are ‘fully willing to do what (we) are doing and when (we) embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment’, we are autonomous or self-regulated. (Deci, 1996: 2) To foster students’ autonomy in their learning process, students first need to be aware of what they are doing and they should be given a chance to be able to pass this initial stage. In many cases it is observed that students are deeply attached to their passive role, which is assigned to them by traditional school system in which any major decision is made on behalf of them even for the crucial meta cognitive decisions such as ‘learning targets’ or ‘evaluating learning outcomes’ which should involve the learner. Nonetheless, submitting to this role does not necessarily mean that students lack the ‘capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action’ (Little 1991:4). Teachers and classroom environment should propose and enable students to foster the autonomy they already possess innately and there need to be a shift on the mindset many teachers share, which is students are not ready to take responsibility. Brown and Presley propose four major characteristics that self regulated learners share. (Brown and Presley, 1994: 158):

- good thinkers use cognitive strategies
- good thinkers employ meta cognitive strategies. They monitor their process closely.
- good thinkers have other knowledge (on the other topics)
- good thinkers possess motivational beliefs

This action research conducted on a sample group validates that students’ entries in their journals shared some or in some cases all of the characteristics of a self regulated learner proposed by Brown and Presley. Given the right environment and a chance to be self-sufficient and autonomous, learners realize that they have the skills to monitor, evaluate and make their own decisions to follow certain strategies and plans to direct their own learning. It was also evident that as participants undertook this process, it had a considerable impact on their attitude, motivation and self-esteem.

References