



Strategies for Developing Autonomy by EFL Learners and its Relation to Foreign Language Achievement¹

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher investigated the impact of social, metacognitive, and cognitive strategies on developing learner autonomy in foreign language learning. 150 EFL students participated in this study. In the selection of the participants, a simple random sampling technique was used. The aim of this study was to find the relationship between students' autonomy and foreign language achievement. Also, the researcher tried to show the impact of age and gender factors on using strategy. A quantitative method was followed in this study. Descriptive statistics revealed using metacognitive strategies more than other strategies by students. There was a positive correlation between students' grade point average and using strategies. According to the results of the Mann-Whitney U and the Kruskal-Wallis tests, gender and age factors had not a significant effect on using strategy.

Keywords: Autonomy, Foreign Language Achievement, Strategies

Introduction

Student autonomy and the development of student autonomy have been studied for 30 years. Due to shifting in English language teaching over the last two decades, students are placed at the center of classroom organization by most language teachers, respecting their needs, strategies, techniques, and styles. Holec (1981) defined autonomy as "the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning" (p. 3). Dickinson (1987) defined autonomy as "a situation in which the learner is fully responsible for decisions about their own learning and the implementation of those decisions" (p. 11). Today, contemporary education values the development of learners' autonomy. This study aimed to reveal using strategies by EFL students to improve their autonomy in learning a foreign language. The researcher argued useful strategies to improve autonomy and explored the relationship between them and foreign language success. Students should be aware of their learning process and use strategies for controlling their own learning process. In this study, the researcher examined using some strategies by EFL students attending Hacettepe University ELT Department in the 2012-2013 academic year in Turkey to improve their autonomy in foreign language learning. Therefore, the following research questions were answered in this study:

- What are the most used language learning strategies by students?
- Is there any correlation between using strategies by students and foreign language achievement?
- Are gender and age factors effective in using strategies by students?

¹ This study was adopted from the first author's MA. Thesis in 2014.

Literature Review

Researchers such as Richards and Platt (1992, p. 209) define learning strategies as intentional behaviors and thoughts to help learners to understand, learn or remember new information. Students use learning strategies in the processing of new information and in the realization of learning activities. The language classroom environment is a problem-solving environment. In this environment, language learners are willing to experience new inputs and difficult tasks given to them by their instructors. Therefore, learners try to find the easiest way to do what is necessary by using language learning strategies. The most comprehensive classifications of language learning strategies were done by Oxford (1990) that defined them in six types. She divided these strategies into two categories. Direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensatory) directly contribute to new language learning. According to Oxford (1990, p.37), "all direct strategies require mental processing." On the other side, social, metacognitive, and affective strategies as indirect strategies can affect the learning process indirectly and help the learners for organizing their learning process. In the current study, cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies were investigated by the researcher to measure the use of them by male and female students. Short definitions of these strategies are as follows:

Cognitive strategies directly affect language learning and include practice, receiving and sending messages, summarizing meanings, imagination for memorization, analyzing and organizing a new language, repetition, analyzing, and structuring input that enables students to make the learning process meaningful.

Metacognitive strategies fall under the indirect strategies that students use to unify their learning process. These strategies allow learners to control their learning and help them to plan their language learning efficiently.

Social strategies contribute to learning indirectly and help students learn by asking questions, collaborating with others, and recognizing other people's feelings. There is no competition due to cooperation with other students. With cooperative learning, students increase their self-esteem and self-confidence in their foreign language success.

According to the findings of O'Malley et al. (1985), successful learners used more comprehensive learning strategies than less successful learners. In a similar study (Green & Oxford, 1995), all types of language learning strategies were used more frequently by more proficient students. Another study (Griffiths, 2003) discovered a strong positive relationship between learning strategy use and language proficiency. The findings showed that advanced language learners use language-learning strategies more frequently than elementary students.

Many studies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer & Groarty, 1985) have investigated the relationship between students' language proficiency level, motivation, culture, learning styles, age, gender, and using strategies. Some studies have indicated significant gender differences among language learners, where female learners have shown using more strategies than male learners (Zare, 2010; Lee, 2003; Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). The mentioned variables have different effects on the use of strategy categories. To demonstrate the impact of gender factor on using language learning strategies, further studies have been done. Bacon (1992) stated using more metacognitive and cognitive strategies by the females compared to the males. In Ehrman and Oxford's (1989) study, functional strategies, general strategies, conveying meaning, and self-management strategies were used by females significantly more than males. Similarly in another study, (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989) using language learning strategies by females was reported significantly more than men. In Kaylani's (1996) study, female learners used memory, compensatory, cognitive, and affective strategies significantly more than males. The findings of Green and Oxford's (1995) study revealed a higher level of strategy use by female learners. Regarding the age factor, studies (Burling, 1981; Schmidt, 1983; Schumann, 1978) confirmed developing a new language is difficult for adults (Griffiths, 2003, p. 48). On the contrary, adult learners can understand grammatical structure and patterns easier than young learners and transfer their knowledge easily to the learning context (Chang, 2005, p. 36). According to Bialystok's (1981) study, older learners used learning strategies more than younger learners. Although

Ehrman and Oxford (1989) do not consider the age factor important to understand and learn a language, this view contradicts the view of declining language learning ability with increasing age. Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) studied children's learning strategies in intensive classrooms. The findings of their study indicated the flexibility of active young learners in using their strategies than their less active children. They argued that at different stages of age, learners can examine and adapt strategies. Therefore, to support the less successful students, teachers should explain strategies to them in language learning.

Methodology

The selected design of the current study is comparative and correlational. In this study, the researcher intended to find the relationship between foreign language success and learner autonomy and reveal the impact of age and gender factors on using strategies. Based on a survey conducted to describe important factors, this study is descriptive. The researcher used a quantitative method for this study. For calculating the used strategies by the students, descriptive statistics were used. In addition, this study is quantitative research. Finally, the study can be described as a comparative study. It tried to compare the mean ranks of under investigation variables between male and female, to explore the significant relationship between.

Participants

Participants of this study were 150 English Language Teaching students (117 female and 33 male). Through simple random sampling, participants were selected for this study. The sample was selected from a total of 240 students studying at Hacettepe University in Turkey. Students of the second, third and fourth classes were selected for this study. Students were in the age range of 18 to 22 years and older.

Instrument

The researcher used a questionnaire to collect quantitative data. This questionnaire was developed by Chan, Spratt, and Humphreys (2002) and adapted and modified by the researcher (see Appendix-A). The questionnaire consists of two sections. The

first section was about the students' demographic information. In the second section, 30 items that include cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies relevant to the developing learner autonomy were included. Piloting of this questionnaire was done with 50 students. Its validity was confirmed by ELT experts. Also, the degree of reliability ($\alpha = 0.89$) for the questionnaire was high.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through a 30-item questionnaire to assess student autonomy based on the used strategies by students. Students answered the questions in a Likert- scale ranging from always (5) to never (1). The researcher applied the questionnaire to 150 ELT students attending Hacettepe University ELT Department in June 2012-2013 academic year. The purpose of the study was explained before the respondents answered the questions. In addition, the students' grade point averages were controlled and considered at the end of the study.

Data Analysis

For ranking the strategies, descriptive statistics and to find any relation between students' foreign language success and autonomy Spearman rank correlation coefficient test was used. For finding any significant difference between gender factor and using strategy, and to determine the effect of the age factor on using strategy respectively Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used by the researcher.

Findings

In this section, the results of the survey were compared based on the strategy preferences of the students. In addition, the relation between strategies and foreign language achievement was reported by analyzing data. As a result of this research, the following three research questions were answered: Research question 1: The researcher interpreted the findings based on the following criteria and determined the median scores for the use of strategies: low use (1 to 2), moderate use (2 to 3.5), and high use (3.5 to 5).

Table 1: Frequency of Using Strategy

Language Learning Strategies	N	Median
Cognitive	150	2.37
Metacognitive	150	2.68
Social	150	2.50

As shown in Table 1, metacognitive strategies with a total median of 2.68 were used more by students than the other two strategy groups.

Research question 2: Observing the results of the Spearman correlation test between three groups of strategies and students' GPA, it can be understood that there is a significant correlation between strategies and students' grade point averages ($p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Correlation between Using Strategy and Students' GPA

Language Learning Strategies	N	Correlation Coefficient	Sig
Cognitive	150	0.203	0.013
Metacognitive	150	0.328	0.000
Social	150	0.245	0.003

The results showed that the correlation between students' GPA and metacognitive strategies is stronger than the other two strategy groups.

Research question 3: In this question, any differences in the use of students' strategies regarding their gender and age were examined. The researcher used the Mann-Whitney u test for finding a significant difference between using strategies and gender factor.

Table 3: The Impact of Gender on Using Strategy

Language Learning Strategies	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Z	Sig
Cognitive	Male	33	82.58	-1.061	0.289
	Female	117	73.50		
Metacognitive	Male	33	85.59	-1.514	0.130
	Female	117	72.65		
Social	Male	33	76.58	-0.163	0.871
	Female	117	75.20		

The results of Mann-Whitney u test showed that males and females had similar mean rank for using cognitive strategies ($\text{sig} = 0.289, p > 0.05$), metacognitive strategies ($\text{sig} = 0.130, p > 0.05$) and social strategies ($\text{sig} = 0.871, p > 0.05$). As a result, a significant difference was not found between students' strategy use and their gender. Therefore, the impact of gender factor was not seen on using strategy.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to analyze the impact of the age factor on using strategy. As found in the results, there was no significant difference between all types of strategies and age factor.

Table 4: The Impact of Age on Using Strategy

Language Learning Strategies	Age	N	Mean Rank	Sig
Cognitive	18-20	28	75.02	0.757
	21-22	85	77.54	

Cognitive	23-upper	37	71.19	0.757
Metacognitive	18-20	28	73.68	0.970
	21-22	85	75.92	
	23-upper	37	75.92	
Social	18-20	28	74.05	0.673
	21-22	85	73.61	
	23-upper	37	80.95	

As seen in Table 4, almost the same mean rank of using strategy is observable among the three age groups. There is no significant difference between the age factor and using strategies ($p > 0.05$). It can be concluded that the age factor was not effective in using strategy.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the relation between using cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies and developing language learner autonomy was investigated to see the impact of these strategies on improving foreign

language achievement in the EFL context. Due to the frequency of use, metacognitive strategies were the most used strategies by learners. Moreover, students used all strategies at a moderate level. Spearman correlation test showed that there is a correlation between using independent three groups of strategies and students' grade point average. The correlation between students' grade point average and metacognitive strategies was stronger than any other two strategy groups. As a result, it can be understood that metacognitive strategies were preferred more than other strategies by the students. In line with these results, Zhang (2007) stated that student metacognition helps learners to control cognitively and regularly their learning and promotes foreign language achievement. Regarding students' gender, the males and females students preferred strategies almost in the same way. This contrasts with previous research (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer, 1983) and similar studies (Green & Oxford, 1995; Lee, 2003; Zare, 2010) that have indicated a significant difference between gender factors and using strategies (Alotaibi, 2004, p. 49). Also, a significant difference was not found between using strategies and the age factor. The results of Ehrman and Oxford's (1989) study support this study because in their study the age factor was not considered important for understanding and learning a language. Learners use language-learning strategies as tools to assist their language learning process. Using these strategies by learners, distinguishes them from each other as successful learners and less successful learners. The results can be useful for EFL teachers in training less successful language learners. All language learning strategies were used at a moderate level in this study. It was reported that students used metacognitive strategies more than other strategies. Other learning strategies also depend somewhat on them, as they relate to the thinking process. In other words, all language learning strategies are related to each other. As the main conclusion, it can be said that autonomous learners used metacognitive strategies more than less successful learners. There are inevitable limitations to any second/foreign language research. Therefore, interviews or think-aloud protocols can be used to further investigate of using strategies by the students to achieve reliable results in other EFL contexts.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions

In light of the finding discussed, four educational implications can be presented. The first is developing autonomy at universities to encourage autonomy and enable students to exercise control over their own learning. The following key points need to be taken into account for the development of autonomy at universities.

- Curriculum and assessment models at universities should be designed according to the principles of autonomy.
- Evaluation of whether textbooks in universities encourage autonomy.

Second, considering language learning strategies, especially metacognitive strategies, in the preparation of curricula for students studying in English Language Teaching departments of Turkish universities and in different contexts.

Reviewing the findings of this study, two suggestions can be made for further research:

- Replication of this study with a larger number of participants to obtain more reliable results.
- This study can be carried out with action research to simultaneously practice and control developing student autonomy.

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Appendix-A. Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

Dear students,

This survey has been structured to research students' perceptions of the strategies used by ELT students attending English Language Teaching Department at Hacettepe University to develop student autonomy in English language learning. Any information identifying the respondent will not be disclosed under any circumstances. There are 30 items in this survey. Please follow the instructions to complete it. Thanks in advance for your help and frank answers.

Section I: Personal Information:

Name and Surname (Optional):

Gender: Male ()

Female ()

Age:

Section II: Students' Perceptions of Using Strategies to Develop Student Autonomy

	Items	Always (5)	Often (4)	Sometimes (3)	Seldom (2)	Never (1)
	Cognitive strategies					
1	I do assignments which are not compulsory.					
2	I take note of new words and their meanings.					
3	I read newspapers in English.					
4	I visit teacher about work.					
5	I read books or magazines in English.					
6	I watch English TV programs.					
7	I listen to English songs.					
8	I talk to foreigners in English.					
9	I practice using English with my friends.					
10	I do grammar exercises.					
11	I do group studies with my classmates in English lessons.					
12	I attend the language lab/ library for self-study.					
13	I ask the teacher questions when I don not understand.					
14	I make suggestions to the teacher.					
15	I plan lesson/study.					
16	I activate prior knowledge while studying.					
	Metacognitive Strategies					
17	I make inferences about the lesson.					
18	I do classifications while studying.					
19	I do summarize while studying.					
20	I take notes while studying.					
21	I use resources while studying.					
22	I work cooperatively with my friends.					
23	I use the internet in English learning.					
24	I send e-mails in English.					
25	I listen to English radio programs.					
26	I take opportunity to speak in English.					
27	I choose learning activities.					
	Social Strategies					
28	I evaluate my learning.					
29	I watch English movies.					
30	I decide how long to spend on each learning activities.					

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