An investigation on prospective German language teachers' autonomous learning level[*]

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Abstract

Developments in the last decades necessitated the acquirement of diverse skills that enables to keep up with the changing conditions of todays' world. In this context teachers as learners are in need of a continuous renewal. The acquirement of autonomous learning skills promoted at the teacher education might be contributory for the development of a lifelong learning ability. The aim of this study is to analyze the factors affecting the autonomous learning behaviors of prospective German language teachers to determine their actual state. Thus the purpose of the study is to identify students' autonomous learning behaviors in view of different variables and to discuss the results with respect of learner autonomy and foreign language teacher education. For data collection Autonomous Learning Scale was developed and used. Nonparametric Kruskal - Wallis and Mann - Whitney U tests were used to identify whether there is a significant difference between students autonomous learning behaviors according to class, age, gender and educational background. The results of the study showed that there is no statistical significant difference among class level and educational background in terms of autonomous learning, but there were statistical significant differences with regards of age and gender. Further the subscales 'planning' and 'performing' had on average a higher score as the subscale 'evaluating'. The findings of the study indicated that teachers as learners have to be promoted with regard to their actual state. Further studies regarding learner autonomy in teacher education are recommended for the promotion of teacher competences.

Keywords: Teacher education; learner autonomy; teacher autonomy; autonomous learning; Autonomous Learning Scale

1. Introduction

As a consequence of social, economic and technological developments educational expectations have changed over the last decades. It is necessitated to be equipped with diverse skills to be able to respond immediately to actual requirements. Thus educational institutions have to provide their

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learners opportunities allowing them to find out how to acquire such skills (Christ, 2002; Krumm, 1996). Yet it seems to be a challenging issue as individual and social needs are of changing nature. Furthermore "Learning is a life-long process. No school or university can provide its pupils or students with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult life. Adult life, in its personal as well as its vocational aspects, is far too diverse and too subject to change for any educational curriculum to attempt to provide a detailed preparation" (Trebbi, 1990, p.4). In this context the concept of learner autonomy may be contributory.

1.1. Literature Review

First used by Holec (1981) for adult education and lifelong learning means "learner's ability to take responsibility for their own learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). It later became more popular in foreign language education and many debates take place about the term and concept of autonomy. While glancing at the pertinent literature on autonomy it is evident that it has been debated under various aspects. These may be subsumed in a broad sense under "political, ideological and philosophical outlooks" (Benson, 2008, p.15), in a narrow sense "for situations in which learners study entirely on their own; for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning; for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning" (Benson & Voller, 1997, p.2). On the other hand, it is assumed to be "(…) acquiring learning strategies for language education and the ways of using these strategies" (Mutlu & Eröz-Tuga, 2013, p.109). Hence it seems to be no general agreement about the meaning of this term, but the concept itself received considerable attention as it is regarded to be a "vital part of learning process" (Tanyeli & Kuter, 2013, p.29). Nevertheless, a renewed interest in recent years indicated its importance especially for developing lifelong learning abilities highly valued by society.

Thus it is questioned how to involve learners in the learning process that allows them to develop such qualities. In this regard Holec's (2009) concept of learner autonomy seems to reply as it describes learners' role in the learning process. Learners' behaviors in an autonomous learning concept are described as "to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired" (Holec, 2009, p.36). Regarding this definition, it is evident that autonomous learning consists of three stages: Planning, performing and evaluating. Learners have to take responsibility in these stages to have acted autonomously. With this active participation the learning process turns out to be a dynamic process (Tassinari, 2010; Oxford, 2015).

However not just learners are determinants of this process, but also teachers. Hence for the promotion of learner autonomy it is crucial to take teachers' perspective into consideration. In literature there seems to be a wide range of studies about learner autonomy, yet the teacher perspective is ignored widely (Sert, 2007, p.182). Such studies would contribute not just to learners', but also to teachers' individual and professional development (Shen, 2011; Smith, 2003). Furthermore, it has to be considered that with changing conditions also teachers' competences have to be adapted to new requirements. Such an adaption is necessitated especially as new educational conceptions are put into practice by teachers (Hatipoğlu, 2005). On the other hand, "teacher grab hold of methods in their own lessons that they themselves had experienced either at the training college or in classes as school children" (Dam, 2007, p.1). Thus it can be concluded that teachers' professional development may have impact on teaching practices and hence on learners' achievement. Nevertheless, teachers are regarded to be lifelong learners as they have to keep themselves up-to-date continuously. Therefore, it is of great importance that autonomy studies consider also teacher dimensions. "(…) to be more aware

of what kind of progress they have made and what else they need to improve next" (Balçıkanlı, 2010, p.96) teachers as learners have to be aware of their own learning.

1.2. Research questions

In this context the aim of this study is to investigate prospective German language teachers' autonomous learning level.

The study will address the following questions to reach the predetermined aim:

- To what degree are prospective German language teachers learning autonomously?
- What are the 'Autonomous Learning Scale' scores?
- Is there a statistically significant difference of these scores in view of the variables gender, age, class level and education?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The population of this study consists of prospective German language teachers studying at Istanbul University in Turkey. The sampling of the study consisted of all undergraduate students (288 students) during the academic year 2013-2014. The entire research group was targeted; 166 students were reached. Of these students, there were 28.3% freshmen, 28.9% juniors, 20.5% sophomores, and 22.3% seniors; there were 74.1% females and 25.9% males. 78.3% of these students were under the age of 29, 21.7% above the age of 29. Of these students, 29.5% have studied in Germany, 21.1% in Turkey, 44.0% in Germany and Turkey, 5.4% in other countries. Further of these students, 70.5% graduated from a Turkish high school, 29.5% haven't attended a Turkish high school. Of the students without a graduation from a Turkish high school, 19.3% graduated from the German "Hauptschule", 19.3% graduated from the German "Realschule", 9.6% graduated from the German "Gymnasium", 8.4% graduated from the German "Gesamtschule" and 4.8% graduated from a high school from an another country. As other countries were mentioned Switzerland, Austria and Netherlands.

2.2. Instrument(s)

A survey was developed consisting of 21 items aiming to determine autonomous learning behaviors of the students in view of the stages planning, performing and evaluating. The items of the survey were developed by examining autonomous learning descriptions in literature (Holec 2009, Martinez 2008, Tassinari 2010). 'Autonomous Learning Scale' (ALS) was developed by the researcher (Deregözü, 2014). The 'Autonomous Learning Scale' was finalized and used as data collection means. In the scale formed of Likert-type 14 statement points, the participants have to grade the items with 'never', 'rarely', 'occasionally', 'frequently' and 'always'. Validity of the scale was identified by using Exploratory Factor Analysis. The total variance explained by the three factor scale is %50.7. Factors' load values have been found above .30. Scale's Cronbach' Alpha coefficient concerning interior coherence has been found to be .78. The reliability of the sub scales is for planning .62, performing .68 and evaluating .77.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The study is a descriptive - quantitative research. Teachers' autonomy level is determined by examining their autonomous learning level. Autonomous learning has been examined as dependent

variable whereas class, gender, age and education which are considered to have effect on autonomous learning level have been examined as independent variables. While data are evaluated, 'never' has been calculated by giving 1 point, 'rarely' 2 points,' occasionally' 3 points, 'frequently' 4 points and 'always' 5 points. Point averages for each group forming independent variables have been calculated. These points were used for further analyses. These analyses were performed by using the PASW 18.00 statistical package program. Kolmogorov Smirnov Normality Analyses revealed a non-normal distribution of the data. Thus nonparametric statistical analyses were used for determining statistical significant differences between the groups. Accordingly, groups' average points were examined by using Mann - Whitney U analyses for two groups and Kruskal - Wallis analyses for more than two groups. The points obtained in scale were subdivided into .8 intervals. Accordingly, 5.00 - 4.21 was considered as very high, 4.20 - 3.41 high and 3.40 - 2.61 medium. Under the score of 2.61 autonomous learning was defined as poor and insufficient.

3. Results

3.1. Results regarding autonomous learning average scores

Table 1 illustrates average scores of the scale items. As it is evident on average the participants had a higher autonomous learning score at the stages planning and performing stage as at the evaluating stage.

Table 1. Results of the ALS

		n	$\overline{x}$	*ss*	$Sh_{\overline{x}}$
Planning	1. I identify my learning needs.	160	3.98	.90	.04
	2. I decide on the order of my learning.	159	4.34	.78	.05
	3. I decide on my own what to learn.	161	4.08	.93	.07
	4. I arrange my learning environment according to my learning.	161	3.82	1.08	.08
Performing	5. I use sources that support my learning.	160	4.40	.84	.04
	6. I find out appropriate material for my learning.	162	3.77	1.05	.05
	7. I use various sources, when my learning isn't as desired.	160	4.14	.89	.06
Evaluating	8. I prepare a list of my learning objectives.	161	3.37	1.23	.04
	9. I use different methods during my learning process.	160	3.23	1.07	.05
	10. I evaluate what and how I learn during my learning process.	162	3.94	1.00	.06
	11. I evaluate the time of my learning.	161	2.99	1.20	.09
	12. I evaluate my own learning.	162	3.59	1.01	.08
	13. I evaluate to what extent I've reached my learning objectives.	162	3.70	.99	.08
	14. I evaluate to what extent my learning materials have supported my learning.	162	3.69	.99	.08

3.2. Results regarding the variables gender, age, class and education

Mann-Whitney U test was applied to define the difference between the point averages of the students' autonomous learning level in terms of gender variable.

Table 2. Results of the Mann-Whitney U test according to ALS scores and gender

	Gender	n	$\bar{X}$	$\sum$	U	z	p
Autonomous Learning	Female	121	88.34	10689.00	1653.000	-3,192	.001*
	Male	41	61.32	2514.00			
Planning	Female	121	88.01	10649.00	1693.000	-3,058	.002*
	Male	41	61.29	2554.00			
Performing	Female	121	82.55	9988.50	2353.500	-,495	.621
	Male	41	78.40	2514.00			
Evaluating	Female	121	87.33	10567.50	1653.000	-2,727	.006*
	Male	41	64.28	2635.50			

*p < 0.05

Table 2 displays the results of the ALS scores according to gender. As indicated in the table there is a significant difference in view of gender (p= 0.001 < 0.05 Mann - Whitney U test). This difference is also evident at the stages planning (p= 0.002 < 0.05 Mann - Whitney U test) and evaluating (p= 0.006 < 0.05 Mann - Whitney U test). Whereas at the performing stage there is no significant difference in view of autonomous learning and age (p= 0.621 >0.05 Mann - Whitney U test).

Mann - Whitney U test was applied to define the differences between the ALS scores in terms of the variable age.

Table 3. Results of Mann – Whitney U test according to ALS scores and age

	Age	n	$\bar{X}$	$\sum$	U	z	p
Autonomous Learning	Under 29	126	76.33	9618.00	1617.000	-2,626	.009*
	Above 29	36	99.58	3585.00			
Planning	Under 29	126	78.56	9898.50	1897.500	-1,505	.132
	Above 29	36	91.79	3304.50			
Performing	Under 29	126	77.46	9760.00	1759.000	-2,074	.038*
	Above 29	36	95.64	3443.00			
Evaluating	Under 29	126	77.04	9706.50	1705.500	-2,272	.023*
	Above 29	36	97.13	3496.50			

*p < 0.05

As Table 3 illustrates there is a significant difference in terms of age (p= 0.009 < 0.05 Mann - Whitney U test). This difference is also obvious at the stages performing (p= 0.038 < 0.05 Mann- Whitney U test) and evaluating (p= 0.023 < 0.05 Mann - Whitney U test). Whereas at the planning stage there is no significant difference in view of autonomous learning and age (p= 0.132 >0.05 Mann- Whitney U test).

Kruskal -Wallis test was applied to define the difference between ALS scores according to class and education variable.

Table 4. Results of the Kruskal - Wallis test of ALS scores according to class

	Class	n	$\overline{X}$	x^2	sd	p
Autonomous Learning	Freshmen	46	83.18			
	Juniors	47	73.52	2.581	3	.461
	Sophomores	33	81.35			
	Seniors	36	89.90			
Total		162				

p > 0.05

As Table 4 displays, there was no significant difference between the autonomous learning scores and class level (p= 0.461 > 0.05 Kruskal - Wallis test), which signifies that the degree of autonomy in view of class was at the same level.

Table 5. Results of the Kruskal - Wallis test ALS scores according to the country of education

	Country	n	$\overline{X}$	x^2	sd	p
Autonomous Learning	Turkey	48	84.61			
	Germany	35	82.80	3.267	3	.352
	Turkey and Germany	70	75.86			
	Others	9	103.67			
	Total	162				

p > 0.05

Table 5 illustrates the results of ALS in view of country of education. As it is displayed, there is no significant difference regarding this variable (p= 0.352 >0.05 Kruskal - Wallis test). It concludes that the degree of autonomy was at the same level in view of country of education.

Table 6. Results of the Kruskal -Wallis test ALS scores according to high school graduation from Germany

	High School	n	$\overline{X}$	x^2	sd	p
Autonomous Learning	Hauptschule	30	51.32			
	Realschule	32	42.95	1.851	3	.604
	Gymnasium	15	43.27			
	Gesamtschule	14	44.50			
	Total	91				

p > 0.05

As Table 6 shows, there is no significant difference between students graduated from high schools from Germany (p= 0.604 >0.05 Kruskal - Wallis test), which signifies that all of these students had the same degree of autonomy.

4. Discussion

Prior studies have emphasized the importance of learner autonomy as a key competence for lifelong learning. In addition, "More learner-centered modes of learning which have been encouraged among learners have necessitated the introduction of autonomy in learning as a central component in the teaching/ learning process "(Sert, Adamson & Büyüköztürk, 2012, p.129). As mentioned before very little was found in literature on learner autonomy with the focus on teacher perspective (Sert, 2007, p.182). Therefore, the research attempted to contribute to this issue by providing empirical evidences. For this purpose, prospective German language teachers' autonomous learning behaviors were analyzed in terms of some variables. On the question of 'To what degree are prospective German language teachers' learning autonomously?', this study found that on average autonomous learning is on a sufficient level (Table 1). Yet there were significant differences between the stages planning, performing and evaluating. Autonomous learning average scores at the evaluating stage were lower compared with the other stages (Table 1). On the question of 'Is there a statistically significant difference of the scores in view of the variables gender, age, class level and education?' the study revealed that autonomous learning scores have shown significant differences in terms of gender in favor of female students (Table 2). This finding confirms that autonomous learning behavior differ with regard to gender (Sakai, Takagi & Cu, 2011). In view of gender the differences in the learning process is especially significant at the planning and evaluating stage, whereas at the performing stage there is no significant difference between female and male students (Table 2). Furthermore, there are significant differences in terms of age. Students above the age of 29 are learning more autonomously as students below this age. It is evident that students above the age of 29 are acting more autonomously at the performing and evaluating stage, whereas at the planning stage there is no significant difference (Table 3). The results of this study did not show any significant differences in terms of class level and education (Table 4 & Table 6). Average scores of students educated in Germany were as same as of students educated in Turkey. However, with regard to the sample size related to educational background, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be generalized to the scores of students educated in other countries like Austria, Netherlands and Swiss (Table 5).

5. Conclusions

The findings will doubtless be much scrutinized, but there are some immediately dependable conclusions for learner autonomy. It can be concluded that autonomous learning behaviors are linked to gender. In general, it seems that female students are acting more autonomously as male students. It can thus be suggested that male students have to be supported especially at the planning and evaluating stage. With other words methods and techniques allowing learners' involvement in the learning process have to be used at the planning and evaluating stage especially with a focus on male students. Further there is a link between age and autonomous learning behavior. The findings show that older learners tend to learn more autonomously as the younger ones. "When learning is a matter of adding information to an existing construct (…)" (Benson, 2001, p.37) it might be possible that learning and life experience shape autonomous learning behaviors. As at the tertiary level of education mixed age classes are mostly common, it is crucial to consider learning needs of different ages. Thus it is suggested to implement various techniques and methods able to respond to the interests of these learners.

As mentioned before educational institutions need to find adequate ways to deal with diverse expectations. Traditional influenced teachers assume learners to be homogenous as classroom instructions are applied to the whole class in the same way while ignoring diversities. However, in an

autonomous sense classes are on the basis heterogeneous with regard to their various needs and interests (Haerens, Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens & Van Petegem, 2015, p.27). Therefore, further studies with more focus on autonomous learning considering diversities are recommended. Hence methods and techniques allowing an intensified learner participation in the learning process is needed while respecting individual differences.

Further in teacher education it is of great importance to provide learning opportunities as "In initial teacher education the main concern lies on the development of qualities which might be applied to teaching practices in future" (Neuner, 1994, p.14). Therefore, it is recommended to implement various methods and techniques that can be used by teachers in their future classes. Furthermore, for the development of teachers' life-long learning ability it is crucial to promote autonomous learning especially by "learners who have just commenced their academic education since it will lead them to become competent enough to take the responsibility for their own learning" (Balçıkanlı, 2008, p.283). Out of the findings it can be concluded that learners possess to an extent autonomous learning abilities that might be unconsciously. On the other hand, "In the promotion of learner autonomy the main concern lies on the development of diverse competences allowing learners to be aware of their actual state" (Hatipoğlu & Deregözü, 2014, p.144). Thus it is suggested to give learners opportunities that allow determining their own state." It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself or herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned how to think and how to learn" (Trebbi, 1990, p.4). Such an understanding is just to that extent possible as learners are encouraged to take responsibility in their own learning. Hence opportunities should be given allowing learners to act independently. Furthermore, raising awareness for this kind of learning is crucial as a shift is needed from a teacher predetermined lesson to a learner determined one. As traditional influenced teachers may tend to teach in a traditional way it is recommended that initial teacher education is improved for learner autonomy and with possible 'models' and 'underlying principles' for in-service teacher education that might make teachers change their practice towards learner autonomy (Dam, 2007, p.3). The concept of learner autonomy seems to be an important issue for future researches and educational practices based on empirical evidences may be contributory for the development of abilities and qualities required by society.

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Almanca öğretmeni adaylarının özerk öğrenme düzeylerine ilişkin bir inceleme

Öz

Günümüz dünyasında yaşanan gelişmeler farklı bilgi ve becerilerin edinilmesini zorunlu kılmıştır. Bu bağlamda birer öğrenen olarak öğretmenlerin de bilgi ve becerilerini günün gerektirdiği düzeye getirmeleri gerekmektedir. Özerk öğrenme becerisi ise bu konuda yardımcı olabileceği düşünülmektedir. Bu çalışma, aday Almanca öğretmenlerinin özerk öğrenme düzeylerini çeşitli değişkenler açısından incelemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Veriler, Alman Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalında eğitim gören öğrencilerden toplanmıştır. Bu çalışma, aday Almanca öğretmenlerinin özerk öğrenme düzeyleri ile yaş ve cinsiyet arasında bir farklılığın olduğunu göstermiştir. Öğrenmenin planlama, uygulama ve değerlendirme aşamalarında da yaş ve cinsiyet açısından farklılıkların olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: öğretmen eğitimi; özerk öğrenme; özerk öğrenme ölçeği.

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