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Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who is the Most Autonomous of Them All?

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Abstract

Learner Autonomy is a key element in the field of education, and the number of academic studies in the field has considerably increased recently. Educators have also attached importance to classroom implementations to raise their learners' autonomy over time. In this classroom action research study at a university in Turkey, I aimed to present the findings to this question: What is my learners' level of awareness regarding their own learning and study habits? This article will present the results of this classroom inquiry based on a portfolio task that asked learners to prepare an oral report about their study habits. Data were collected through student notes, my notes on the whiteboard, and observations throughout the task. The thematic analysis method was used to analyze patterns in the data. The results suggest that learners are good at accessing study materials according to their identified needs. Although they have some effective strategies for *how to learn*, these strategies are outnumbered by *source selection strategies* in the *students' suggestions* list. This article may be useful to those who are interested in promoting learner autonomy through classroom activities.

Keywords: learner autonomy, reflective classroom activities, language advising, teacher advisors

Learner Autonomy has been one of the trending concepts which language educators in Turkey are willing to explore more in recent years. Especially in the institution where I am teaching, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University (AYBU hereafter), there is an increasing interest from my colleagues on how to promote learner autonomy in classroom settings. I also believe as a teacher that it is one of my primary responsibilities to guide my students about how to lead their own learning journey.

At AYBU School of Foreign Languages (AYBU SFL), students are required to complete one year of English classes before they start studying their own major. They are offered an English Proficiency Exam at the end of the academic year. The level of the exam is B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and each student may take the proficiency exam two more times in the summer period if they fail it the first time. If they fail all three exams, they are required to repeat the English preparatory program for the next academic year. I have been teaching these repeat students since 2016; therefore, I have had enough time and chance to observe the general profile of these repeat students and classes. I have observed

several different underlying reasons which lead to their failure. However, one common feature they share with me is that they generally lack the characteristics of an autonomous learner. My observations and experiences have taught me that learners should be supported to be more autonomous, not only out of class but also in a classroom setting, so that they can lead and direct their own learning. With the motive to promote learner autonomy through classroom activities, I applied this exploratory classroom research in one of my classes, where I taught English to these students who were studying their second academic year at AYBU SFL.

Learner Autonomy and Its Significance in Language Classes

As the well-known English proverb goes, ‘*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*’ In educational terms, providing information about a foreign language only will limit our learners to the information they have. However, as educators, if we can contribute to our learners’ learning processes by helping them learn *how to learn*, they may gain the skills to ‘feed’ themselves for a lifetime. Therefore, learner autonomy has become a key element of all types of learning, and it has seen a considerable growth of interest in academia. Holec (1979) was the first researcher to define autonomy as the ability that one has to take over the responsibility of his/her own learning. Najeeb (2013) claims that in language learning, three main pedagogical principles are highlighted in terms of learner autonomy which are *learner involvement*, *learner reflection* and *appropriate use of the target language*. When learners are involved in learning, they take over the responsibility of their own learning. Learner reflection is provided when learners are supported to think critically, plan, implement their plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. Lastly, considering the target language as the main medium of language learning will help the learner to use it appropriately.

However, learner autonomy is neither an easy term to explain, nor does it occur by itself. We, as educators, should support our learners to develop their autonomous learning skills. Kato and Mynard (2015) state that this kind of guidance can be made possible in several ways. Learning advisors can prepare learners in advising sessions through the promotion of deep reflection. Another method that can be applied is to help learners through *structured awareness raising* classroom activities. Integrating *awareness raising* approaches to classroom implementations will enable students to gain more insight into their learning processes.

Characteristics of an Autonomous Learner

There is no doubt that autonomy is a complex issue, and a long list can be formed to define an autonomous language learner. Reviewing the literature on learner autonomy shows that an autonomous language learner has a number of characteristics. Dickinson (1993), for example, lists five features and states that autonomous learners:

- have an understanding of what is being taught,
- can set their own learning goals,
- can choose and apply appropriate learning strategies,
- are aware of the strategies that are not working for them and are able to use others, and
- can monitor and evaluate their own learning process.

As Dickinson's list indicates, autonomous learners have control over both their cognitive and metacognitive skills and strategies and are also good at evaluating and adapting their learning processes. We, as educators, may conclude from this description that learners should be supported in their learning journey so that they adopt these characteristics through classroom activities or training. One area that could help us is advising in language learning (ALL) which aims to assist learners to develop these characteristics.

Advising in Language Learning and Awareness Raising

ALL is defined by Kato and Mynard (2015) as the support given to a language learner so that (s)he can be a reflective, effective, and aware learner. In this regard, the medium of communication between a learner and an advisor is an *intentional reflective dialogue* (IRD). IRD is “a conscious discourse with learners with the purpose of engaging them in transformation in learning” (Kato & Mynard, 2015, p. 32). An advisor can be a professional advisor, a language teacher, or a more knowledgeable peer. Advising can be implemented inside or outside of a classroom setting. Although it is usually one-to-one, it can also be applied in small groups. The term advising should not be regarded as *advice giving* as defined in several other fields (Kato & Mynard, 2015). Although a classroom teacher may give advice to a learner on their learning process, a learner advisor aims to raise awareness on this issue (Horai & Wright, 2016). However, a *teacher-advisor* has the chance to integrate advising into classroom activities. The role of being a teacher-advisor consists of two metaphorical hats. In other words, from my

understanding, a teacher-advisor is a teacher and a certified language learning advisor. The teacher's hat at this point can switch to an advisor's hat. As a life-long learner and a participant of this study, I believe advising is an asset for the learner to transform the blurred picture of their learning journey by raising awareness and making it a clearer one.

Promoting Metacognitive Awareness in the Classroom Setting

Schraw (1998) puts forward the idea that metacognitive awareness is crucial for a successful learning process. Learners with high metacognitive awareness better manage their cognitive skills and are more aware of their own weaknesses and strengths. He further claims that metacognitive knowledge is teachable in the classroom with four instructional strategies to raise metacognitive awareness. These are: promoting general awareness, improving self-knowledge, developing regulatory skills, and promoting learning environments that are instrumental to the construction of metacognitive knowledge.

There are case studies showing that it is beneficial to cover classroom activities that will improve learners' metacognitive skills. Desautel (2009), for instance, conducted an action research case study with his second-grade elementary school students. The study searched for the effectiveness of classroom practices in promoting metacognitive awareness. The practices included self-reflection and goal-setting activities, and the metacognitive level of the students was assessed through a survey. The researcher argued that the practices applied during the study enriched student's self-awareness. In another study conducted in Saudi Arabian context, Al Asmari (2013) collected the opinions of 60 teachers regarding the practices of learner autonomy in their classrooms. Similarly, the researcher found that it is important to provide learner training together with the classroom activities and make it an integral part of the teaching process so as to help learners become more autonomous and aware learners. Although these two studies have been conducted with two different types of participants of the classroom (one with students and the other with teachers), they both indicate that promoting metacognitive skills through classroom practices contributes to learner autonomy as well as metacognitive awareness.

My Experiences Concerning Learner Autonomy as a Teacher-Advisor

After becoming a learner advisor, I started to conduct advising sessions, through which I discovered the power of asking reflective questions to learners rather than giving answers to

them. I also tried to connect this to my role as a teacher and apply classroom advising in my courses. When I first attempted to do this in my classes, I could clearly observe my students' astonished faces as they were not used to answering the questions in their minds. They had always asked questions to their teachers and expected them to solve their learning issues. However, over time, they began to realize that whenever they posed a question to me, they received another question in return. I believe this promoted a deeper level of thinking concerning their *selves* and their learning.

In 2018, one year after I completed my advising education, I took part in a study called the Personalized Learning Module (PLM) at AYBU (Howard et al., 2021). The study consisted of seven modules, and each module was conducted through group advising sessions where each group had six volunteer students led by one advisor. The PLM was the experience that taught me the power of peer learning. In each module, we focused on a different learning issue or strategy. At the end of the seven-week module, the student group members were able to advise each other, feeling less need for an advisor. This experience was the one where I concretely observed the power of peer learning.

Being a teacher of 16 years and a learning advisor, I believe it is of utmost importance to promote awareness through classroom activities regularly. Therefore, I aimed to write this paper based on a task which I applied in my classroom. The task was originally provided by the curriculum unit of our department, and it asked learners to *write an oral report about their study habits*. However, I decided to change this task to a more reflective and interactive one. When I first saw the task in the syllabus, I thought that my students might write memorized sentences describing how they study daily, focusing only on completing the required minutes of their presentation. Aiming to apply the task more effectively and to make it more reflective for the learners, I decided to exploit it by adding reflective prompts and an interactive pair work exercise to it. Furthermore, I wanted to exclude the possibility that one student would not listen to the other during the pair work presentation. That was the moment when I realized that if I had covered the task the way it was originally provided, almost no real learning would have taken place in those four class hours. I felt like my students needed a deeper self-reflection on the topic first, and afterwards, if they interviewed each other about their own study habits, they would have the chance to learn from each other's learning strategies and come up with suggestions for one another about the challenges they faced in language learning. They needed some guidance to

structure their interviews, so I prepared some possible question prompts they may ask while interviewing their friends. My purpose in preparing these leading questions was to promote reflection. I wanted my students to think deeply about their learning and analyze themselves as language learners. Therefore, the questions had to be both informative and reflective. A detailed description of the task is provided in the method section below.

My motive to change the task was my ‘switched viewpoint’, which occurred during and after my learning advisory education at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Japan, in 2017. I have always defined myself as an enthusiastic language teacher. However, despite being aware that one of my roles is a *facilitator*, at the end of this training, I ended up with the conclusion that I also had prescribed diagnoses in my mind, and these diagnoses would somehow apply to all learners. This training led me to do so much reflection that, at the end of the training, I realized that reflection was now an indispensable part of my life, both as a learning advisor and a teacher.

This exploratory classroom task was another effective experience in which learners enjoyed peer learning mutually. At the end of the class, the right word to describe my feelings was that I was *thrilled*. I was thrilled to see how deep they thought of their learning; I was thrilled to see how *aware* they were about their strength to deal with their learning issues, and I was also thrilled to see how creative they were in using problem-solving skills. One of the ‘*aha*’ *moments* I experienced in the class was when I was writing the suggestions they made to their partners on the board. Everybody was listening attentively and noting down all the suggestions instead of taking a picture of the board. This high interest of the students in this task is also an indicator of how motivated they were in learning how to learn. As a result, I felt more encouraged to support them to gain the skills they needed in their journey to become more autonomous learners.

Method

Study Design

The current qualitative study was designed and conducted as a classroom action research study which is a research method for identifying best classroom practices or areas in need of improvement to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in the immediate classroom (Mettetal, 2012). According to Winter (1996), classroom action research concerns the way

teachers shape their learning circumstances and how they draw conclusions from their classroom practices. Action research is a chance for them to implement new ideas or tackle issues with certain solutions, and to systematically observe the results.

Participants

The task was carried out with the participation of 27 students. The students' ages varied between 18 and 21, and 16 of them were female students while 11 of them were male. Four class hours were allocated to cover the task. At AYBU SFL, one academic year consists of 28 weeks which are divided into four periods, and each period lasts seven weeks. It was the third week of period two, and my class contained CEFR B2 level repeat students, which means they were studying English for their second year at preparatory school at AYBU.

Procedure

This study stemmed from my inquiry as a teacher-advisor about my learners' level of awareness of their learning strategies, strengths, weaknesses, and study habits. The task asked students to prepare an oral report and talk about their study habits, and it was one of their portfolio tasks. Each student may collect up to 100 points from a variety of different tasks, assignments, and tests to pass one level. 10% of this total score is based on the four different portfolio tasks in each period. Therefore, this portfolio task was worth 2.5 points. The instruction for the task was as follows: *Prepare a short oral report about your study habits*. However, I revised the task in order to promote better reflection and interaction.

The first step while introducing the task to my students was to tell them to think about themselves as language learners and analyze their study habits. This is how I gave instructions for the task:

- Get into pairs.
- Describe your study habits to your partner.
- Your partner will take notes, and then you will do the same for your partner.
- Prepare an oral report about your partner's study habits, learning strategies, and learning issues.
- Remember to end your report with a suggestion to your partner.

I provided some informative and reflective questions that could help them reflect more. Each student had 10 minutes to prepare. The following were the prompt questions for reflection:

- Think deeply about your own study habits.
- When and how do you study effectively in a day?
- What are your learning strategies? How do you study reading, listening, writing, speaking, grammar, vocabulary?
- What are your strengths and areas to improve?

After this self-reflection process, they were supposed to describe everything to their partners. Meanwhile, the partner took notes of their partner's study habits, learning strategies, and the challenges they faced as a language learner. Five minutes were allocated for this peer discussion activity for each pair, during which the teacher took the role of a monitor. Finally, all the students were given 10 more minutes to organize the notes they took while their partner was talking. After this, they were required to present their report about their partners to the whole class. They were also supposed to end their reports with a suggestion to their partners.

After each student presented his/her report, I wrote the suggestions of the presenter on the board by one by one and asked the whole class how they found this suggestion, whether they experienced a similar issue, and how they overcame that issue. I observed that each student felt relieved to see that others were also experiencing a similar problem. This also gave them the feeling that they were not alone, and it is normal to experience that kind of a problem. At the end of the day, they had a long list of suggestions which they produced on their own without being led by the teacher. It would not be wrong to say that another reward for the day was the feeling of satisfaction arising from the atmosphere of cooperation and encouragement.

Ethics

As this task was already one of the requirements of their portfolio, I did not get additional permission to conduct the action research. However, no data of a personal nature was collected from the students, and as described in the procedure section, the students did not engage with any tool or activity that could be detrimental to them, either physically or psychologically.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis method was used to analyze the qualitative data collected through student notes, my notes on the whiteboard, and observations. It is a way of identifying commonly occurring codes in the data set and deducing specific patterns from these codes, also called themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Although scholars argue that thematic analyses are capable of yielding

dependable and profound results (Braun & Clarke, 2006), there seems to be no commonly accepted way of practicing the method. For this particular study, I noted down the suggestions from peers and student reports, combined the similar or the same ones, and finally, classified the gathered codes under two categories, *suggestions about study materials*, representing the cognitive skills, and *suggestions for how to learn* representing the metacognitive strategies.

Findings and Discussion

Suggestions from Peers

Study Material Suggestions and *Suggestions for How to Learn* revealed to what extent the students were aware of their cognitive and metacognitive skills and strategies. Their study material suggestions included a variety of resources, which will help their peers to study productive skills, receptive skills and also sub-skills such as grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, the learners' *suggestions for how to learn*, which will define their metacognitive awareness, were mainly about organizational and motivational strategies. A sample figure of this categorization method can be seen below in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Categorized Suggestions from Learners

1. Study Material/Sources Suggestions:

These suggestions represent the cognitive skills of the learners. The list below, which was formed from the suggestions of the learners, included a considerable number of digital

and printed resources. This variety reveals that the learners are mostly good at accessing different types of study materials.

a) To practice receptive skills (Reading & Listening)

- Download applications and visit web resources (www.voscreen.com, www.listenaminute.com, www.lyricstraining.com, www.esl-lab.com, www.learningenglishteens.britishcouncil.org, www.duolingo.com)
- Go to the school library and read short story books.
- Go to the Independent Learning Center (ILC) to read magazines; do the listening and reading exercises prepared for us.
- Listen to Spotify podcasts in English. (www.spotify.com)
- Watch TV series with or without English subtitles.

b) To practice productive skills (Writing & Speaking)

- Download applications; visit web resources (www.tandem.net, www.cambly.com and the mobile application *meeff*). You can meet foreign people and talk with them.
- Watch essay videos on www.youtube.com.
- Write one essay every week. Check your essays on web resources (www.writeandimprove.com and www.grammarly.com).
- Write your own dialogs to practice writing, grammar, and vocabulary.
- Choose a reading text and use it to write a response paragraph.

c) To practice sub-skills (Grammar & Vocabulary)

- Prepare flashcards to practice grammar and vocabulary as presented in the course book series in use at school.
- Study proficiency books to learn vocabulary

2. Suggestions for How to Learn

These suggestions represent the metacognitive skills of the learners. The strategies that the learners adopted were mostly organizational or motivational. When compared to the *study material suggestions*, this list includes less variety.

a) Organizational Strategies

- Have a daily / weekly to-do list.
- Have a break of 10 minutes after every 40 minutes.

- Organize your time during the day.

b) Motivational Strategies

- If you don't like doing reading exercises, read something that is about your hobby. For example, I like history, and I always read the National Geographic history website (www.nationalgeographic.com).
- Do some breathing exercises when you can't focus on studying.
- Give yourself a reward after you do something good about your studies.
- Remind yourself to *never give up*.
- Remember your goal when you are not motivated.

The analyses reveal that learners suggested 12 different items on the category *study material suggestions* while the items on the category *how to learn* was 8. This indicates that they have more control over source selection strategies than they do on motivational and organizational learning strategies. Also, from the high number and the variety of the study sources for different skills and sub-skills, I conclude that learners are good at reaching a variety of study materials according to their identified needs. Although they have some critical strategies for deciding motivational and organizational learning strategies, source selection strategies outnumber the former ones. However, the findings also indicate they have an awareness of their learning at the metacognitive level to some extent because the suggestions for *organizational strategies* indicate that they have some awareness of the necessity of planning and time management. Moreover, under the subcategory *motivational strategies*, students focused on some encouragement strategies when they felt unmotivated and some strategies on how to make their learning more fun.

I observed that the integration of ALL into classroom activities which promote learner autonomy, helps learners to reflect on their learning processes more frequently. Therefore, they may reach the characteristics of an autonomous learner discussed in this article when they are exposed to ALL in classroom settings and reflective classroom activities continuously.

Hozayen (2011) proposes that reflection makes learners more active and critical in that it enables them to analyze their learning strategies; therefore, they start making their own learning decisions in the learning process. The findings of the study, similarly, demonstrate that this classroom task assisted learners to reflect on their learning both at cognitive and at metacognitive

aspects. First, they had the opportunity to identify their own learning strategies and styles by reflecting on how they learn best and what their study patterns are. They were able to seek effective strategies by listening to their peers, which also promoted peer collaboration. Furthermore, thanks to their self-reflection, reports, and suggestions from their peers on their study habits, each learner reflected on and evaluated their own language performance. However, when the findings about the metacognitive skills of the learners are taken into consideration, it would not be wrong to say that learners need to be more aware of what metacognitive knowledge is and how this knowledge may contribute to their learning process. While their suggestions for how to learn include a variety of items related to motivation and organization, the list lacks goal setting or self-monitoring and self-evaluation strategies, which are also two other indispensable characteristics of autonomous learners. I felt, as a teacher, that I could keep supporting them by teaching about the metacognitive skills explicitly with an aim to create their awareness of the context and let them reflect on their learning later on. One example could be an application of a learning advising tool followed by a reflective writing task as a classroom activity.

Conclusion

This study focused on a reflective classroom activity conducted with repeat students at AYBU SFL. During the task, students reflected on their own learning performance, learning strategies, and study habits. Afterwards, they shared their reflections with a classmate, and each student prepared an oral report of his/her partner's reflection with some suggestions in it. The findings of this study revealed that students felt more willing to participate in the lesson actively when they had the opportunity to reflect on their own learning and language performance through reflective classroom activities, which promote learner autonomy. Moreover, interaction and interest in the task increased when they shared their reflections with classmates, which, ultimately, resulted in peer collaboration. Secondly, the suggestions provided by the students in this study indicate that they tended to focus and reflect more on cognitive skills than on metacognitive skills when they are asked to reflect on their learning. However, because they were already exposed to such reflective activities in their previous classes, they also had some awareness on how to motivate themselves and how to organize their studies during the day.

This study has some limitations, and some possible solutions can be put forward. Firstly, students may not be used to doing reflective activities in a classroom setting. In this case, they may not know how to analyze their learning performance and may have difficulty defining and stating their strengths and weaknesses. However, activities promoting reflection and metacognitive awareness can be regularly applied during the term starting from the first day of class at the beginning of the academic year. The features of a good reflection may even be taught explicitly. Second, learners might adopt inappropriate strategies for themselves just because their peers benefited from them. A solution to prevent this may be to apply study plans in the first week of the year and reflect on the plans on a regular basis, which can help them find the right strategies. Moreover, more qualitative data may be gathered to assess the metacognitive awareness levels of learners. Therefore, I recommend that further research or studies focus on the potential effectiveness of training learners explicitly and continuously about metacognitive knowledge and strategies for their language learning.

Notes on the Contributor

Ebru_Sinar Okutucu is an English instructor and a learning advisor at AYBU. She graduated from Gazi University (GU) ELT Department and holds a master's degree in Educational Administration from GU. Her interests include PD, integrating critical thinking skills into EFL settings, educational leadership, advising in language learning and learner autonomy.

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