

Full Length Research Paper

Autonomous foreign language learning

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This study investigates foreign language teacher candidates' views regarding the issue of autonomous learning through a survey given to the students in the Department of German Language Teaching at Marmara University in İstanbul. Participants' views on their responsibilities, learning styles, strategies, and motivation during the learning processes were elicited through the scale "checklists for learner autonomy". The results of the study indicate that while prospective teachers were aware of their learning styles and strategies, their strengths and weaknesses, they needed to develop their skills to put into practice what they knew about autonomous learning in theory.

Key words: Autonomous learning, learning style, learning strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to determine to what extent the university students are aware of their own learning styles and strategies. The ways of solving learning problems were also investigated in the study. Another purpose is to reveal the learning motivation and planning. The point here is to help students who have difficulty in learning to be more successful.

The sample group, which was limited to the teacher candidates studying in the Department of German Language and Education at Marmara University during the academic year 2012-2013, is composed of the first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students. The sample group to be examined in terms of their learning habits was investigated from such aspects as the type, strategy, motivation, planning of learning, realization of the learning plan and measurement of learning achievement.

FIELD STUDIES IN TURKEY

After defining the primary problems related to

autonomous learning, the academic literature on this field was examined. There have been some postgraduate thesis studies conducted on the topic of autonomous learning in foreign language education in recent years.

The increased amount of academic study lately in Turkey draws attention to the fact that the foreign language education is provided through autonomous learning in university preparatory classes. Some of these studies examining the autonomous learning from different aspects were shortly introduced and their importance for our study was mentioned in the study.

In the postgraduate thesis by Koçak (2003), autonomous learning readiness levels of 186 students who learned English at the Preparatory School of Başkent University were investigated. It was found in the study that students had high level of motivations, succeeded in using strategies through self-observation; however, that they held teachers responsible for most of the learning activities and mid-level students were more successful in autonomous English learning activities.

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Karabıyık (2008) investigated the relationship between culture of learning and Turkish university preparatory students' readiness for learner autonomy. The students who learned through the autonomous learning activities at high school were more effective in their perception and behaviors concerning this topic. It was also emphasized that other individual factors should be examined as well (Karabıyık, 2008).

Demirtaş (2010) who came up with similar results investigated the conformity of autonomous learning in English preparatory class with student requirements, the place of autonomous activities in the course and their effects on students' perceptions and academic achievements.

Kaya (2012) conducted a "survey study concerning the autonomous learning skills in foreign language learning with 162 second-year students of distance English Teaching Undergraduate Program" in the postgraduate thesis on autonomous learning skills of distance education learners in foreign language learning: Distance ETUP. Another researcher, Göçmez (2014) investigated the readiness levels of students who received distance English education by evaluating their views on autonomous learning.

Despite confirming a statistically significant difference in autonomous learning habits of German Language teacher candidates at İstanbul University according to the gender and age variables, Deregözü (2014) could not find a significant difference according to their class levels and educational levels. It was found that their learning habits were on higher levels than planning, application stages and assessment.

In the postgraduate thesis study named 'An examination of teacher candidates' autonomous learning levels according to various variables', Alkan (2015) examined 776 first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students who were studying at Gaziosmanpaşa University, Faculty of Education during the academic year 2014-2015. The findings obtained from the analysis of the "autonomous learning scale" which was used to determine teacher candidates' autonomous learning levels showed that the level of autonomous learning illustrated a significant difference according to the department and the high school from which they graduated. However, no difference was found according to the variables gender, the place where they spent most of their lives, the geographical region, class level and family's income status. In addition, it was observed that there was a positively significant but low-level relationship between teacher candidates' autonomous learning levels and their GPA.

Finally, it was determined that academic self-efficacy and academic motivations were important predictors of teacher candidates' autonomous learning.

The aim of Yılmaz's (2014) postgraduate thesis study on foreign language learning habits of German language teacher candidates was to determine the learning habits

acquired by students who were studying at the Department of German Language Teaching of Marmara University during 2012-2013 spring term. It was found that most of the students knew the learning strategies and the motivational factors, and that they were able to determine the duration and environment of study. However, it was revealed that the students could not comprehend and understand how they would benefit from those strategies when facing challenges during the learning process. Another remarkable point was that the students seemed quite reluctant about new learning strategies.

The research focused on the autonomous learning attitudes of students especially in preparatory classes or faculties of education. The type of learning, choosing right strategies and their contribution to the learning processes and the learning achievement were examined. However, the similarity between previous postgraduate thesis studies, despite the fact that they constantly address the same issues, prevents the research subject from being improved. Information exchange is required to ensure a more effective field research. It is therefore believed that waste of time and resource can be avoided and more effective academic studies can be conducted.

The problem

Each student has different habits during foreign language learning. This is why learning strategies and habits, motivation and self-assessment play important roles, hence the concept of autonomous learning. The activity of learning should not be managed externally but by the student himself/herself. Therefore, university students are expected to take more responsibilities and increasingly handle their learning by themselves. Students have to identify their weaknesses and deal with it through appropriate strategies they choose. Being able to make this choice presents a great problem.

Another important problem is the loss of motivation during learning. In this case, students generally stop studying instead of trying other methods to gain the learning achievement. The fact that students do not know themselves sufficiently poses another problem; they consider themselves to be either too superior or too inferior. Another point to remember is that students maintain a score-oriented learning process. In this case, language learning is, of course, not possible. Therefore, university students have to take "lifelong learning" as basis.

The concept of autonomous learning

Even Pestalozzi as an educational reformist addressed the type of learning and explained this change of educational understanding as follows:

Table 1.Traditional versus autonomous learning.

Criteria	Traditional approach	Autonomous learning approach
Identification of Learning Goals	Identification of Learning goals by the Educator	Determining the learning contract according to content and assessment criteria
Preparation for the Lesson	Preparation of the material	Collecting the material
	Choice of method	Library
	Planning the program	Specifying the choices
Method Used	Offering ideas and solutions	Mobilizing the potential
Assessment of field knowledge	Directly by the teacher	Conveying through helping
Type of motivation	Extrinsically	Intrinsically
Main Understanding	Teaching	Consulting
	Informing	Helping

(Deiterring, 1995, p. 109, cited from Hirth, 1980, p. 124).

We have unexceptionably come to understand that a human is not taught with what he hears but what he does (cited by Wilkner, 1987, p. 4).

The renowned educational reformist Pestalozzi pointed out that learning is not performed only by listening. Learning is an efficient action; students learn by doing personal acts and gain experience through different senses to improve themselves and perceive both the world and themselves. Another figure among today's pedagogues, Carl Rogers, emphasized that learning is possible through personal efforts with the statement "An individual cannot teach another one directly but may enable the other one to learn" (Rogers, 1951). He therefore indicated that learning act can be facilitated. He mentioned the importance of the same situation, "autonomous learning is the ability to assume one's own learning's responsibility" (Holec, 1981). Autonomous learning means that students should make their own decisions about their learning. Accordingly, the traits of the autonomous learner are defined as follows:

*He/she has desire to learn,
is aware of how he/she will learn,
creates a learning plan,
knows what methods or strategies to use,
knows whether to learn by himself/herself or with others,
is aware of his/her goals,
knows how to plan the learning durations,
knows how to check and assess his/her learning.*
(Rampillon and Bimmel, 2000, p. 33).

In the Common European Framework of Reference accepted as an important resource in language education, autonomous learning is specified according to the following fields:

Raising the learner's awareness of his/her present state

*of knowledge;
Self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives;
Selection of learning materials;
Using appropriate instruments for self-assessment.*
(Quetz, 2001, p. 18).

As can be understood from the points above, thinkers (Rogers, 1951; Rampillon and Bimmel, 2000: p.33); Quetz, 2001: p.18) the responsibility of learning in autonomous learning belongs to the student. It is also important that teachers need to master the principles of autonomous learning.

Teachers' duty is not only to convey information but also, as experts, to help students when they face difficulties. Opportunities should be provided so that students can have experiences.

Students now assume more responsibilities to learn thanks to the role of exchange between student and teacher.

Goals of learning are not identified only by teachers; students should also decide on what purposes they will achieve through the contents. The roles exchanged between teachers and students are given in Table 1 (Deiterring, 1995, p. 108).

It is possible to summarize the differences between the approaches of traditional and autonomous learning in Table 1.

When one compares both approaches, it is clear that in autonomous learning, contrary to the traditional approach, the responsibility belongs to the student rather than the teacher. The teacher supports the student for any kinds of problems, encouraging him/her. The student does not feel that he/she is controlled. He/she decides about his/her own learning goal and path. No longer does he/she only consume the learning particles provided by the teacher. Instead, he/she picks up the important

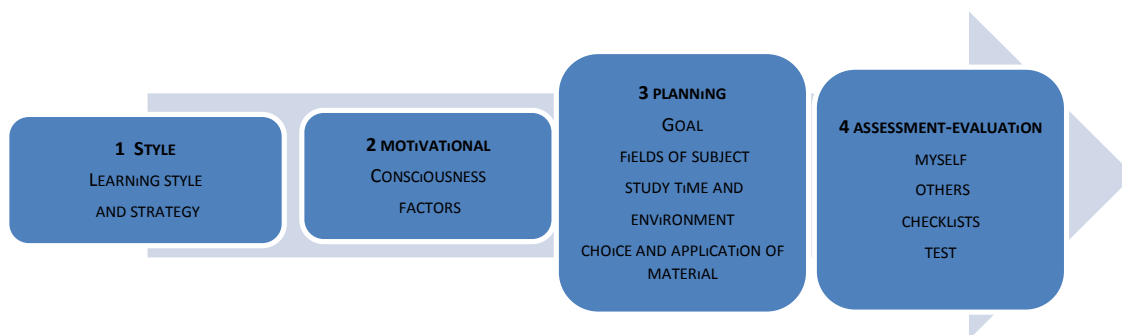


Figure 1. Autonomous learning field.

information while constructing his/her knowledge.

Autonomous learning which has been utilized in different fields of application over time has also been an important didactic approach in the foreign language education. To be able to be autonomous, the student should specify appropriate learning strategies for himself/herself, and direct and configure the learning process. The readiness level and motivational consciousness of the students need to be enhanced to ensure the autonomous learning. In addition, this process should also be assisted through learning strategies, techniques, self-assessment and students' awareness. The use of original materials and worksheets is also among the most important elements of this process.

As a result of comparing both approaches, it is seen that the autonomous student assumes the responsibility.

In case of any problems, the teacher supports the student by encouraging him/her. In that case, the student does not have a feeling that he/she is controlled. The student determines his/her learning goal and path by himself/herself. The student is not only the consumer of the topics given by the teacher any more. He/she now chooses the important information and generates his/her own knowledge.

METHOD

An effort was made to determine personal information; responsibilities, skills and motivation levels during the learning process via a 3-point Likert type scale in the survey form evaluated on SPSS software package. The research is based on an intensity analysis performed on the learning habits of German Language teacher candidates (n=117) participated in the survey. The survey used to obtain the data of learning habits during the learning process was developed utilizing the studies by Tassinari (2010) and Başbağı et al. (2014). The questions concerning the motivation, measurement/assessment of the learning achievement and identification of the learning goals were used as the same in the study by Tassinari while learning strategy, learning styles, learning conditions and students' deficiencies were applied from the other study (Başbağı et al., 2014).

Open-ended questions as well as the close-ended ones were

included in the tool, so that the teacher candidates could write down their own thoughts. There are questions for seven different fields in terms of learning habits:

- 1) **Learning styles:** At the beginning of the survey, there is an effort to determine what learning styles and learning strategies the teacher candidates adopt.
- 2) **Motivation to study:** In this section, the motivation awareness, motivational factors and the loss of motivation are addressed.
- 3) **Planning of Learning:** The third section of the survey is for the preparation of the planning of learning. With whom and how do the candidates define their goals?
- 4) **Linguistic skill areas:** Are the areas in which they are deficient and successful able to be specified?
- 5) **Studying conditions:** Are the duration and environmentally studying conditions able to be specified by the teacher candidate?
- 6) **Realization of the learning plan:** Are the deficiencies able to be noticed during the autonomous learning process? Is the necessary studying material able to be chosen? Are the learning activities able to be started and maintained?
- 7) **Assessment of the learning achievement:** Is the learning achievement able to be measured and assessed? Who or what tools are utilized for this?

It is possible to summarize the research questions scrutinized above in the following scheme under the title of autonomous learning field (Figure 1).

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

The introduction and analysis of the findings obtained from the survey was performed in the study. In short, the adopted learning style and strategies were addressed after having known about the characteristics that form the identity profile of the teacher candidates. Finally, the motivation consciousness, factors and the planning of learning were introduced.

Demographic Information on Teacher Candidates

As for the personal profile of the teacher candidates, most (34.19%) of those who study at the Department of German Language and Education is 25 years old and

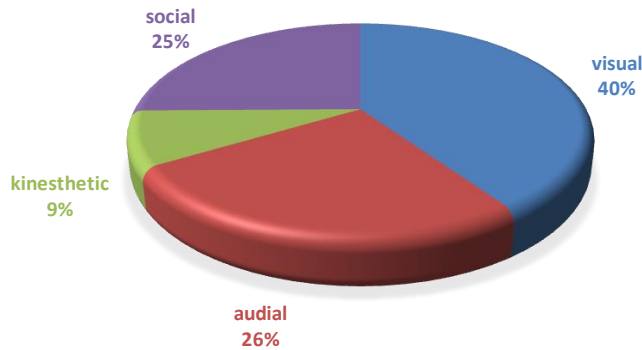


Figure 2. Learning style.

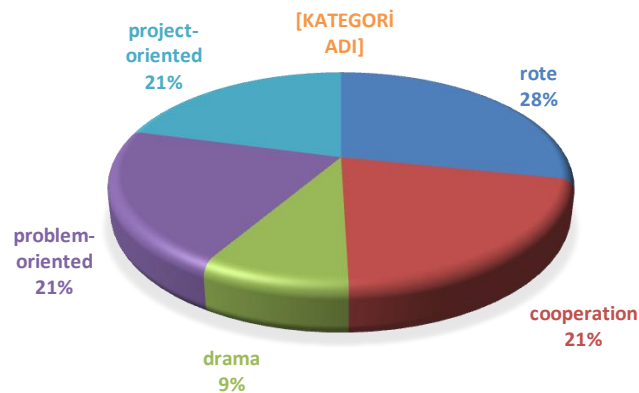


Figure 3. Learning strategy.

above. The majority (73.5%) of them is female. More than half (56.41%) of the students were born in the countries where German language is spoken. 104 of the 117 participants have lived abroad at least once even for a short time. Another point is that more than half (88.03%) of the students have lived in a country where German language is spoken. The majority has been abroad for more than 16 years. Most of the students have been to a school abroad for 6-10 years. It can be seen that last time, most (28.45%) of them went to Hauptschule; the other part (26.3%) went to Gymnasium. Most students have a good command of two foreign languages (49.6%). Majority (32.4%) of the teacher candidates were graduated from a state high school. While 28.2% of the students attended the preparatory class, 71.8% of them did not. Majority (57.6%) of those who attended the preparatory class continued their education there for two terms without interruption (see Annex 2 Identity Profile). It is understood from these results that the student profile has a heterogeneous structure. They have different linguistic levels. It can be seen that they had different linguistic levels before starting the university education;

majority of the teacher candidates who were able to start the university education, skipping the preparatory class have adequate linguistic levels.

Learning styles and strategies of the teacher candidates

It was observed that majority of the teacher candidates were informed about learning strategies and types, they were aware of their strengths and weaknesses; and visual learning was the most utilized learning style during their learning process. Nevertheless, many of the teacher candidates utilize multiple learning styles at the same time. The desire to acquire new learning styles remains on a very low level. The rate differs between 1-7%. As for which strategy to choose, it was stated that mostly project based, cooperation based and rote learning was preferred. Another point to explain is that the most desired learning style is the one performed with role plays. This shows that the candidates are not acquainted with every strategy but curious to learn. Not every student adopts various strategies of learning; however, it should be remembered that a different strategy is chosen while learning (Figures 2 and 3).

Learning motivation of the teacher candidates

In the light of candidates' explanations on this topic, we obtain the following results: Majority of them know what situation will motivate them during the learning process. In the other cross tabulation, the motivation can be ensured through choosing interesting material, awarding the learning achievement, cooperation (two individuals studying together), and the project studies. However, 45% of the candidates are not in the mood of remotivating themselves in case of the loss of motivation. It can be inferred that candidates do not possess different strategies and methods to solve the problem. While only 2% of the participants who said that there are many motivational factors could motivate themselves, 10% of them stated that they had the social motivation. Hence, it is seen that the teacher candidates master the autonomous learning skill to a limited extent because, consequently, the autonomous student learns by deciding on his/her goals and strategies in individual and cooperative ways. Then he/she assesses those decisions (Figures 4 and 5).

Planning of Learning

Majority of the candidates think that they are able to set goals by themselves. While a considerable number of them set their learning goals with the help of others, and

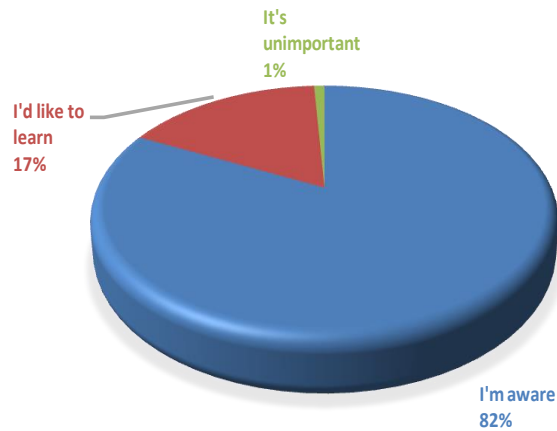


Figure 4. Motivational consciousness

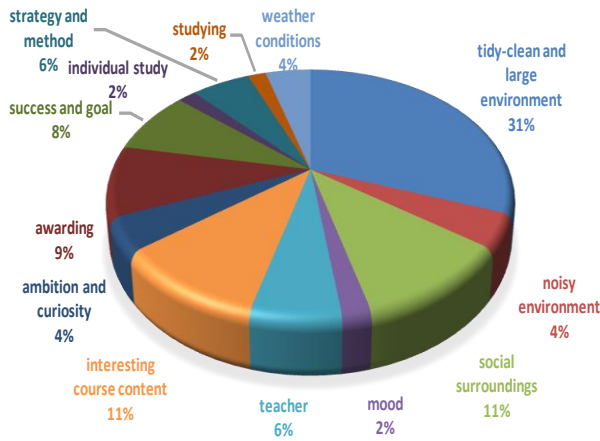


Figure 5. Motivational factors

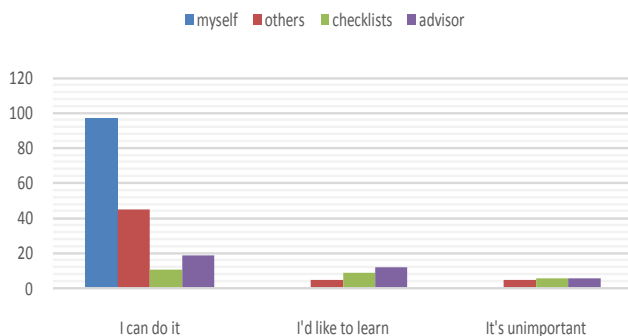


Figure 6. Purpose of planning.

some of them do it with the help of the advisor, few of them set their goals with a checklist. The number of those who think that checklists are important for the learning

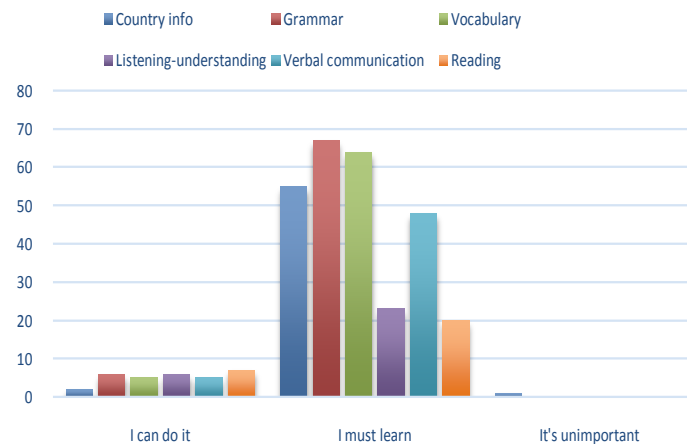


Figure 7. Fields of weaknesses.

process is very few. This indicates that the candidates cannot be adequately efficient in using the checklist for the planning of learning. On the contrary, such lists make it possible for an assessment of the learning activity. All students therefore should use this assessment to be able to be more autonomous. Most of them are not even aware of the fact that such lists help them to guide themselves (Figure 6).

Fields of weaknesses

The primary weaknesses in the German language learning are country info =cultural information, grammar and vocabulary. The teacher candidates who are aware of their deficiencies are therefore able to make the planning to eliminate those deficiencies. Hence, it is also understood how associates can mentor the teacher candidates on the topics in question (Figure 7).

Study time management

Being able to manage study time has an important place in the planning of learning. In Figure 8, most (70%) of the candidates claim that they can plan their time. It is therefore understood that an important condition of autonomous learning is met because planning the study time according to the needs means that one knows how much time individually is needed. Accordingly, it is necessary to specify the aim of the study in a better way (see Appendix 2).

Learning environment

According to the results, majority of the teacher

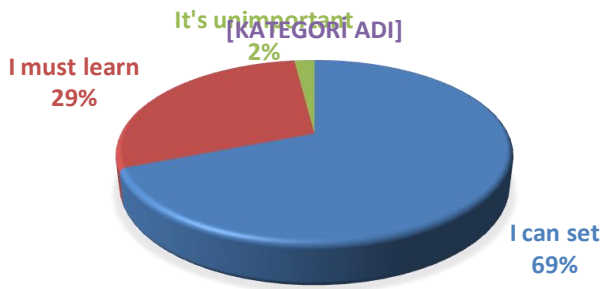


Figure 8. Study time.

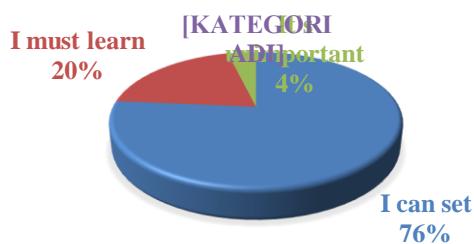


Figure 9. Study environment.

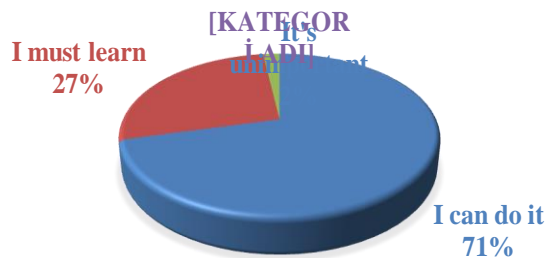


Figure 10. Selection and application of material.

candidates are able to set the learning environment that is useful for them. Choosing and setting an appropriate studying environment is important because it affects the learning process (Figure 9).

Selection of the study material

When considering the answers given with regard to this topic, many (71%) of the candidates claimed that they could choose the materials by themselves and therefore have control on the learning activity. On the contrary, 27% of them stated that they are yet to learn it (Figure 10). The reason is that everyone has different learning backgrounds. We can observe this in some of the candidates who are open to be controlled by others.

Therefore, they do not know how to choose materials and perform the learning activity.

Evaluation and assessment of the learning stages

Majority of the candidates stated that they evaluate/ assess the stage in three different ways. They measured the learning stages by themselves, with an external support or through an examination. Even though majority of the teacher candidates said that they measure their achievements by themselves, through a test or with others, few of them master the evaluation through checklists. And they are not that willing to learn this type of evaluation. Consequently, checklists that may be considered to be the main tool of evaluating the achievement by one are not adopted by the teacher candidates (Figure 11).

Some recommendations concerning assessment and autonomous learning

To sum up, it can be said that the teacher candidates should gain more consciousness about the learning habits and give thought to this topic. Although there are some theoretical information on learning strategies, motivational factors and learning styles, these are not put into practice on an adequate level. According to the results of the research, even though the teacher candidates are aware of the difficulties, they do not know how to deal with that problem because nearly half of the candidates have difficulty in remotivating themselves when they lose motivation. Just as the high level (81.9%) of consciousness in terms of learning styles seems satisfying, willingness to learn the learning styles is on a very low level (1-7%). It is possible to observe the same tendency in the learning strategies. Although there is a high level (72%) of consciousness in that area, they do not seem enthusiastic about acquiring new strategies (6-20%) while determining their learning strategies (87%-93%). Based on these observations, it can be said that the teacher candidates have excessive amount of confidence. While 86% of the teacher candidates have the motivation, 45% of them are not that good at restoring it when they have lost their motivation. For 4% of the candidates, ambition and readiness to obtain information are important factors for motivation. However, this rate remains too low. With regard to the interpretations of these findings, the teacher candidates regard their achievements as being on high levels. Nevertheless, the fact that they do not master the learning methods, personal motivational factors indicates how inadequate they are. In this case, it is seen that autonomous learning plays an increasingly important role from the beginning of the foreign language learning until the language education

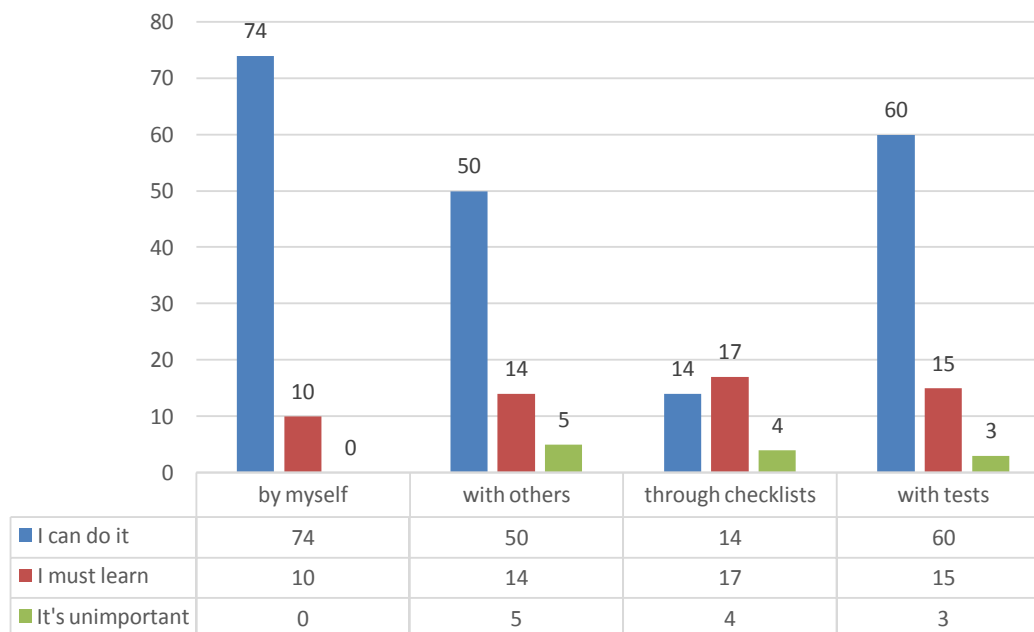


Figure 11. Evaluation-assessment of learning stages.

at university. This is better understood when one looks at the clustering of these data obtained from the four main areas in the whole autonomous learning area.

According to Bleyhl, language cannot be taught linearly; however it can be learnt so (2000, p. 7). Therefore, the student should comprehend the information given in a way that suits him/her. If the autonomous learning starts to be applied, the students realize the learning achievement and use the information given for entire life.

Learning occurs through students' gaining experiences, not through the narration by the teacher. Students' interest in learning is lost with the guiding course contents. The seminars should be arranged so appropriately that the student can assume more responsibilities in his/her learning. This way, the weaknesses can be identified and eliminated.

In the current study, the teacher candidates were investigated for their deficiencies. There was an effort to determine how they would act in case of a problem. It is important to reveal this aspect because it is ensured this way that students have acquired strategies to use in case of such situations.

It becomes harder to quit the learning habits acquired later in the university. Learning in the secondary education differs from the one in the university. While course contents are constantly repeated and managed by teachers at school, the learning in university is rather autonomous.

Senior high school students or university students now master countless number of learning strategies; however,

they usually struggle to use them. It is difficult to break away from traditional learning to adopt new understandings and transfer them into the learning. Applying the learning strategy to the concrete learning activity is one of the greatest problems for almost all students.

It should be a part of the main goals of the language education in university to develop students' autonomous learning so that they can define their personal learning styles, apply learning strategies and plan their learning. The autonomous learning habits of the German language teacher candidates studying at Marmara University were introduced. This will enable more confidence in the university education.

Consequently, it can be said that autonomous learning has a motivation-enhancing effect on students. Choosing and learning the topics arbitrarily motivates the students. Learning is now understandable and transparent.

However, promotion of autonomous learning in the Turkish Educational system faces challenges. Some of the recommendations to be applied are listed below:

- 1) Teachers who serve in the primary and secondary education cannot spare time for innovative learning methods such as autonomous learning due to the lack of time because they are obliged to follow the curriculum. Therefore, teachers do not take student's requirements into consideration most of the time. That is why lessons are still taught in a teacher-centered fashion.
- 2) Another problem is that students feel concerns for exams and their future due to the central exams during

transition to the secondary and higher education across the country because they have to prepare for multiple-choice tests to give more correct answers. That is why the stressful students do not have time for learning for which they are personally responsible.

3) Students who are introduced to many different foreign language levels after the secondary education placement exams are randomly gathered in the foreign language classes of most Anatolian and science high schools. While the lessons to be taught by teachers get more difficult in the classes formed without any prior foreign language level tests, students are therefore prevented from improving gradually. The same teacher should make more effort to teach lesson on different levels. It is evident that teaching lessons in heterogeneous classes is difficult. Autonomous learning is usually not possible in such class environments.

Autonomous learning is an innovative approach. Having become not just a modern approach over time, autonomous learning has turned out to be a great need that every student should benefit from it to increase efficiency and autonomy.

The students who need warnings from their surroundings to contribute to their development should acquire skills and gains that they can utilize in daily life (Wolff, 2007, p. 31).

One cannot help but agree with this opinion. Teacher candidates should be provided with transparent goals. Not only the expectations from university education should be met, but also these goals should be kept alive later in the professional life. However, there is a need for lifelong-learned foreign language skills. Autonomous learning should be featured and encouraged during the university education.

It is revealed in this study that students should give much thought to their own learning processes, and the information about learning methods and strategies which are applied for the intended plan and also theoretically known by students should be applied practically during the learning process too. Consequently, it should be remembered that autonomous learning will be performed successfully as long as it is supported by important elements such as method, motivation, learning strategy, and self-assessment.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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