

## Self-regulated Learning Strategies of Learners of English in a Turkish State University to Improve their Language Proficiency

Burak Tomak<sup>1</sup>, Gölge Seferoğlu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Marmara University Istanbul, Turkey

<sup>2</sup>California State University San Bernardino, US

**Corresponding Author:** Burak Tomak, E-mail: buraktomak@hotmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

In today's world, it is recognized that learners should be in charge of their own learning. Therefore, language learners are expected to regulate their language learning process. This study aimed at investigating the self-regulation process a group of language learners at A1 level went through during a one-year English prep program they attended at a state university in Turkey. The students were to get English medium instruction (EMI) in their departments if they passed the English proficiency exam at the end of the year. Ten participants were selected based on the results of Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL) (Oxford, & Burry-Stock, 1995), which was applied on 169 English language students who started their language learning with A1 level. On the basis of the questionnaire results, three students were selected from the higher average learners, three students were selected from below average learners and four students were chosen from average learners. These ten participants were interviewed twice: at the end of the first term and the second term. It was found that learners who were highly self-regulated had both self-study time and evaluated their development in terms of linguistic competence. Based on the findings, it can be suggested that learners must monitor their language development and plan their own learnings accordingly.

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduce the Problem

The importance of self-regulation in language learning came out more than two decades ago with the idea that students should take over the responsibility of their own learning (Zimmerman, 2008). However, although there are several studies conducted on self-regulated learning, Karabenick and Zusho (2015) focus on the need for further research on self-regulated learning for future studies to employ multiple methods (i.e. self-report and trace methodologies) to better understand the dynamic nature of SRL because they think self-regulation is a highly contextual issue as students' cognition, behavior, and affect will change over time and across the learning environments and/or tasks that are given to them. Therefore, they state that the studies will contribute more to the field if they can show how self-regulated learning change over time as well as contextual variations that affect the results. In this sense, this study aimed at showing how self-regulation of the students changed over time

in one specific setting as the data for the current study were collected over one year. In order to achieve the goals of this study, the researchers used both a questionnaire and interviews held twice at the end of both the first and the second term. The following research questions guided this study:

- What self-regulation strategies do students starting from A1 level use to improve their language skills?
- Do they change their self-regulation strategies they employ as their level of language proficiency improve?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As every learner is different from each other in terms of their abilities and how they learn best, they need to organize their own learning and use 'specific abilities to navigate different (learning) environments' (Reinders & White 2011, p. 2) following their own paths. According to Bandura (2006), learners should use three important processes which are self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reaction, which will make it possible for the learners to monitor and adjust

their learning behaviors accordingly. Wolters (1998) stresses that most of the studies on self-regulation focus on cognitive aspect of it but self-regulated learning has other dimensions which are more important than such as motivational or affective aspects. Pintrich (2000) agrees with Wolters (1998) by claiming that self-regulated learning is made up of four factors. Pintrich (2000) elaborates on Bandura's (2006) categorization by claiming that self-regulated learning accounts for four factors. Not only cognitive one but also motivational, affective and contextual factors should all be given some consideration.

Many studies found a direct relation between self-regulation and success. For instance, the research conducted by Vrugt and Oort (2008) reveals that there is a correlation between academic success and self-regulated learning strategies. Other researchers (Zimmerman & Martinez- Pons, 1986) have also shown that students who highly use self-regulation strategies consult their peers, teachers, and parents more than their peers whose self-regulation skills are not high. Consequently, they learn more and they highly benefit from this cooperation and collaboration. In Zimmerman and Bandura's (1994) study, it has been shown that the efficient verbal skills of students are reflected on their written performance with the help of self-regulation skills.

Another research conducted in Turkish context by İnan (2013) has shown a correlation between self-regulation and GPA. The findings show that there are significantly positive correlations between three aspects of self-regulated learning strategies (i.e. motivation and action to learning, planning and goal setting, strategies for learning and assessment) and GPA scores of the participants. The highest correlation has been found between motivation and action to learning and GPAs.

Students are expected to be self-regulated learners; however, students may not know how to regulate their learning on their own so they need guidance and direction on how to become a self-regulated learner. Heikkila and Lonka (2006) emphasize the importance of teaching 'self-regulatory skills' to students so as to facilitate their learning. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to familiarize students with self-regulation techniques with which their students may not be familiar at all. Otherwise, students will find it difficult to regulate their own learning and unless students regulate their learning, this process will be taken over by the teacher, which is called 'external regulation'.

Another research that shows the importance of self-regulated learning training has been conducted by Schmitz and Wiese (2006). In their research it has been shown that students who have got self-regulation training have improved themselves a lot in terms of intrinsic studying motivation, self-efficacy, effort, attention, self-motivation, handling distractions, and procrastination.

## **METHOD**

### **Setting and Participants**

This study was conducted in one of the state universities in Istanbul in Turkey which offered English-medium-instruction (EMI) programs. The participants of the study were

attending the English prep school before they were able to start to take departmental courses in English. Their English level was A1 and they needed to pass the English proficiency exam at the end of the academic year in June. The participants were taking intensive English classes every day during the week. They were expected to reach B2 level at the end of the academic year which lasted 8 months.

The participants for this study were chosen out of the 169 students who started their language learning from A1 level in this school. All A1 level students were given the Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL) (Oxford, & Burry-Stock, 1995) three weeks after the beginning of the academic year. According to the results of the inventory, 10 students were chosen considering their responses to the inventory. The participants were divided into three groups: the ones whose averages were high, the ones whose scores were average of the whole group, and the ones whose scores were below the average. Three students were chosen from the ones whose scores were higher than the average, 3 students were selected from the below average group and 4 students were chosen from the average group. All 10 students willingly accepted to be part of this study. These students were coded as HAS (Higher Average Students), BAS (Below Average Students) and AS (Average Students), respectively.

### **Data Collection**

Data used for this study were collected with the help of two different tools: SILL and interviews. As one of the researchers were participant observer who was working in the institution where the research was carried out, the students were given the assurance that the things that they were sharing would be confidential and they would not affect the test scores or grades that they would take.

### **SILL**

Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL) was given to 169 students who started their language education from A1 level in the prep school at the beginning of the academic year. Right after the inventory results were analyzed, students were categorized as the ones whose average was lower, higher or just between these two groups. From these three different groups 10 students were selected according to their willingness to contribute to the development of this study.

### **The Interviews**

Two interviews for each participant student were arranged. The first interviews were conducted with ten students at the end of the first term. At this time of the academic year students were supposed to be at A2 level so they had sufficient language learning experience. The second interviews were conducted with these same ten different students at the end of the second term before the proficiency exam was given. At the time of the second interviews the students were expected to be at B1 level. All of the interviews were conducted in Turkish to let participants express themselves freely in their native language.

The initial interview questions were developed by the researchers in line with the purpose of the study and they were shown to two different academics to check whether they were serving for the aims of this study. The questions were semi-structured to be able to provide participants some space so that they could express themselves freely. Each interview lasted not less than 40 minutes. Each interview was recorded for the transcription so that they would be analyzed easily by the researchers.

The second interview questions were developed based on the analyses of the first interviews. These questions were also checked by the same colleagues who checked the questions of the first interviews. Based on the feedback received, the questions were revised and the interviews were conducted three weeks before the proficiency exam in June.

### Data Analysis

The inventory results were analyzed with the help of the software program 'SPSS', which gave the descriptive statistics of the data calculating the frequencies and mean scores. However, this was not the main target as a data collection tool for this study so the mean scores of the participants paved the way for the division of the students as well their selection.

The interviews were analyzed right after the transcriptions of the recordings were completed. Manual coding was done by the researchers trying to come up with common themes and categories. For member-checking purposes, some of the participants were consulted for the accuracy of the interpretations. This process was important because it gave the participants a chance to change, clarify and elaborate more on what they had said in the interviews. These member checks contributed a lot to the accurate reflection of the participants beliefs on the findings of the study.

### RESULTS

One of the most important skills for a 'self-regulated learner' is to plan self-study programs. Thus, in the interviews students were asked whether they pursued self-study programs. The ones who were in the average group and below average group said that they did not arrange self-study programs. Unlike these two groups, the HAS (Higher Average Students) acknowledged that they followed self-study programs. The same question was asked in the second interviews conducted before the end of the second term. The BAS group said they still did not have a study plan and they gave up studying for the proficiency exam. Likewise, the AS group also said that they did not have a fixed studying plan but they were aware that they had to show some efforts to pass the proficiency exam. The students in the average group stated in the second interviews that they would study hard for the rest of weeks (three weeks before the exam). On the other hand, the HAS group said that they had their own study plans in the first term but they changed them in accordance with their needs and their deficiencies. HAS2 said:

*"Now I focus more on vocabulary instead of grammar and I write essays often. I have recently written on 'indus-*

*trial revolution and its effects on the society'. I read some pieces of information on Wikipedia first and tried to learn the unknown words for me. Then, I tried to write my essay by using the vocabulary that I had just learned. I do my best to improve my vocabulary knowledge. I write and I do watch foreign news broadcasting channels and foreign TV serials to improve my vocabulary. I do not want to face any difficulty when I pass to my department so I must have a good range of vocabulary knowledge".*

The higher average students (HAS) reorganized their study plans in accordance with their needs and considering their weaknesses in terms of their language proficiency. They reported using "organizing and transforming" strategy (Wang & Pape, 2005), which made them great self-regulated learners.

The participants were also asked whether they needed and expected guidance from their instructors and they all said that they were "seeking teacher assistance" (Wang & Pape, 2005).

Students were also asked whether they kept track of their own language development and how they did so in the first interviews. Whether the grades that they took from the exams were any indication was also questioned. The BAS group said that they did not keep track of their own language development and that exam results could not be of any sign of development, which seemed to be a shared pattern for this group. However, AS were divided into two in terms of their perspectives for this issue. AS2 and AS3 said that they did not keep track of their language development and took the grades that they got from the exams as a criterion whereas AS1 and AS4 said that they kept track of their language development not by looking at the grades that they took but they both said that they compared their present knowledge level with their past knowledge level. On the other hand, HAS said that they did their best to monitor their language development especially with their speaking and writing performance. HAS1 explained the situation by saying:

*"I try to keep track of my language development with my speaking performance or my vocabulary knowledge. Let's say, I learned a word and used it in my speaking and I try to remember it two weeks later. I always check myself and my development by monitoring myself. If I remember what I have learned previously, it means that I have internalized it. Thus, I only take my performance into consideration. Surely, the exam results are also important but they may not show the reality because I may not reveal my real performance on the exam day if I have a physiological or psychological problem. What is more important for me is to learn. Thus, getting higher scores from the exams is not my priority".*

This same question, whether they kept track of their language development was again asked to the students in the second interviews at the end of the second term. In addition, they were also asked whether they felt themselves B1 because the language level where they had to reach at the time of the second interviews was B1. The BAS group directly said that they did not feel any language improve-



ment and they did not feel that they were B1, either. Unlike the BAS group, the AS group said that they felt their language developed but they did not feel that they were at B1 level.

It was found in the second interviews that the AS group accepted that they did not study much and they did not have any plans to do so, which led them to feel that they did not reach the level that they were expected to. However, there was some noticeable development in their comprehension level in terms of their reading and listening abilities. Unlike AS, HAS said that they felt that they were at B1 level and they felt their language proficiency developed considering their performance in writing and speaking due to their using 'keeping records and monitoring strategy'.

In the first interviews, the participants were asked whether they did self-study out of their class time excluding time spent on homework assignments. BAS2 said that he did not have self-study time at all but BAS1 and BAS3 said that they had some self-study time but it was not sufficient. The AS group also said that they did not allocate extra time for the self-study out of their class time. Even though they did so, it was not sufficient for them to improve themselves. This same question was asked to the HAS group and they all said that they did self-study out of their class time regularly. HAS3 explained how she studied, which was a shared pattern for this group:

*"I surely do self-study. I try to speak English with myself. I do watch videos with English subtitles. I try to write something in English. It does not have to be our homework. I read a book and try to write something on what I have read. Even if I have written an assignment and give it to the instructor as a writing task, I try to rewrite it again when he gives it to me with his feedback so I focus on my mistakes and think how I can write it in another way".*

It could be understood that HAS focused on productive skills while they were doing self-study just as they monitored their language development in terms of their performances in the productive skills.

This same self-study time out of the lessons question was addressed to the participants in the second interviews in the second term as well. The BAS and AS groups said they did not do self-study in the second term, either. This was a shared pattern in these two groups. However, it was found that HAS group kept doing self-study in the second term, as well.

## **DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Self-study time is one of the important elements that makes a language learner 'self-regulated' one. Thus, in this research, self-study was one of the deeds that made the HAS group different from their peers in the other two groups: AS and BAS. It is really important that these learners should continue studying out of their class time. Therefore, students must be guided and trained by their teachers to acquire that studying habit (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). Thus, Harmer (2015) advises that teachers should show

learners how to continue 'studying on their own by suggesting a number of techniques' (p. 105). This is important because a student who starts at A1 level and expecting to reach B2 level at the end of a year should do his/her best to improve his/her language skills. As the time is limited to eight months in one academic year, more efforts are expected from these students to keep up with the intensive language program. It has also been stated in the report that has shared the state of English in Higher Education in Turkey by British Council (2015) that it is really demanding for students who start their language learning from A1 level to reach to B2 level in English language within one academic year, which has been main the procedure for most of the School of Foreign Languages in Turkish state universities. Thus, students should take over the responsibility of their own learning and do their best within this limited amount of time instead of trying to learn only within the lesson hours in these prep schools.

Here at this point, both students and instructors should cooperate with each other well. Instructors should assign their students with efficient and beneficial activities and make them engaged even out of their class time and students have to follow the instruction and guidance given by their instructors if they want to progress in accordance with the pace of the program that they have to follow. Students should do these assignments and tasks given by their instructors on a regular basis to improve themselves. As a matter of fact, the importance of guidance by the teachers to self regulate their learners is also shown in the study of Schmitz and Wiese (2006) as this kind of instruction has a positive effect on their intrinsic studying motivation, self-efficacy, effort, and attention. What is more, instructors should also give instant feedback on what they have given as a task because unless students get any reaction from the instructor who gives the assignments and tasks, they will give up doing them. Furthermore, making students engaged with activities even out of the class time and cooperating with them might be achieved with the help of technology. Some software programs, educational applications and social media networking websites which are directly related to education such as *Edmodo* can be used. This will make the cooperation and collaboration of teachers and students more likely and they will have an easy and an instant access to each other. Thus, providing students with some feedback on what they have done will keep students active and it is also an indication that instructors give importance to what they assign to students.

Apart from self-study, students were also asked about whether they kept track of their linguistic development and how they did it. AS group said they did by comparing what they had known with what they knew then so it was a kind of comparison between past knowledge and previous knowledge. However, HAS stated that they evaluated their performance on productive skills (speaking and writing) to determine their development. How they made sentences and how they expressed themselves in a spoken and written language were the criteria for them to evaluate their performance. Zimmerman and Bandura (1994)

justify that the self-regulated learners seem to be better at their verbal skills and written performance. What is more, Abraham and Vann (1987) confirm that successful students use a variety of strategies, especially productive ones. In contrast, AS group paid attention to their performance on receptive skills such as their comprehension level of the reading texts the questions of which they were trying to solve. Surely, both types of assessment are important for students to evaluate their developmental process but the performance on productive skills will certainly give the real results because unless students can produce what they have received, it means that they have not reached to synthesis stage in which they are expected to create or make their own sentences with the knowledge they have accumulated. Therefore, AS stay in comprehension stage in which they are to understand, describe and explain what is happening around them. What is more, the evaluation based on the comprehension level might be misleading for these students as they might think that they have developed their language skills even though they have a long way to go. Hence, they should assess their knowledge that they have acquired with the synthesis stage in which they can see whether they can effectively use their knowledge. Thus, there are two more stages that average group must take in order to reach the level of HAS: application and analysis. In the second interviews, HAS stated that they focused on productive skills while they were trying to upgrade themselves whereas AS stated that they focused more on the receptive skills, which led to a huge gap between these two groups almost at the end of the academic year. Rowsell and Libben (1994) claim that the real difference between high and low achievers is that higher achievers engage themselves with 'communication-making' and 'context making' activities. They even create imaginative dialogs and conversations in their minds to practice their language skills (p. 668). Thus, instructors should make their students engaged with performance tasks which consist of writing and speaking tasks that will provide the students with the chance to practice these skills by doing the assignments and homework given to them. What is more, they will also evaluate their performance in line with the feedback given to them by their instructors so that they will keep track of their linguistic development better. İnan (2013) approves that the more self-regulated the learners are, the better grades they will get from the exams in the end.

## CONCLUSION

It is really important for learners to regulate their own learning because learning occurs not only in the classroom but everywhere. It is our responsibility as teachers to help learners in their journey to become self regulated because the self-regulated ones benefit from the language learning process a lot more than the ones who do not have these skills. What is more, it can be concluded from this study that self-regulated learners in this research context have their own self-study programs which might be changed in accordance with their needs and deficiencies along the

way they follow to improve their linguistic competence. Additionally, they monitor their language development with their speaking and writing performances (productive skills). Therefore, it can be stated that HAS (Higher Average Students) can change their self-regulated learning strategies as their level of language proficiency has improved.

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