

THE USE OF AN INDEPENDENT STUDY PLAN IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETİMİNDE BAĞIMSIZ ÇALIŞMA PLANLARININ KULLANIMI

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ABSTRACT

It is necessary for university students to work independently outside class hours in order to fulfill university requirements. In principle, self-study develops and reinforces active participation of the students in their own learning. However, students usually face difficulties in starting self-study. In order to facilitate students' independent study skills, various types of support can be provided by the teachers. An "Independent Study Plan" is one means to help students to study independently in their own time. It is also useful in motivating students, enabling standards for effective time/study management, improving teacher-student interaction, determining student needs and in return preparing supplementary materials. The results of the study, conducted in an English language school of an English-medium university, revealed that the students were in need of study plans which would show how and what to study for their education.

ÖZET

Üniversite öğrencilerinin ders saatleri dışında bireysel olarak çalışmalarını gerekmektedir. Çünkü bireysel çalışma öğrencinin sağlıklı gelişimini sağlar. Ancak, öğrenciler bu konuda nasıl çalışacaklarını bilmediklerinden yakınırlar. Bu bağlamda öğrencilere muhtelif yardımlar sağlanabilir. Bireysel Çalışma Planı'nın geliştirilmesi öğrenciye yol göstermesi açısından önemlidir. Bu planın geliştirilmesi ayrıca öğrenci motivasyonunu artırma, zamanı iyi kullanma, ihtiyaçların belirlenmesi ve öğrenci-öğretmen ilişkisinin geliştirilmesi açısından yararlıdır. İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversitenin hazırlık okulunda gerçekleştirilen çalışma, öğrencilerin neyi nasıl çalışacaklarının belirlenmesinde yardımcı ihtiyaçları olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu ihtiyacın giderilmesinde öğretmen ve öğrenci tarafından geliştirilen Bireysel Çalışma Planı'nın etkili bir yöntem olduğu görülmüştür.

INTRODUCTION

As Meyer (1992:1) states "The Twentieth Century is the Age of Machines and the age of Science". In recent years everything has been developing rapidly. Thus rapid population growth, industrialization, urbanization, changing values and democraticization have affected the educational system like the other systems (Akçay, 1990:35). In accordance with these developments in society, education has broadened in scope, is more varied in its offerings, and the development of human resources has become a vital issue (Kipnis, 1990:135). The growing tendency to become more learner-centered has been observed in almost every sphere of education. It has been realized that learners are responsible for their own learning and that they need to engage their own personalities in the educational process.

It has also been realized that individual learners are

different from each other and that they are not simply soft clay, waiting to be shaped (Littlewood, 1989:51). In other words, meeting the total needs of the students via meaningful educational experiences has become essential. This requirement has resulted in formal systematic curriculum development. Greater attention to personal needs, interests and values are emphasized in curricula. Thus, curricula are designed to meet the needs of learners and eventually the demands of the changing world by delineating needs analysis (Bellon and Handler, 1982:32).

In brief, the effects of changes in society have resulted in the emphasis being on the learner with the needs of the learner being the key element. Meanwhile, developments after the end of the Second World War, also brought about the need for an international language (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:6). For various reasons, English is the

language which fulfilled this need. In accordance with this, teaching English as a second or foreign language has become more and more important and hence English-medium universities were founded in Turkey, just as in many other countries.

Meanwhile it is necessary for university students to work independently outside of class hours so as to meet the expectations of not only the school but also university. Walter (1998:11) emphasizes the importance of encouraging learner independence by stating that:

most of the lives of most learners are spent outside the classroom and learners have to be autonomous there; giving students more control over the learning process increases motivation; the possibility of individualization provides the potential for taking into account different language learning aptitudes and speeds of learning.

An independent study plan is one means to reinforce students' independent study. This independent plan is used in various schools and the purpose is to support students to plan their independent study better.

BACKGROUND

Students who register for the English-medium university where this study was conducted, must take a Proficiency in English exam given at the beginning of every academic year. These exams are designed to ascertain whether their level of English is sufficient for them to enroll directly into their freshman year. Students who fail to reach the required standard in the proficiency exam have to attend courses at the Preparatory school of English language. The courses in this school mainly focus on consolidation of general English skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Student services within the language school of this English-medium university are designed to foster students' independent studies. The Self-Access Center was one of these services where at least one teacher was assigned to guide students. The development of study plans with students was one of the responsibilities of the teacher(s). The goal of the school and hence of the Learning Center was to expand the use of such plans school-wide. However, it was not possible due to the limited number of learning center teachers and the high number of students. Therefore, it was decided to ask teachers to develop such plans with students in class time

and there was a need to pilot test such an implementation.

THE STUDY

Purpose

The aim of the present study was to pilot test teachers' use of independent study plans in class and their effect on students' achievement of the goal of acquiring the language and the skills necessary to cope with the requirements of the school.

Participants

The participants were three groups of intermediate level students, comprising altogether 31 students and six teachers. The first group consisted of 4 students who attended the pilot study. The 13 students in the second group were partially involved in the pilot study. The fourteen students in the third group were the participants of the study.

The reason for selecting intermediate level students is as follows:

- a. the students have developed basic comprehension skills at the beginner level and are expected to develop flexible reading skills, familiarize themselves with critical reading skills, select and read from a free choice of reading materials.
- b. the content of the beginner course relies heavily on introduction of language items whereas at intermediate level they are expected to produce the targeted language points effectively in context.
- c. the vocabulary at intermediate level is taken from the common core with additions from a broad academic register, rather than focusing on prescribed basic common core register as in the beginner level.

In other words, they have completed their basic training stage and are in a "transition and production period." This period is important because many students, due to previous language learning experiences within their school system believe that they are not learning anything unless they are writing down grammar formulas. In brief, they are keen on structuralist language learning. However, as of intermediate level their experience differs since the emphasis is on skills rather than language forms.

All six of the teacher participants of this study were randomly selected and were described as 'experienced

teachers' since they had been teaching for more than 10 years and they all had an MA degree in TEFL.

Procedure

This study was completed in two stages of which the first part is referred to as 'the pilot study' and the second study as 'the study'. The qualitative data were collected via interviews with students in both parts of the study.

Pilot Study Procedures

Teachers were selected randomly by Self-Access Center members to participate in the study. A meeting was held with the participants where the teachers were informed about the purpose and the procedures to follow in the pilot study. The procedures were as follows:

Each teacher would explain the purpose of the study to the students and ask for four volunteers to participate in the study. Then, the teachers would work individually with these students spending an hour to interview them and fill out a questionnaire. Having completed these requirements, the teacher would set an appointment with each student to follow-up on how their study plans were working out. These weekly appointments were not meant to last any longer than 20 minutes.

The Study Procedures

The study was completed in four stages.

The first stage consisted of asking students to fill out the questionnaire part of the plan by themselves after class so as to identify :

- a. areas or skills where difficulties are experienced
 - b. the reasons for these difficulties
- The second part of the study plan required students to identify

- a. their individual goals
- b. the means to reach their goals
- c. the duration of their study
- d. the evaluation or measurement means

using the data from the questionnaire part of the instrument. Therefore interviews were scheduled with each student, three or four interviews per day after school. During these interviews, the data collected from the first part of the study was reviewed. Then, using this data, the second part of the study plan was developed.

The third part of the study consisted of providing materials to the students and carrying out discussions as a follow-up of their studies. Since each student identified

his or her perceived weakness, materials were prepared and distributed accordingly. Preparing these materials was not as hard or time consuming as it may sound since most of the teachers had their own resources of materials that they could use. Besides, as Menniss (1996:224) states "autonomous learning is at best only sharing that responsibility"

As for the last stage of the study, students were asked to write an essay in English or in their native language to give their perceptions about the study a day before the end-of-course assessment test. The reason for allowing students to write in their own language was to free the students from any type of anxiety and focus only on their perceptions.

RESULTS

Pilot test results

After explaining the purpose of the study to the students in the class, the teacher asked for any volunteers. The first problem occurred at this stage since all the students volunteered. Then, the pilot study team leader was contacted. As a result of the discussions carried out with the team leader, it was decided to select 4 weaker students in the class and send the other students to the self-access center so that the students could develop their plans with the teachers there. The criteria for identifying the weaker students were the exam results and teachers informal observations. Students were then told that 4 students had been selected randomly to work with their teacher while the others would be working with the self-access teachers, without going into further details. The rational behind this was to avoid labeling the students.

As instructed by the team leader, study plans for each student were developed during class time while the other students were assigned tasks to complete. The drawback here was that the students were more interested in the interview going on than their assignments. They actually interfered to express their perceptions and feelings.

Another constraint was that the time allocated was not enough to carry out the required discussions to formulate the study plan. There were a lot of questions to be answered in the questionnaire but only one lesson (50 minutes) was assigned for it. It almost took three lessons to develop the study plan. It was very time consuming.

Four weeks after having done the plans and meeting regularly with the students at their convenience, it was

realized that there was another problem. Students did not feel comfortable with the study plan schedule. They had difficulty in meeting the objectives set in the schedule and were completing the schedule just for the sake of doing it. The idea of meeting the objectives made them nervous. One of the students even said that she had given up the schedule after two weeks but that it took her some time to admit it.

At this stage, the need to talk about the perceptions of all the students in the class about the study plans was felt. During the discussion, it was realized that some of the students had not even gone to the self-access unit. These students stated that it was difficult to set appointments with the teachers. In brief, they just did not want to spend any time after school for that purpose. Among the students who had gone to the Self-Access Center, some of them did not go to discuss their study plans or to get feedback after a couple of weeks for the same reason. At this point, it was obvious that students did not believe that the study plan could be helpful in their studies.

The next problem for the students was in finding the right books and materials to study and how to study. In other words, they were not able to select the means to reach the objectives they had set earlier. However, the difficulty for the students actually lay in finding books or materials that had a practice effect and/or ones similar to exam types. This conclusion was drawn since students were describing their achievements only in terms of exam results.

In brief, the result of the pilot study indicated that independent study plans could not be implemented in class mainly due to their being time consuming and to the fact that they did not have an effect on students' achievement of the goal of acquiring the language and the skills necessary to cope with the academic requirements of the school. However, the goal of teachers is to reach "professional competence". One of the first steps to reach this competence is to determine the individual needs of each student due to the differences among and within the classes and the fact that art of teaching is a dynamic interaction of individuals. In other words, needs analysis is essential, and independent study plans could serve as a tool for such an analysis. Hence, it was decided to carry on the study via modifications to the pilot study.

The study results

Students did not have difficulty in identifying their weaknesses and strengths. The students were ex-

periencing difficulties in different areas or skills which can be summarized as follows: Students did not have much difficulty in studying for the multiple choice grammar components of exams, because there were a lot of materials or books available and the practice effect was high. However, they had difficulty in the cloze-test or dialogue completion sections since these types of questions require competence of a certain degree. Nevertheless, the practice effect was also observed at some degree. Writing was another problematic area. The concept of "writing an essay" caused anxiety for students since they mainly believed that essay writing requires specific skills or special talents. Listening to a dialogue, taking notes and then answering questions was also area of difficulty. Students had problems in identifying the main ideas or points along with not being able to understand the notes and they had taken. Reading was another problematic area. Students believed that their limited vocabulary hindered their reading ability.

Problems were experienced in students identifying their short-term goals. First of all, the students' short-term goals were test-related. In other words, they all stated that they would like to study for the upcoming classroom assessment test. (At the time this study was done, there were five assessment tests in one course and in each test a different skill was tested.) Therefore, the duration of their studies and means to evaluate their progress were based on tests.

The following are the procedures followed in providing materials to students so as to fulfill their needs. The students who said they were weak in listening skills, were told to listen to a specific English-channel news report everyday at their own convenience and take as many notes as they could. The next day the students' and teachers' notes were photocopied and distributed to other students so that they could compare their notes and find out what they had missed. They were also asked to write the time they listened to the news. After doing this activity for a week, they were asked to organize their notes under headings they thought were suitable. The next day, during one of the ten-minute breaks, a mini-discussion was carried out about the headings. Three days later, they were asked to summarize their notes and, again, theirs and the teacher's summaries were photocopied and distributed for comparison. A week later, they were asked to write questions about the news that they had listened to.

prepare an answer key and distribute them along with the questions and answer key prepared by the teacher. At the end of the week, they were told that they were to take notes of the news and the relevant questions would be provided the next day by the teacher so that they could use it as part of their independent study.

Two criteria were utilized while selecting reading materials for the students who were weak in reading skills. The first one was to rank the texts from simple to complex and distribute accordingly. The second criteria was to choose materials with exam-like comprehension questions. Two weeks later, a reading book which served the purpose was found, an answer key was prepared by the teacher and given to the students to use. Students were also encouraged to look up the definition of words that they did not know in the dictionary instead of trying to guess from the context until they felt ready to start doing it.

As for the writing component, the text type(s) that intermediate level students were expected to produce were discursive and descriptive essays. First, they were asked to write at paragraph level then gradually expand the given topic into an essay. A process approach was applied and feedback was provided on a daily basis.

Since the cloze tests and dialogue completion exercises were mainly designed to test students' grammar background, grammar revision was planned for students who were weak in this area. However, instead of going over the rules students were provided with sentence transformation exercises. Having completed these exercises, dialogue completion exercises were provided. Students were firstly asked to complete the dialogue by writing a full sentence, then completing either the first or the last part of the sentence then just writing one word or phrase which led into cloze test type of exercises.

When the students essays, which were written to give their perceptions about the study, were read it was found that an "independent study plan" is one of the means to help students study independently in their own time. This was also useful in

- a. motivating students
- b. enabling standards of effective time/study management
- c. improving teacher-student interaction
- d. determining student needs and in return preparing supplementary materials

In order to support these findings two students essays are provided;

STUDENT 1

The first day I came to school my classmates told me that unless a student is an English-medium high school graduate, he or she studies English for two years at the preparation school. I was not successful at the end of the first year. When I talked to my teachers they told me that I was good in grammar but bad at writing. I failed in the exams because of writing. Although I had the necessary knowledge it was hard for me to express my thoughts. Then, I started looking for ways to improve my writing. I am now successful at writing since my teacher started to guide me in my outside studies. I would like to say now how I managed this. I liked going from simple to complex. My teacher told me to simply describe a traffic accident. I immediately wrote it. My teacher said that it was a good paragraph. I was pleased that my teacher found my writing good even though it was a first draft. My teacher told me to rewrite the paragraph by adding one more person involved in the accident. I was very happy to write it. Of course this was not the last thing my teacher wanted. It was first two cars, then three cars, the colors of the cars, police reports, people involved, linking words, rewriting sentences and so on. As a result, I had to write the essay 20 times. My teacher was very patient with me. I was totally amazed to see how a simple paragraph turned out to be such a beautiful essay with these additions. I now know how to write and now I can see what was wrong with my writing. I cannot describe my feelings but I know that I CAN write on my own. Just like an essay, a life consists of introduction, development and conclusion. This experience in the development part of my life brought me confidence in myself.

STUDENT 2

There have been a lot of changes since I started this study and they have all been positive ones. Most importantly, just as I was about to hate English, I became friends with it. I am now not trying to find excuses for not studying. I always had a lot of excuses like a headache or a good film on TV. I have learned so many things. Firstly, I was always a failure in reading because we did not have enough practice in reading. The ones we did were either from the course books or readings that was not similar to the ones in exams. The course book readings are usually

too short, simple and the comprehension questions are multiple choice so they are not helpful for us. Now, I have a lot of exam-like reading practice. Secondly, vocabulary. My teachers always told us to memorize at least 40 words per day and never did anything to encourage us to memorize them. Now, my teacher encourages me to use a dictionary while reading. When I know the meaning of the unknown word(s) I feel more comfortable. Otherwise I feel as if I am missing something. More importantly, when that word is repeated in the article couple of times, I learn it. Now, I am eager to practice reading because it is fun, entertaining to understand what I am reading, my vocabulary has improved and most importantly now I can guess the meaning of unknown words from the text.

DISCUSSION

Out of the fourteen intermediate level students in this study, only three of them said that they just did not study. One of the students said he wanted to study but he just could not do it, he simply could not concentrate. He also added that he owed his success at exams to his prior knowledge. The second student said that he had lived with his aunt, who was an English teacher, until he came to university and that he had studied very hard and systematically with her for years and that he was such a good listener in class that there was no need for him to study at this stage. The student said that he simply did not want to come to the school but that his mother made him come. The student who could not concentrate was sent to a student counselor for professional help to improve his concentration. The other two students were told that they did not have to develop a study plan if they did not want to. They were also informed that this activity was free from any type of assessment and that they could ask for help or assistance anytime they liked. Hence, no study plan was developed for these students.

At the end of the course, out of the fourteen students ten of them passed the end-of-course assessment test and were able to attend the next level course. The student who was sent to the school counselor to improve his con-

centration problem and the student who wanted to work rather than coming to school were not successful but the student who stated that he was a good participant in school was successful. More importantly, however it was found that the study plan could be implemented by the teacher and that it was effective in helping students achieve the goal of acquiring the language and the skills necessary to cope with the requirements of the school.

It is necessary for the university students to work independently outside the class hours in order to fulfill the university requirements. Hence, the students need to organize their learning programs more efficiently outside the class-time. In principle, self-study develops and reinforces the active participation of the students in their own learning procedures. Meanwhile, it has been observed that the students usually face difficulties in starting their own self-studies. In order to facilitate the students' independent study skills, various means of support can be provided by the teachers and the independent study plan is one of the means.

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