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## Understanding Learner Autonomy through Cognitive, Metacognitive and Social Strategies Used by English Language Learners in a Computer-based Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies contribute to learner autonomy. Data were collected from 104 first year undergraduate learners who were taking a required Computer course in the English Language Teaching program at one of the major government universities in Turkey. Learners were asked to respond to a questionnaire adapted from Figura and Jarvis (2007). Descriptive statistics was employed to analyze the data to determine the types of strategies that learners use and the effect of using those strategies on learner autonomy. The results showed that the participants used metacognitive and cognitive strategies more than the social strategies. Based on the results, implications are provided with respect to how to encourage learners to use more of the learning strategies so that learners can achieve greater levels of autonomy.

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Although the use of learning strategies in classrooms has long been the focus of research, learner autonomy has benefited from few studies that involved the use learning strategies when using technologies. As Debski (1997, p.42) stated “a fuller integration of contemporary computer technology and foreign language education is most likely to take place in learning environments in which students can easily combine learning a language with reflection about language learning strategies.” As learners use computers for learning and social purposes, scholars (O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Hauck, 2005) have come to realize the importance of using learning strategies in computer-mediated environments. For

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example, Hauck (2005) established a link between self-management, understanding the conditions in which a learner accomplishes a task successfully, and autonomy. The relationship between autonomy and social and affective strategies was particularly very important due to the fact that many learners interact with one another on social media websites. However, given the fact that there is still lack of research regarding the use of learning strategies in online settings and that both learner and teacher autonomy are not sufficiently practiced in the classrooms especially in Turkey, the present study aims to investigate the extent to which students use cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies when they are engaged in online activities and how the use of these strategies contributes to learner autonomy. The importance of the current study lies in the fact that the participants in the study are student-teachers who are planning to become English language instructors in three years. Therefore, it is highly important that they build an understanding of how learners and teachers should go about practicing autonomy both inside and outside the classroom.

## **2. Learner Autonomy**

Over the past 30 years, as learners have become the center of attention in many areas of education, learner autonomy has gained considerable importance, especially in the area of teaching English as a foreign (EFL) or second language (ESL). In investigating “what is autonomy?”, Holec (1981), was considered by many scholars to be the establisher of this concept. Holec defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Since then many scholars have seen learner autonomy as an effective current of thought to enhance student learning. They identified what contributes to learner autonomy and suggested appropriate materials, learning techniques, strategies, and ideal contexts to promote learner autonomy (Benson, 1997; Benson, 2001; Bondi, 1999; Littlewood, 1999; McGrath, 2000; Oxford, 2003; Sinclair, 2008; Smith, 2003; Trebbi, 2003; Wall, 2003; Zou & Hu, 2009). For instance, according to Holec (1981), setting objectives, planning for learning, making decisions on the content, evaluation of learning, making use of affective and metacognitive strategies as well as having a positive attitude toward this type of learning were prerequisites for being an autonomous learner. Likewise, Sinclair and Thang (2009) referred to learner autonomy as taking responsibility for one’s learning and actively seeking out new knowledge and argued that autonomy requires specific metacognitive knowledge regarding one’s self as a learner, the subject matter to be learnt, one’s learning context, and the processes of learning. Throughout the literature, one of the most quoted works about learner autonomy is that of Little (1991). Little defined learner autonomy as “a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning - a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (p. 4). More recently Little (2007) described learner autonomy as “the product of an interactive process in which the teacher gradually enlarges the scope of her learners’ autonomy by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning” (p. 3). Dickinson (1995) associated autonomy with learning alone and emphasized the importance of factors such as “formulating learning objectives, selecting and making use of appropriate learning strategies, monitoring the use of these strategies, and being able to self-assess” (pp. 330-31) while Lamb and Reinders (2006) saw autonomy as independent learning organized in several ways but practiced under the control of the teachers.

With its emphasis on the importance of working independently both inside and outside the classroom, learner autonomy was also approached from a variety of perspectives. For example, Benson’s (2008) idea of autonomy in language learning is based on the concept of personal autonomy, which entails that in order for an individual to be autonomous, he/she must live in a society in which autonomy is valued and freedom is respected. Freedom is a prerequisite for learner autonomy. Autonomous learners should be “seen as persons who possess both the capacity and the freedom to steer their own learning in the direction of personal autonomy” (p. 22).

### 3. Learner Autonomy in Online Settings

Studies on learner autonomy also highlighted the importance of raising awareness on the nature of languages, cultures and language learning, reflective experience-based learning, learner initiatives, exploration of the target language, appropriate learning activities and more importantly, activities that promote how to learn (Trebbi, 2008). Learning how to learn was especially important because training learners in the use of certain strategies emerged from this idea (Weaver & Cohen, 1997) and the contribution of learning strategies to learner autonomy has come to play an increasingly important role in language teaching and learning. Scholars defined language learning strategies as the processes which are selected by the learner to perform a language task in learning the target language (Brown, 2006; Cohen, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Grenfell & Macaro, 2007; McDonough, 1995). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process which includes planning, monitoring, evaluating and problem solving; cognitive strategies involve analyzing and synthesizing information and social-interactive strategies involve collaborating and noticing sociocultural factors. In this sense, Macaro (2001) also defined autonomy as the ability to use a range and combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in that accomplishing tasks or learning in general can be realized with or independent of the teacher's approaches and techniques. Moreover, he stated that in order to be able to use the strategies, the learner has to have the appropriate learning context and the learning potential. Researchers dealing with the interaction between autonomy and learning strategies analyzed how learners can use certain strategies in order to respond to the demands of contexts in which learner autonomy is practiced (Cohen & White 2008; Harris 2003; Hurd et al. 2001; Hyland 2001; Paige et al. 2004; Pujola 2002; Şahin 2005). The environment in which learner autonomy is promoted has been accepted to be one of the ideal contexts where learners can develop a variety of metacognitive and cognitive strategies (Wright, 2005). For example, Vandergrift (2005) analyzed the link between metacognitive strategies and motivation, self-regulated learning and learner autonomy with respect to students' listening test scores. The study showed a very high correlation between motivation and reported use of metacognitive strategies, suggesting evidence between learner autonomy and metacognition. Likewise in a study (Şahin, 2005) that investigated the relationship between learner autonomy and metacognitive strategies used by 110 2<sup>nd</sup> year EFL learners enrolled at Gazi University's Foreign Languages Department in Turkey, the learners used learning strategies at a medium level while they used metacognitive strategies at a higher level, suggesting a strong relationship between learner autonomy and use of metacognitive strategies.

In an attempt to understand L2 learning and autonomy, Oxford (2003) mentioned independent L2 learning, which she defines as the learning of an additional language. She states that such learning usually occurs with other learners. The teacher is not necessarily involved. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, Oxford builds a relationship among independent learning, classroom learning and learner autonomy. Learner autonomy serves as a bridge between independent learning and classroom learning, however, as the Figure also shows, classroom learning is less involved in autonomy than independent learning. In addition, autonomy can be practiced in both classrooms and independent learning situations but the number and type of decisions that the learner makes differ in both contexts.

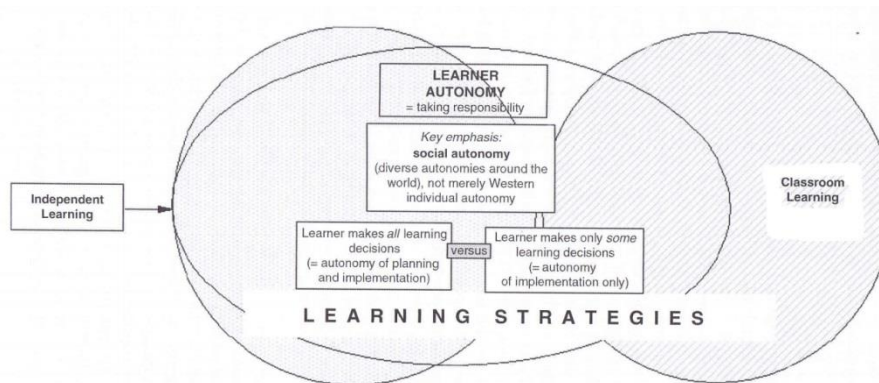


Figure 1. Relationship among learner autonomy, independent learning and learning strategies (Oxford, 2003, p. 43).

What has also recently gained importance is the use of learning strategies when using technologies. This was due to the acknowledgement of “social learner as part of a community of practice” (Hauck & Hampel, 2008, p. 285), that is, learners are social individuals and communities are ideal places for them to learn. The contribution of learning strategies to learner autonomy in online settings is evident in several studies. For example, in a project which was based on an online intercultural exchange, Hauck and Hampel (2008) examined the interaction among French, American and British language learners who used several forms of electronically mediated communication such as email, chat and threaded discussions. Learners of French were enrolled at Open University (UK) and Carnegie Mellon University (USA). Learners of English were studying at Université de Franche-Comté (France). The students were required to work on tasks online, using an equal amount of English and French. Based on the quantitative and qualitative methods of analyses that involved audio and screen recordings, blogs, pre- and post-questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, the results showed that the learners asked questions, empathized with others, got to know others and facilitated interaction. White (2006) found that distance learners used metacognitive strategies, in particular self-management and affective strategies to a greater extent than learners in a classroom. Along those lines, Hauck (2005) carried out a small-scale longitudinal study involving Spanish and German language learners with respect to variables such as learning strategies, with a particular focus on metacognitive strategies along with others such as attitudes, anxiety, individual differences and task design in online language learning. Her findings showed a relationship between self-awareness and metacognitive strategies such as self-management, thus autonomy. Campbell (2004) conducted a study that required foreign language learners to participate in different online social networking activities such as weblogs and live journals. The students joined the networks based on their own personal interests. The results showed that students had more control of their own learning which led to learner autonomy. In a recent study, Mutlu and Eröz (2013) investigated the effect of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) on learner autonomy at a foundation university in Turkey. The participants were Forty-eight intermediate-level students. For the purposes of the study, the students were divided into two groups: the Strategy Training Group (STG) and the Non-Strategy Training Group (NSTG). The students in the STG were trained about using learning strategies whereas the other group was not. In addition to the training program, data were also obtained via questionnaires, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, and e-learning diaries. According to the results, students in the STG improved their language learning strategies. They also took more responsibility and had higher motivation than the students in the NSTG.

In another study that investigated whether or not online learning would enhance learner autonomy, Chang (2007) divided a group of English language learners into a control and an experimental group and gave instructions to the both groups regarding a web based task. He gave additional

information to the experimental group on online self-monitoring techniques involving learning process, predicting scores, and self-evaluation. According to the results, students, regardless of their English proficiency level, who used the self-monitoring strategies, were more successful than those who did not. Figura and Jarvis (2007) examined the extent to which non-native speakers of English enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program made use of metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies when they are engaged in online activities and in self-study contexts outside of the language classroom. The authors also investigated the extent to which the use of the strategies promoted learner autonomy. Based on the questionnaires, interviews and observations, the authors reported that the students were autonomous to some extent, using cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than the social strategies in the target language. Given the fact that the above-mentioned studies present strong arguments in favor of integrating learning strategies when using technologies, the present study also aims to identify, in a Turkish educational setting, which strategies learners use when they are engaged in online activities and what can be done to incorporate learning strategies into the curriculum to improve learner autonomy. The following section presents the research questions, describes the participants, the instrument and data analysis. Section 4 provides the results and section 5 discusses the findings and offers some suggestions.

## **4. Method**

### *4.1. Aim of Study*

The purpose of the present study is to examine the extent which metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies influence learner autonomy. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. RQ1: What metacognitive strategies do learners apply when they are engaged in online activities?
2. RQ2: What cognitive strategies do learners apply when they are engaged in online activities?
3. RQ3: What social strategies do learners apply when they are engaged in online activities?

### *4.2. Participants*

The participants were first year students enrolled in the English Language Teaching Department at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey. In this department, students are trained to be English language instructors. One hundred and four (77 females and 27 males) students who were taking the Computer I course participated in the study. At the time of the study, the participants were 18-19 years old.

### *4.3. Instrument*

The analysis in the current study draws on the responses of a questionnaire adopted from Figura and Jarvis (2007). The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit which metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies students used when they are engaged in online activities. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part explored the use of metacognitive strategies which included 9 items on planning, monitoring and thinking about learning. The second part was related to cognitive strategies, which explored using different techniques to learn English. This part included 2 items about listening, 4 items about watching on the computer and 7 items about reading. The third part analyzed the social strategies and consisted of 9 items. There were a total of 31 items in the questionnaire. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale from “I never do this” to “I always do this”.

### 4.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 21.0), the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Frequency analyses were conducted to determine the usage rate of each learning strategy. The following tables in the results section show the percentages for each metacognitive strategy.

## 5. Results

Table 1

Metacognitive strategies: Planning, monitoring, thinking, and evaluating

Items	%	N
a. When I find a good Internet site for studying English I save the address	63	104
b. I try to find reading or listening material on the Internet that is at or near my level	61	104
c. I try to find out how to better learn English from the computer	48	104
d. When I finish learning on the computer I check if my work is correct/how well I had done	47	104
e. I keep some of the English emails in my folders for future language reference	37	104
f. I set my learning goals before studying English on the computer	29	104
g. I learn from sites specifically designed for English language learners with different exercises	29	104
h. I plan how I am going to learn English on the computer	20	104
i. I plan how much time I am going to spend learning English on the computer	14	104

As Table 1 shows, the most frequently used metacognitive strategies were saving the address of a good Internet site for studying English, finding materials on the Internet that is at or near the students' levels, followed by finding out how to better learn English from the computer and checking if their work is correct or how well they had done. Only 20% of the students reported that they plan how they are going to learn English on the computer and 14 % of them planned how much time they are going to spend learning English on the computer.

Table 2

Cognitive strategies: Listening

Items	%	N
a. When listening on the computer I listen for important key words that carry meaning	63	104
b. I listen to the same things more than once to understand more	49	104

As for using the listening strategies, the majority of the students listen for important key words that carry meaning. Almost half of the students listen to the same things more than once to understand more.

Table 3

Cognitive strategies: Watching on the computer

Items	%	N
a. When watching TV programs or films on computers I read English subtitles to understand more	75	104
b. When watching programs on the computer I pay attention to pictures to understand better	62	104
c. When watching TV programs or films on computers I use subtitles in my language to understand more	47	104
d. I watch TV programs or films on computers twice: once with subtitles and once without	11	104

With respect to watching on the computer, the most frequently used strategy was reading English subtitles followed by paying attention to pictures. Very few students reported that they watch program on computers once with subtitles and once without.

Table 4  
Cognitive strategies: Reading

Items	%	N
a. When reading on the Internet I check words or phrases I do not understand in a computer dictionary	55	104
b. Before reading the text on the Internet I first look at the title or pictures to guess what the text can be about	51	104
c. I write down new words or phrases I see on the Internet	40	104
d. When reading on the Internet I look for meaning from the text without using a dictionary	39	104
e. When reading on the Internet I read the same things more than once to understand more	37	104
f. When reading on the Internet I skip parts I do not understand	24	104
g. I go back regularly to refresh my memory of words I learned earlier from the Internet	19	104

As Table 4 shows, more than half of the students used the strategies of checking words or phrases in a computer dictionary and guessing what the text is about by looking at the title or pictures. Almost half of the students reported writing down new words or phrases they see on the Internet and looking for meaning from the text without using a dictionary. However, some students stated that they rarely go back to the websites to refresh their memory of words.

Table 5  
Social strategies: Learning with others

Items	%	N
a. When I talk to someone on live chat I ask him/her about the meaning when I do not understand	48	104
b. I try to talk on live chat about things for which I know vocabulary	40	104
c. When I do not know the answer while doing an exercise on the computer I ask someone else for help	35	104
d. I start conversations in English on live chats to practice my language	35	104
e. On live chat I ask English speakers to correct me when I make mistakes	24	104
f. I write emails to other speakers of English to practice my language	23	104
g. When I finish the exercise on the computer I ask others to check it for me	18	104
h. I talk to other students to find out about learning English using computers	9	104
i. I practise English using computers with other students	6	104

With respect to the social strategies, almost half of the students ask people about the meaning of what they do not understand. Forty percent of the students talk on live chat about things for which they know vocabulary. Very few students reported that they talk to other students to find out about learning English using computers and practicing English using computers with other students.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Promoting Learner Autonomy through the Use of Learning Strategies

The purpose of this study was to identify the extent to which students used metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies when they are engaged in online activities. The participants reported that they used some strategies more than the others. First of all, when we take the metacognitive strategies into



consideration, the participants monitored themselves and thought about their learning processes more than they planned how to learn English. The majority of the students save the address of a good Internet site or find materials on the Internet that is at or near their levels. Less than half of the students check if their work is correct, set their learning goals and plan how they are going to learn English on the computer. It seems that only several students are aware of the importance of planning about how to improve their English language skills. As for the cognitive strategies, they were divided into listening, watching on the computer and reading. With respect to the listening strategies, the majority of the students listened for important key words while almost half of the students listened to the same things more than once to understand more. Regarding watching on the computer, while most of the students read the English subtitles when watching programs, very few students prefer to watch the programs again without subtitles. When the reading strategies are considered, checking words or phrases in computer dictionary and guessing what the text is about through looking at the title or pictures turned out to be used by the majority of the participants. Less than half of the participants reported that they used other reading strategies such as looking for meaning from the text and reading the same things more than once. As for the social strategies, the participants used them less than the other learning strategies. Talking to other students to find out about learning English and practicing English using computers with other students turned out to be the least used social strategies by the participants in the study. It can be said that although some students seem to make use of the learning strategies because students are usually given training prior to entering universities, they are still not fully aware of the importance of using strategies in learning.

Several factors can be considered to support the learners with respect to using learning strategies more. First, classrooms can be transformed into resource centers where learners can use learning strategies in a variety of ways by engaging in computer-assisted language learning and accessing videos, other multimedia devices, and materials. A good example is Virtual English Language Advisor (VELA) at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology ([http://celt.ust.hk/instr/instr\\_td04.htm](http://celt.ust.hk/instr/instr_td04.htm)). VELA is an interactive online system which gives advice to English language learners and also the opportunity to solve language learning problems by using metacognitive strategies. Such resource centers should be built in high schools and in preparatory schools of universities in Turkey. Another effective way to develop autonomous learning through using learning strategies online is eTandem. ETandem is a distance education system and a collaborative language learning program which promotes learner autonomy and an understanding of sociocultural issues. The extent to which teachers and tutors are involved in this system determines the degree of autonomy achieved. In eTandem, two partners who want to learn each others' languages interact via email, audio, video conferencing or other means of communication. The partners are paired by a central organization called eTandem Europa (<http://www.slf.ruhruni-bochum.de/etandem/etdef-en.html>). The efficiency of this form of autonomous learning was investigated by Stickler and Lewis (2008). The authors examined the use of learning strategies such as cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies used by the German and English learners. The authors analyzed a corpus of actual email messages that learners sent to each other. The results showed that learners used social strategies such as giving personal information, thanking or apologizing more than the other strategies.

## 6.2. *Teacher Autonomy*

The findings of the present study also have implications for teachers. Although the issue of learner autonomy that we raise here is somewhat widespread in educational institutions throughout the world, it is still absent from the language classrooms in Turkey. Therefore, it is important that schools develop a strategy for autonomous learning, but in order to do that they need to address issues which go beyond how students perform within a well-defined curriculum. One of the most important factors to

consider is teacher guidance. Scholars claim that autonomy is a trait that can be developed in the classroom with the support and guidance of teachers. As Benson states, autonomy “does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher” (p. 23). According to LaGanza (2008), the meaning of learner autonomy is not limited to taking control or taking responsibility of one’s learning but it also involves the mutual understanding between teachers and students with respect to the needs of the learners. Autonomy, according to Creswell (2000), can be facilitated through active dialogues between teachers and students. Students can report to the teacher the problems that they experience during different kinds of activities.

Another important issue is teacher autonomy. Little (1995, p.180) suggested that “language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous”. The development of learner autonomy depends on the development of teacher autonomy, that is, learner autonomy can be developed only if teachers are autonomous learners themselves. An important reason why learner autonomy is not practiced in many contexts is that teachers may feel that they may lose control and thus this may lead to classroom chaos and disorder (Trebbs, 2008). Thus, it is important that the school administration provides guidance to teachers with respect to how to incorporate autonomy into their teaching, help teachers understand the concept, how it may be put into practice and change their perspectives regarding how students should be taught. One of the studies that examined how autonomy can be incorporated into teaching is conducted by Martinez (2008). Martinez conducted semi-structured interviews with two groups of student-teachers with respect to their perceptions about learner autonomy and how their perceptions can be integrated into pre-service teacher training programs. The findings showed that increased metacognitive awareness through the integration of verbal reports of the students-teachers and having competence in learning to learn promoted autonomy.

## **7. Conclusion and Limitations**

The present study identified the learning strategies that students used in a computer-based classroom. A further study could develop a methodology that could improve the use of certain learning strategies leading to greater autonomy. A further study should also take culture into consideration. Note that the present study was conducted with Turkish students who have lived in Turkey all their lives. Palfreyman (2005) states that culture and autonomy are parallel to each other in some ways and that when considering different approaches to autonomy, one also has to “interpret the particular, cultural, social, political, and educational context in which [autonomy] is located” (Sinclair, 2006, p.6). The role that culture plays in constructing autonomy in learning has been demonstrated in several studies. For example, Gao (2005) investigated Chinese students’ vocabulary learning strategies upon arrival in the UK. Based on the interviews, the author concluded that the students used strategies to determine the meanings of new words, guessed the meanings of words from the given contexts and asked their classmates for clarification of meaning more than they did when they were studying in China. Therefore, given the fact that autonomy is not only influenced by different learning strategies but also influenced by sociocultural factors (Riley, 1988), a future study can involve learners in different cultural settings. This way, a clearer pedagogical understanding of what can be achieved with learners coming from different kinds of cultural backgrounds can be gained.

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