

Full Length Research Paper

The relationship between self-regulated learning strategies and academic achievement in a Turkish EFL setting

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Self-regulation has gained worldwide popularity in the field of language teaching research with the help of recent interest in the active role of learners in the classroom. The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies of the students in an ELT program and their Grade Point Average (GPA) scores. 240 participants from a major public university in Turkey filled out a questionnaire of 41 items and interviews were conducted with twenty randomly selected successful (10) and unsuccessful participants (10). The questionnaire had four dimensions: (a) motivation and action to learning, (b) planning and goal setting, (c) strategies for learning and assessment, and (d) lack of self-directedness. The results of the study revealed that there were significant positive correlations between three dimensions of self-regulated learning strategies (that is, motivation and action to learning, planning and goal setting, strategies for learning and assessment) and Grade Point Average scores of the participants. Qualitative analysis revealed that the top two reasons of success, as perceived by successful participants, were high interest in the field and being sensitive about the grades. On the other hand, unsuccessful students stated that they did not like their fields and they had poor interest levels. This study adds to the literature that demonstrates the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies and academic achievement by providing data from university level students in Turkey.

Key words: Achievement, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Self-Regulation, self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Since the significance of learner-centered instruction in foreign or second language teaching and the assumption that each learner is different in terms of reasons for learning another language and their approaches and abilities has been recognized, there has been a considerable amount of emphasis on learners who are able to take the responsibility of their own learning. With the increasing focus on learner responsibility in education,

self-regulated learning has attracted noteworthy attention over the last decades from people of different fields such as primary education, science education, maths education in different educational settings. Brown et al. (1999, p.162) defines self-regulation as “the capacity to plan, guide and monitor one’s behaviour flexibly in the face of changing circumstances”. Another definition by Zimmerman (2000, p.14) regards it as a process that

Table 1. Phases of self regulation.

Phases	Behavioural aspect	Contextual aspect
Forethought. planning. activation	Planning time, effort, self-observation	Perceptions of task and context
Monitoring	Awareness and monitoring of effort, time, need for help	Monitoring task and context conditions
Control	Increase/decrease effort Persist/give up Help-seeking	Change/renege/leave task or context
Reflection	Choice behaviour	Evaluation of task and context

involves “self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals”. Since self-regulation is perceived as a skill that can be learned and developed, it is considered to be an important element in the process of lifelong learning. Individuals’ requirement to organize and regulate their own learning according to their learning needs created the concept of “self-regulated learning” (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulated learning is defined as a process in which learners regulate their cognition, motivation and behaviour actively.

Self-regulation in the academic contexts entails a “multidimensional construct, including cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivational, behavioural, and environmental processes that learners can apply to enhance academic achievement” (Dörnyei, 2005, p.191). More specifically, it refers to “planning and managing time; attending to and concentrating on instruction; organizing, rehearsing and coding information strategically; establishing a productive work environment; and using social resources effectively” (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1997, p.195). Even though there are various definitions and conceptualizations of “self-regulation” in different contexts, Pintrich (2000) identifies some common characteristics of self-regulation that can be deduced from all of these definitions such as:

1. Self-regulated learning is pro-active and constructive, that is, the student is active in the learning process.
2. A prerequisite for self-regulated learning is the potential for control. The students are able to monitor the learning process, which is a function of certain individual differences.
3. In self-regulated learning there are goals, criteria and standards that help the learner to modify the process of learning if needed.
4. Mediators have an important role in self-regulated learning in that they are a link between the learner and outer expectations, and between actual and expected activity.

Zimmerman (2008) argues that self-regulated learners are the ones that are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their process of learning. Similarly, Randi and Corno (2000, p.651) define self-regulated learners as the ones who “seek to accomplish academic tasks strategically and manage to overcome obstacles using a battery of resources”.

According to Pintrich (2000, p.454), the process of self-regulation includes four phases that have behavioural and contextual aspects as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 indicates how some specific behaviours, in specific contexts, form self-regulated learning behaviour. In the first phase, namely, *forethought, planning and activation*, the learners plan their time and effort and observe themselves in accordance with their perceptions of task and context. In the second phase of the cycle, which is *monitoring*, they monitor or watch their effort, their timing and whether they need help or not according to the conditions of tasks and their contexts. In the third phase named *control*, they either increase or decrease the effort they spend on the task, they either persist or give up or they ask for help. In the last phase named *reflection*, they evaluate the task and the context within the scope of their chosen behaviour.

LANGUAGE LEARNING, LEARNING STRATEGIES, ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-REGULATION

Starting with the efforts to define the characteristics of a good language learner in 1970s, language learning strategies adopted by successful learners and the possibility of teaching them to unsuccessful learners has become an important issue in the field of language teaching. A substantial body of second language research emphasizing language learning strategies appeared in related literature (Cohen, 1998, 2002; Nunan, 1997; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 1996) and different taxonomies related to language learning

strategies were put forward by Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990); however, Dörnyei (2005) claims that the term "*self-regulation*" has substituted "*strategy*" because of the difficulty in conceiving learning strategies. As suggested by Dörnyei (2005), even though the term "self-regulation" is thought to be synonymous with the term "strategy", it is different from strategy in that there is a shift of focus in self-regulation from product to process and self-regulation is not limited to learning but it also deals with other types of cognitive and behavioural processes in different disciplines such as clinical, health, and organizational psychology. Similarly, Tseng et al. (2006) mention definitional fuzziness related to language learning strategies and difficulties related to the measurement instruments used and they state that the term "learning strategy" rarely appears in research publications. Therefore, they conceptualize and assess strategic learning according to the notion of "*self-regulation*" and focus on the significance of learners' innate self-regulatory capacity that encourages them to identify and apply their own strategic learning mechanisms.

With the occurrence of Common European Framework in 2001 and its emphasis on "learning how to learn", the significance of self-regulated learning strategies was also recognized in the field of language teaching. *Self-regulated L2 learning strategies* are defined as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn the L2 (Afflerbach et al., 2008).

Previous research on self-regulation argues for a positive relationship between self regulation and academic performance. Findings of the earlier research in science education (Akyol et al., 2010), primary education (Eshel and Kohavi, 2003; Kitsansas et al., 2009; Ocak and Yamaç, 2013), math education (Arsal, 2009) and higher education (Lindner and Harris, 1992; Vrugt and Oort, 2008) demonstrated this positive correlation. However, there are not many studies, to the researcher's best knowledge, which investigated the relationship between self-regulation and academic achievement among university-level language learners, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. To fill in the gap in the literature, the researcher examined the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies of university students who were majoring in an English Language Teaching Department and their academic achievement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is there any relationship between the participants' self-regulated learning strategies and their level of achievement?
2. What are the reasons for success and failure among successful and unsuccessful learners in regard to self-

regulated learning strategies?

METHODOLOGY

The aim and the significance of the study

As stated before, self-regulation has been studied in different fields and settings; however, its role in an EFL setting has not been studied comprehensively. Taking this gap as an impetus, this study aims to find out about the self-regulated learning strategies adopted by Turkish EFL learners in a university setting and its relationship with the success of the participants. This current study also tries to identify, qualitatively, perceived self-regulated learning features of successful and unsuccessful participants. With all these dimensions, the researcher hopes that this study will contribute to the literature on self-regulation with its specific concern for the university EFL contexts by providing quantitative and qualitative data.

Setting and participants

This study was carried out in a public university in Turkey in the spring term of 2011 to 2012 academic year. The participants of this study included 240 freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors who were enrolled in the English Language Teaching Department in the Faculty of Education. Of the 240 participants, 49 were male and 191 were female (20% and 80%, respectively). The average age of the students, at the time of the study, was 19.8. 34% of the participants were in their first year of study, 19% were sophomores, 37% were juniors and 10% were seniors. All of the participants were upper-intermediate to advanced-level learners of English who would teach English in different educational institutions in Turkey after their graduation. As they were university level learners, the students were supposed to understand and remember the materials presented to them during class lectures in some courses related to their major such as literature, theories of foreign/second language acquisition, teaching language skills, etc. As Cohen (2002) suggested, students at post-secondary level must be proactive in their quest for knowledge and features of self-regulation can tell us about the level of the proactive nature of the students.

The questionnaire

The Self-Regulated Learning Scale used in this study is taken from Turan (2009) who adapted the scale to the Turkish university context by translating it and conducting necessary validity and reliability statistical analyses. It is a 5-point Likert-type scale which consists of 41 items corresponding to four dimensions associated with self-regulation. In this scale, the minimum possible score to be obtained is 41 whereas the maximum possible score is 205. The scale includes the following dimensions:

- a. Motivation and action to learning.
- b. Planning and goal setting.
- c. Strategies for learning and assessment.
- d. Lack of self-directedness.

For these four dimensions, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for reliability are 0.88, 0.91, 0.83, and 0.76, respectively. In the questionnaire, there were 7 items that inquired about motivation and action to learning, 8 items about planning and goal setting, 19 items about strategies for learning and assessment and 7 items

Table 2. Descriptive statistics about participants' GPAs and dimensions of self-regulation.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	sd
GPA	240	1.03	3.86	2.65	.449
Motivation and action to learning	240	2.29	5.00	4.03	.461
Planning and Goal setting	240	2.50	5.00	3.81	.599
Strategies for learning and assessment	240	1.00	4.43	2.48	.591
Lack of self-directedness	240	2.58	4.95	3.85	.411
Total	240	2.63	4.96	3.84	.393

about lack of self-directedness, which are considered to be important constructs in the process of self-regulation.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Self-Regulated Learning Scale was given to the participants in Turkish so as to avoid possible misunderstandings. Prior to the implementation of the research instrument, the participants were informed about the content of the study and confidentiality of their responses and their consent was taken. Some demographic data were included on the first page of the research instrument about the participants' gender, the year they are attending at university, etc. After the implementation of the scale, the data gathered with the help of the scale were analyzed with SPSS 13.0 statistical analysis software. In order to analyze the data of the study, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, etc.) were calculated and in order to find the relationship between students' academic achievement and their self-regulated learning strategies, correlation analyses were implemented. Ten of the randomly selected successful participants who had GPAs of 3.00 or higher and ten randomly selected unsuccessful participants with the GPAs of 1.99 and lower were interviewed about their perceptions of self-regulated learning and their perceived reasons for success and failure in order to increase the reliability of the findings and to triangulate the data gathered in this study. All of the interviews were conducted in Turkish and later translated into English by the author for further analysis. The qualitative part of the data was inductive because the aim was to reach some generalizations related to students' perceptions. All the interviews were coded by the researcher and some common topics mentioned by the students were discerned and related tables were prepared by the researcher.

RESULTS

In this study, the researcher investigated the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies of EFL learners and their academic achievement. The researcher also interviewed successful and unsuccessful participants about their self-regulated learning strategies. The quantitative analyses were conducted to examine any correlational relationship between the self-regulated learning strategies and academic achievement as operationalized by the GPA scores of the participants. In Table 2, the descriptive statistics about the GPAs of the participants and four dimensions of the Self-Regulated Learning scale have been provided.

As can be seen in Table 2, the GPAs of the participants

ranged from 1.03 to 3.86 (out of 4.00) with a standard deviation of .449 ($M=2.65$). Among the four dimensions of self-regulation, maximum scores of 5.00 were obtained in two dimensions (motivation and action to learning and planning and goal setting) and a minimum score (1.00) was obtained only in strategies for learning and assessment.

In order to examine any correlation between the four dimensions of the self-regulated learning strategies and academic achievement, the researcher ran correlation analyses. The findings of the correlation analyses of students' self-regulated learning strategies and their GPAs are given in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, there are significant positive correlations between three dimensions of self-regulated learning strategies: motivation and action to learning ($r=0,486$, $p<0.000$), planning and goal setting ($r=0,220$, $p<0.001$), and strategies for learning and assessment ($r=0,200$, $p<0.002$) and GPA scores. The highest correlation is between motivation and action to learning and GPAs. As anticipated, there is also a negative, but not significant, correlation between lack of self-directedness and GPAs ($r=-0,115$, $p<0.075$). Furthermore, the researcher observed a significant positive correlation between the total score of self-regulated learning strategies scale and participants' GPAs ($r=0,245$, $p<0.000$).

To answer the second research question and to increase the reliability of the findings of this study, the researcher thematically analyzed the interviews. As mentioned before, 20 participants (10 successful and 10 unsuccessful) were interviewed about their attitudes towards self-regulation. The duration of the interviews ranged between 10.30 minutes to 21.10 minutes ($M=13.20$ minutes). Based on the analysis carried out, it was observed that the successful participants have repeatedly mentioned the following statements about their success in their academic studies. The frequencies of the statements have been provided in parentheses:

As can be seen in Table 4, most of the successful participants were highly interested in the fields that they were studying and they were quite concerned about the grades. The excerpts below taken from Interviews 4 and 7 of the 'successful participants group' illustrate the point.

Table 3. Correlations between the dimensions of self-regulated learning strategies and GPAs

	Dimension	N	r	p
Self-regulated learning strategies	Motivation and action to learning	240	.486**	.000
	Lack of self-directedness	240	-.115	.075
	Planning and goal setting	240	.220**	.001
	Strategies for learning and assessment	240	.200**	.002
	Total	240	.245**	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Qualitative analysis of the interviews of successful participants (Thematic units)

Perceived reasons for success in academic studies	Frequencies
High interest in the field	9
Utilizing new strategies in challenging situations	5
Having specific goals about one's future profession	6
Being concerned about the grades	8
Having high intrinsic motivation level	7
Using self-evaluation techniques whenever necessary	4
Making time arrangements carefully	7
Criticizing oneself in failure	5

I have been interested in English since primary school when I first started learning English. Since then I have been listening to English songs, watching TV programmes in English and using the tools of social media to communicate with other people who speak English. Regarding success in my school, I have been always careful about my courses and I do really care about my grades too.

Interview 4- Successful Participants

I love English and I like learning new things about it everyday. I feel that knowing English, itself, is an asset for me. In the future, having a job in the field of ELT will give me more chances of interacting with English speakers. While studying for my courses, I like using different resources together with what is given in classes.

Interview 7- Successful Participants

The researcher also analyzed the self-regulated learning features of the unsuccessful participants by asking them about their strategies, motivation levels, learning habits and interest in their majors. Table 5 summarizes the thematic analysis of the interviews with unsuccessful participants.

Poor interest level about the field and disliking the field were the top two main reasons of failure according to the

analysis of the unsuccessful participants' interviews. To illustrate the point, the researcher has included Excerpts from Interviews 2 and 5 of the 'unsuccessful participants group'.

If I had a choice, I know that I would not be studying in this major right now. I did not like English and I feel that I am not interested in learning English because I never use it in Turkey. Also, I feel that my interests are quite different. I like reading historical novels but in Turkish and if I could change my major now, I would study History.

Interview 2- Unsuccessful Participants

If I get a bad result from my exams, I do not want to continue studying English anymore. Also, when I see some friends who get good results without any effort, I feel that the teachers are not doing their jobs properly but also I know that I really do not try enough... To summarize my feelings towards English, I can say that I don't like it.

Interview 5- Unsuccessful Participants

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the researcher has investigated the relation-

Table 5. Qualitative analysis of the interviews of unsuccessful participants (Thematic units)

Perceived Reasons for Failure in Academic Studies	Frequencies
Poor interest level in the field	7
Giving up trying in difficult situations or failure	6
Disliking the field	7
Depending on others about studying	5
Criticizing teachers and others in failure	4
Having too many personal problems in their lives	4
Making poor arrangements about time	6

ship between different dimensions of self-regulated learning strategies and academic success with the help of a questionnaire. She also examined the perceived reasons for success and/or failure in academic studies of 10 successful and 10 unsuccessful participants with the help of interviews. The findings demonstrated that there were significant positive correlations between three dimensions 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 was observed between motivation and action to learning and GPAs. It was also found out that there was a negative but not statistically significant correlation between lack of self-directedness and GPAs of participants.

The qualitative analysis implemented revealed that top five reasons of success, as perceived by successful participants, were high interest about the field (9), being sensitive about the grades (8), having high intrinsic motivation level (7), making time arrangements carefully (7) and having specific goals about their future profession (6). On the other hand, unsuccessful participants had poor interest level about the field (7) and they did not like English Language Teaching department and English (7). They frequently gave up trying in difficult situations or failure (6) and made poor arrangements about time management (6).

DISCUSSION

As mentioned before, this study is one of the first studies that investigated the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies and academic success in the field of ELT in an EFL setting. Based on the findings in this study, it can be argued that there is a positive and significant correlation between self-regulated learning strategies and academic success of the participants. Similar results were observed by Eshel and Kohavi (2003), Kitsansas et al. (2009) and Ocak and Yamaç (2013) who conducted research in primary education contexts with younger students. Together with Yamaç and Ocak's study, this

study contributes to the research about self-regulated learning strategies carried out in Turkey. Moreover, Lindner and Harris (1992) and Vrugt and Oort (2008) conducted research in higher education settings and found a correlation between academic success and self-regulated learning strategies. This research contributes to the literature by providing more support to the relationship between self regulation and academic success in higher education settings.

The questionnaire that was used in this study had four dimensions and three of these dimensions (motivation and action to learning, planning and goal setting and strategies for learning and assessment) had significantly positive correlations with the GPA scores of the participants. The highest correlation was observed between motivation and action to learning and GPAs. There are many other studies, especially in the field of language learning, that demonstrate the relationship between motivation and academic achievement (Ardasheva, 2010; Bernaus and Gardner, 2008; Ehrman and Oxford, 1995; Gardner, 2006; etc.). The high correlation in this study would support the findings of these previous studies as well.

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