THE EFFECTS OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT ON LEARNER AUTONOMY OF TURKISH ADULT EFL LEARNERS

Abstract

In this study, the effects of formative assessment on the autonomy of Turkish adult EFL learners was tried to be found out. The study was carried out at the English preparatory class at a state university. Case study design was adopted during this study. Within the basis of constructivist approach, formative assessment procedure was implemented. Autonomy Learner Questionnaire and Assessment Preference Scale were used for data collection. Both of the data collection tools was implemented as a pre-test and post-test during the study. At the end of the study, it was concluded that formative assessment practices had a positive effect on the autonomy of Turkish adult EFL learners studying at English preparatory class at a state university.

Keywords: Constructivism, Formative Assessment, Learner Autonomy, Assessment Preference.

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1 This study is condensed version of the master’s thesis entitled “The Effects of Formative Assessment on Learner Autonomy of Turkish Adult EFL Learners” completed by Tuğba Sönmez in 2013.
BİÇİMLENDİRİCİ DEĞERLENDİRMENİN İNGİLİZCEYİ YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRENEN YETİŞKİNLERİN ÖĞRENEN ÖZERKLİĞİNE OLAN ETKİLERİ

Öz

Bu çalışmada, biçimlendirici değerlendirme yöntemini İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen yetişkinlerin öğrenen özgürlüğine olan etkileri bulunmaktadır. Çalışma bir devlet üniversitesinin İngilizce hazırlık sınıftında yürütülmüştür. Çalışma bir devlet üniversitesinde İngilizce hazırlık eğitimi alan sınıfta yürütülmüştür. Bu çalışmada, durum çalışması uygulanmıştır. Çalışmanın başından itibaren yapılandırılmış yaklaşım temel alınarak biçimlendirici değerlendirme uygulamaları yapılmıştır. Çalışmanın veri toplama araçları Öğrenen Özverkliği Anketi ve Değerlendirme Tercihi Ölçeğidir. Veri toplama araçları çalışma boyunca ön-test ve son-test olarak uygulanmıştır. Çalışmada elde edilen verilerin sonuçlarına göre biçimlendirici değerlendirme yöntemlerinin İngilizceyi yabancı dili olarak bir devlet üniversitesinde İngilizce hazırlık eğitimi alan öğrencilerin özgürlüğü üzerinde olumlu etkisi olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yapılandırmacılık, Biçimlendirici Değerlendirme, Öğrenen Özverkliği, Değerlendirme Tercihi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning and speaking a foreign language is very important because of the people living in different countries all over the world. For this reason people need to contact with these people belonging to different cultures and they need to maintain these relations. Language is a key term at this point (Merter, Şekerci and Bozkurt, 2014).

There is a rapid change in educational practices nowadays. Within the effects of humanistic approach, teaching notion has also has gained a different view. Especially in language classes where there is more diversity as a result of the impact of a different culture, many various teaching and learning activities exist.

Humanistic approach views have also affected teacher and learner roles in a classroom. The teacher is not the only active maintainer of the classes. Besides this; more student participation has gained sight. The teacher shows how to find their ways in language learning and students try to do it on their own. During this process, it is important to use right assessing method. Measuring students’ performance or their learning may be based on tests and exams or it may be done by comments and reports.

Choosing the right assessment way contributes both on teaching and learning process. In parallel with changing roles of teachers and learners, assessment has to be changed or adjusted.

1.1. Constructivism and Teaching and Learning

Constructivism has gained sight and it is important to build one’s knowledge and construct it in accordance with learners’ learning experiences. Meaning construction is the direct result of constructivism. At this point, learners’ previous knowledge, experiences and understanding the world is important. A teacher can’t make students adopt his/her own interpretations...
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or he/she can’t make them directly obtain the information (Jonassen and Reeves, 1996). Learners’, especially their needs are on the forefront in this approach. For this reason, learner-centered became the key component of constructivism. As Flynn, Mesibov, Vermette and Smith (2004) stated constructivism isn’t memorizing, it is a way to facilitate understanding and constructing knowledge.

In contrast to current views, constructivism offers educators to design an alternative set of values. In order to implement constructivist philosophy in educational practices, teachers should maintain the connection between the learner and the learning context. It is beneficial to provide learners with a context that supports both autonomy and relatedness. In order to increase responsibility and the autonomy of the learners, promoting skills and attitudes that facilitate learning is important. Lastly, awareness raising is important to engage students in intentional and conscious learning processes (Lebow, 1993).

Most constructivists agree that constructivism promotes internalization and deep understanding. In constructivist learning environments, individuals are encouraged to act as an agent in constructing meaning” (Richardson, 1997 in Ed Richardson 1997:3). It can be concluded that constructivism help students have more permanent learning because students are more active in their learning.

Constructivism is based on constructing knowledge. When students construct their own knowledge they participation may be higher. In a constructivist perspective, all the information is reinterpreted and reconstructed (Larochelle and Bednarz, 1998 in ed. Larochelle and Bednarz, 1998:4).

1.2. Formative Assessment

The basis of formative assessment is continuing assessment practices. It aims improving learners’ performance and giving information about how well learners are doing.

William (2000) defines formative assessment as; all class activities that are done by teachers and learners which provide data to reorganize activities which engage learners to provide feedback for teachers.

Formative assessment is an assessment type and its purpose is to promote students’ learning. However, formative assessment doesn’t account for learning, rank learners or provide learners with a certificate that shows the competence. An assessment activity should provide information about the feedback. By this way, students and teachers can assess themselves using these feedback and also teaching and learning activities may be modified. Engagement of the students with the learning will naturally aid learning. All in all, feedback is a kind of information which guides teachers to meet learners’ needs and reorganize teaching in accordance with these needs. (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William, 2004).

Roos and Hamilton (2004) claim that formative assessment has arisen from cognitive and constructivist theories of learning. Feedback and development are important in formative assessment. The choice of assessment is also very crucial as it leads students to be more conscious about their learning.

Sadler (1989:120) explains that formative assessment mainly focuses on how to use student performance in order to form and enhance students’ competence. With the help of these judgments and information it may be possible to monitor progress and direct students toward continued learning, relearning or alternative learning (Hammerman, 2009). By this way, as
formative assessment focuses on helping the teacher understand the improvements the students achieved and in the end the teacher may help students to be more proficient (Tuttle, 2009).

Assessment Reform Group (2002:2) asserts that there are some principles about formative assessment. One of the vital elements of effective teaching and learning atmosphere is formative assessment and it focuses on the learning process of the students. Formative assessment should be sensitive and constructive because learners’ feelings and thoughts are taken into consideration. Maintaining student motivation is an important result of the formative assessment. Formative assessment should help students stick to their learning goals and understand them, by this way students may grasp how they assessed and which criteria is used. One of the teacher roles in formative assessment is being a guide, students should be guided in order to improve. By means of formative assessment, students understand the nature of assessment and they learn to assess, manage themselves and they reflect on their own learning. Formative assessment should focus on the whole assessment process.

By adapting these principles in our classrooms, we as teachers can involve students in the process actively, we can develop skills towards assessment especially for self and peer assessment. Lastly, we can help students understand their process of learning.

1.3. Autonomy

In recent years, it is understood that traditional teaching methods which require passive learning are not sufficient to meet learning demands. Instead; encouraging greater learner autonomy and placing the learner in the middle of the learning setting assist students to learn efficiently and effectively.

One of the pioneers of autonomy Holec (1981) defined autonomy as “learners taking responsibility for their own learning” (cited in Thanasoulas, 2000:1). By looking at this definition, it can be said that learners know what their roles are. However, autonomy doesn’t mean giving a total independence to the learners.

Jones (1998) has argued that in language learning determining one’s own goals, materials and strategies are important. Language learning can be a self-instructed, planned and implemented by the learner alone within the guidance of the teacher.

Chan (2001: 506-507) explains that the autonomous learner should take the responsibility of his/her own learning and they should foster this on one’s own learning ability. S/he should set his/her own learning goals; goal setting is a consciousness-raising act that urges learner to take the responsibility. Just setting goals is not adequate, achieving these goals may be possible through identifying and developing learning strategies. Study plans also may aid learning. An autonomous learner is active in every stage of learning, so s/he should react on his/her learning. Staying still may not be an indicator of learning; s/he should identify problems and try to find solutions. An autonomous learner may know which sources and materials are relevant and s/he should try to learn to assess his/her learning and reflect on this learning.

In short, an autonomous learner is active during all the process. He/she knows the role and he/she has already set the goals and he/she is always open to criticism.

1.4. Related Studies

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When literature is reviewed, there are many studies about autonomy and formative assessment. Some of the studies given below resulted in same results with the current study.

Cooker (2012) carried out a study about the relationship between formative assessment and autonomy. The researcher firstly explored the nexus between learner autonomy and assessment. The data was obtained from 45 participants. She also tried to find out perceptions of learners on an autonomous learning environment. At the end of the study, she found the ways of being autonomous and she devised a formative self-assessment tool for learner autonomy.

In Restrepo’s (2013) study, students’ views of their learning during and after the implementation of formative assessment procedures such as self-assessment, feedback, and conferences. Students’ perceptions about the implementation were also included in the article. Participants of the study were a group of students of English enrolled in an extension program. At the end of the study, it was concluded that formative assessment helped the participants to be aware of their communicative competence. The results also showed that participants of the study this kind of assessment was a transparent procedure.

Willis (2011) tried to answer the question of “What are the qualities of the teacher-student relationship that support student learning autonomy in a formative assessment context?” Qualitative data was obtained from field notes and video recordings in the study. The study helped teachers develop an assessment capacity. This study is important because as the more teacher assessment supported learners’ autonomy the more autonomy developed.

Jacome’s (2012) study was about to promote learner autonomy through teacher-student partnership assessment namely formative assessment. His study was an action research and he tried to find out to what extent autonomy can be promoted and developed. Formative assessment procedure was used in the study. In the end, the results showed that students developed some autonomy and this was reflected in three dimensions. They take the responsibility of their own learning process, formative assessment fostered their metacognition and critical thinking skills. Lastly, the teacher’s role also was important in setting the appropriate conditions for the development of autonomy.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

At the university where the study was conducted one-year of English preparatory class is not compulsory and 35 students who wanted to take this one year education voluntarily chose to study this course. The students have 24 hours of English class in a week. Formative assessment procedure was followed during this study. At the beginning of the study, the researcher explained the key terms that were frequently used during the study.

The study is an experimental study. The researcher prepared some lesson plans for each week and tried to improve these plans and tries to assess students in accordance with their performances during the teaching and learning period. First of all, in order to raise awareness of students, goal setting sheets were used to make them detect their goals in every two weeks. Goal setting is useful if it is used as an integral part of the lesson. Goals are means to get closer to learners’ goals (Johnson and Graham, 2010:4). By this way, it was aimed to make students more conscious of their learning process and also make them a more planned learner. In order to use formative assessment in learning context teachers should plan learning and teaching so that the goal of teaching is subordinated to the goal of determining student’s level of achievement. (McCallaum, 2000:3). After determining goals, at the beginning of the new week, the students
were asked how many of the goals were reached during this period and it was found out from their answers that at first weeks it was difficult to comply with this goal sheet but they started to get used to it.

During the implementation period, the researcher prepared tasks for students which were related to the topics which were mentioned in the lesson. Throughout the study, although the topics of the tasks were determined by the researcher, the students were given alternatives and they felt free to choose another topic apart from given task topic. As Lee (1998: 282) pointed out that teachers who have more courses with a class are constantly in contact with the students so they can encourage them to undertake independent learning outside the classroom since it is easier to establish rapport and hence foster teacher and peer support. Flexibility and freedom were given during the study as the students made preparations for the tasks in the way they wanted. They chose the material they wanted to use during the study. By this way, the students took active roles in decision making. Some of the students preferred to study in a group and some of the students preferred to study individually. The students made preparations for a different activity every week. Real life topics were given to the students to provide students with real context and to make students use their knowledge that they learned previously.

At the end of each task, students evaluated themselves. Self-assessment tools are indispensable as they facilitate learners’ independent learning. By the help of these tools, students practice and study English at their own level” (Tsutsui, Kondo, Owada and Nakano, 2008:171). For this reason, the participants were given self-assessment and peer-assessment sheets after each activity. These assessment sheets were conducted in Turkish as the students were not proficient enough to give answers in English.

Besides self-assessment, the students were required to make peer-assessments, too. In peer-assessment, the students tried to evaluate their friends after the activity. Students wrote their ideas on these sheets. At the beginning, the answers were not helpful enough to make some adjustments and develop themselves. However, when they started to get more acquainted with the procedure they began to write more beneficial ideas and evaluations. They also gave feedback to the activity made and they wrote their written feedback in giving feedback sheet. When used effectively, formative assessment helps students develop a deeper understanding of their learning. Formative assessment tools should be incorporated into learning context attentively (Clark, 2011:158).

The data from the research group were gathered through Assessment Preference Scale and Autonomy Learner Questionnaire at the beginning of the study and at the end of the 2011-2012 spring term.

The study was conducted in case study design. Stake (1995: xi-12) stated that case study focuses on a single case. It aims to understand the current event. Within a case study, researchers do not make assertions. A good case study takes time and it requires the researcher to be patient.

2.1. Aim of the Study

Understanding and reacting to learning is a difficult process. In order to measure learning, the educators should carefully design assessment because of the fact that in language learning, assessment constitutes a considerable part of language education. Although assessment methods are thought to be applied in a broad and effective sense, sometimes they may be nar-
row and they are unable to describe learning outcomes. Recently, there is a shift from formal examinations towards continuous assessment practices.

Within the last few decades, there have been multidimensional advancements in language assessment. Language assessment practices have advanced in many dimensions. Some language assessment procedures aim to construct of language ability. Some focus on measuring and assessing, and some of them advocate the importance of the learning outcomes (Farhady, 2005:147).

By using formative assessment strategies, the process of evaluating can be managed as student learning takes place. By the help of these strategies, students learn to adjust their learning and they learn to be more autonomous. In this study, we have two aims. The first aim is to deal with formative assessment, and the second one is to deal with learner autonomy.

In short, this study aims to discover the effects of formative assessment on learner autonomy and find out whether formative assessment leads to any change in learner autonomy.

2.2. Research Questions of the Study

This thesis is designed to answer the questions below:

1) Does formative assessment have any effects on students’ autonomy?
2) How does the implementation of formative assessment strategies enhance autonomy of the students in terms of
   a) students’ awareness of themselves
   b) taking the responsibility of their own learning
   c) being confident as a language learner
3) Is there any change in students’ ideas about traditional assessment types by using formative assessment strategies?

2.3. Participants

35 preparatory class students were the participants of the study who study at the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at a state university. Table 1 shows the number of the male and female students participated in the study.

Table 1. Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>54,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The study was carried out with 19 female and 16 male students. All the participants were asked whether they are willing to participate in the study.

**Table 2. Age of the Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants of the study were 19 and 20 years old. Most of the participants entered university after one year or two years break.

**Table 3. Department of the Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Management</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

English preparatory class at this state university is only for the students studying at Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences. For this reason, there was no student from a different faculty. Students being in the same faculty may help the teacher organize teaching and learning and adapt the level.

**2.4. Data Collection Instruments**

Autonomy Learner Questionnaire developed by Egel in 2003 and Assessment Preference Scale developed by Büyükkarç in 2010, were used to gather data during the study.

**2.5. Data Analysis**

For the analysis of the current data, The Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS 10.0) was used. Descriptive and statistical procedures were used to present data and to draw conclusions. The significant level was p<0.05.

**3. FINDINGS**
Before interpreting the data and testing the effects of formative assessment in the autonomy of Turkish EFL learners, in order to see whether the data had a normal distribution or not Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied (Table 4 and 5). As presented in the table it is confirmed that there was a normal distribution and then Descriptive Statistic Test and Paired Samples t Test were used.

**Table 4: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Showing Pre-test and Post-test Scores of ALQ**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test of ALQ</th>
<th>Post-test of ALQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>145,3428</td>
<td>150,1143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>15,0058</td>
<td>14,2906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</td>
<td>0,621</td>
<td>0,479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>0,836</td>
<td>0,976</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 5; In ALQ statistical data analyses, $p>0.005$ was accepted as the value for the $p$-value and the findings had a normal distribution.

**Table 5: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Showing Pre-test and Post-test Scores of APS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Assessment Preferences of Participants</th>
<th>Formative Assessment Preferences of Participants</th>
<th>Traditional Assessment Preferences of Participants</th>
<th>Formative Assessment Preferences of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>32,0286</td>
<td>19,3429</td>
<td>19,6286</td>
<td>33,2571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>3,5354</td>
<td>2,8691</td>
<td>2,7662</td>
<td>2,6496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</td>
<td>0,701</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>0,701</td>
<td>0,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>0,710</td>
<td>0,232</td>
<td>0,709</td>
<td>0,723</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 5; In APS statistical data analyses, $p>0.005$ was accepted as the value for the $p$-value and the findings had a normal distribution.
Table 6: Paired Samples t-Test Results Showing Pre-test and Post-test Scores of ALQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALQ Pre-test</td>
<td>145,342</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15,0058</td>
<td>-1,957</td>
<td>0,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALQ Post-test</td>
<td>150,114</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14,2906</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 6: In ALQ statistical data analyses, pre-test and post-test scores of ALQ had a significant difference (t value= -1,957 p=0.049<0.05). When mean value was considered, mean value of pre-test scores was accepted as 145,342 ± 15,0058 and mean value of post test scores was accepted as 150,114 ± 14,2906.

Table 7: Paired Samples t-Test Results Showing Pre-test and Post-test Scores of APS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Assessment Preferences</td>
<td>19,628</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2,7662</td>
<td>-15,158</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>32,028</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3,5354</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative Assessment Preferences</td>
<td>19,343</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2,8691</td>
<td>-21,156</td>
<td>0,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>33,257</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2,6496</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 7: In APS (Traditional Assessment Preferences) statistical data analyses, pre-test and post-test scores of APS (Traditional Assessment Preferences) had a significant difference (t value= -15,158 p=0.000<0.05). When the mean value was considered, mean value of pre-test scores was accepted as 19,628 ± 2,7662 and mean value of post-test scores was accepted as 32,028 ± 3,5354.

According to Table 7: In APS (Formative Assessment Preferences) statistical data analyses, pre-test and post-test scores of APS (Formative Assessment Preferences) had a significant difference (t value= -21,156 p=0.000<0.05). When mean value was considered, mean value of pre-test scores was accepted as 19,343 ± 2,8691 and mean value of post-test scores was accepted as 33,257 ± 2,6496.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For a more brief and detailed information about the procedure, it can be concluded that the data gathered during the study was about student learning and understanding. This data was
analyzed and then after commenting on this, learning instruction was guided in accordance with the information we had. Weekly quizzes, regular feedback practices gave the students the feeling of consciousness about their learning. Self-assessment practices helped students become more confident and aware of themselves. The students participated in the study felt that; in contrast to their past experiences of education, they were free but this didn’t mean that they were not guided, the researcher namely the instructor was ready to help whenever they needed. They were free to seek the assistance of both their teacher and their friends.

Instead of being just an assessment method, formative assessment practices may help figure out the student understanding, their needs and considering their decisions about the instruction. By this way, formative assessment may be a way of relationship development between the student and the teacher, so it is easy to enhance and develop learning and teaching with the application of the right assessment method.

In this study, students viewed the teacher, not just a teacher, but a guide and a friend. Students learned to evaluate themselves and their friends. They learned that; being educated was not just an exam period or evaluation and assessment period, they conceived that education was a process that included motivation, organization, encouragement, activation, and flexibility. In short, they became more aware of themselves and educational practices.

To sum up, it can be said that implementing formative assessment methods in the classroom may be different at the beginning as for the students it is a new way of assessment. It can be interpreted that formative assessment practices had a positive effect on the autonomy of Turkish EFL learners at a state university.

4.1. Suggestions for Further Studies

The current study described the effects of formative assessment on the autonomy of learners. In order to get more general findings of the current research, it would be more useful to do more studies on this topic. It would be better to extend the number of the participants as the number of the participants in current study is not sufficient enough to make generalizations. Furthermore, there may be interesting results if the study is applied to a different group. For example, the results may be different if it is applied to high school students as traditional assessment procedures are more common. It may be beneficial to make changes in educational procedures after the implementation of such a study on a larger scale.

In addition to these, in this study case study design was adopted. However, experimental study would be conducted, too. It would be interesting to see the results of two groups; control and experimental group. Traditional assessment methods would be applied to one group and formative assessment methods would be applied to another group.
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