

***Teachers' Awareness of the Role of EFL Learner Autonomy in
Promoting Learning Outcomes***

وعي المعلمين بدور استقلالية المتعلم للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في تعزيز مخرجات
التعلم

Layla Zourez *

*University Center Abdelhafid Boussouf – Mila (Algeria)
l.zourez@centre-univ-mila.dz*

Received: 15/01/2019

Accepted: 27/11/2019

Published: 31/12/2019

Abstract

Being a key concept in the field of language learning, autonomy forms the nucleus of the teaching/learning process (TLP). The learner-centered approach considers the learner as the main actor in class, and the most responsible figure for the whole process of teaching and learning. It is generally believed that learners depend more on themselves when the learning context provides opportunities and activities that meet their needs. Encouraging and incorporating elements that help in creating more autonomous language classrooms is reported to promote learning outcomes. In the present paper, the focus is put on investigating teachers' awareness and encouragement of autonomous learning. In addition, the attempt is equally concerned with exploring their beliefs about the role of learning autonomy in fostering learning outcomes. Data was gathered relying on the questionnaire as a research tool. The findings show that EFL teachers are aware of the role of autonomous learning.

Key Words: EFL teaching and learning, autonomy, autonomous learning, learning outcomes.

المخلص

يعتبر مفهوم الاستقلالية في عملية التعلم عاملا أساسيا في مجال تعلم اللغات و هو كذلك يشكل نواة عملية التدريس و التعلم. إن المنهج الذي يركز على المتعلم يعتبر هذا الأخير الفاعل الرئيسي في القسم والمسؤول الأول على عملية التعلم بأكملها. و يعتقد عموما أن المتعلمين يعتمدون أكثر على أنفسهم عندما تتوفر لهم الفرص والأنشطة التي تلبى احتياجاتهم. إن تشجيع و إدخال عناصر تساعد على خلق استقلالية داخل أقسام اللغة يساعد على تحسين نتائج التعلم. لقد تم التركيز في هذه الدراسة على تقصي مدى وعي الأساتذة وتشجيعهم وكذا إدخالهم نشاطات

* **Corresponding Author :** Layla Zourez, **Email:** l.zourez@centre-univ-mila.dz

التعلم الذاتي من أجل دعم الاستقلالية في التعلم. كما تهدف الدراسة إلى محاولة استكشاف اعتقادات الأساتذة بخصوص دور التعلم الذاتي في دفع نتائج التعلم.
الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم و تعلم الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الاستقلالية، التعلم الذاتي، نتائج التعلم.

Introduction

One of the most noticeable and reported problems by EFL teachers in Algerian universities is that students depend on their teachers in almost everything. In fact, the legacies of this phenomenon can be devastating to the individual and society more than what actually appears. This is the reason why rigorous and serious attempts should be made in order to eliminate what is negative and help students view learning in terms of a new paradigm that conceives self-directed learning differently.

Autonomy is a key concept in the field of language learning in general, and its notion is more complex than what apparently seems. The concept came to the scene in the twentieth century. When the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) were introduced, it became more and more prominent. The term 'learner autonomy' was first coined by Henri Holec in 1979 (Holec, 1981). In fact, it is the core of the learner-centered approach in which the teacher is merely seen as a guide and facilitator, and the learner has to considerably rely on him/herself during the learning process. Higher education, being the last cycle of academic instruction, should train students to be autonomous in learning whether in obtaining information or fulfilling various tasks. Students, for various reasons and under specific learning and teaching conditions, tend to rely on their teachers in the learning process. This would ultimately render them passive receivers and would equally deaden them intellectually.

Learner autonomy, and due to the incorporation of its aspects in EFL teaching and learning whether sporadically or frequently, is said to have considerable effects on the teaching/learning process. From the teaching techniques to learning strategies, the impact of using self-directed activities should be positively exploited for the sake of improving TLP and ensuring better learning and teaching conditions and outcomes. Regarding the significance of learner autonomy for both teachers and learners, it is of paramount importance to work hard on developing it in learners.

Literature Review

1. Learner Autonomy in EFL Learning

For the sake of making learning more meaningful and purposeful to the learners, the latter have to take on more responsibility and sacrifice more time and effort in understanding and adopting the learning process with all its elements and stages.

1.1. Concept of Autonomy: Autonomy is a relatively elusive concept. Broadly speaking, it refers to the situation in which learners rely on themselves to solve a given learning task. Autonomous learning is framed in terms of learners depending on themselves in language learning tasks and using special strategies to manage to do that. This is inspired from the principle that “learning should empower a student to become a free, mature and authentic [individual]” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2004, p.14). Hence, teachers are asked to know why this kind of learning is useful and how they can foster it.

Various terms are employed in the literature to designate such a concept including: “*learner autonomy, learner independence, self-direction, awareness, andragogy, autonomous learning and independent learning*” (Pichugova, Stepura & Pravosudov, 2016, p.1). A plethora of definitions are used to refer to this kind of learning including the following:

- “It is the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001; as cited in Farivar & Rahimi, 2014, p.645).
- “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p.3).
- “increased responsibility for their own learning. Be willing and capable of learning from and with others. Participate in diagnosing, prescribing, and evaluating their progress. Exercise self-discipline” (Krabbe, 1983, p. 372).
- “self-directed learning, if and when it occurs, consists of thought and behavior that students elect to engage in to direct, manage, or monitor the event” (Thomas, Strage & Curley, 1988, p. 314).
- The term autonomy has been used in five ways by Benson and Voller (1997) :
 1. situations in which learners study entirely on their own,
 2. an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education,
 3. a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning,

4. the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning,

5. the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning.

(cited

in

Çakici, 2015, P.32).

1.2. Theoretical Background: Autonomy is one of the aspects of learning. It is highly and seriously considered in the field of language learning in general. The approaches in the field constitute the basis for the rationale that holds various theories of language teaching and learning. Most of the principles of autonomous learning are taken from the constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It supports the idea that learners should be in the core of the learning process. They should be decision-makers in relation to: what and how to learn, the cognitive models involved, goals of learning, evaluation, selecting materials, etc. In this regard, Nunan (1988) states that in autonomous classrooms, "learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught" (cited in Nunan, 2003, p.193). Moreover, many of the features of autonomous learning match those of experiential learning wherein "students are placed at the center of the learning process, and their immediate personal experiences are taken as the point of departure for the learning process" (Nunan, 2003, p.194).

This is the reason why, learners should be explicitly and deductively instructed on how to be autonomous in language learning and the notion of autonomy should be spelt out.

1.3. Developing Learner Autonomy: The first step towards establishing autonomous learning is to raise students' awareness and direct their attention towards its advantages. According to Çakici (2015), "the starting point to encourage learners to become more autonomous is to have them accept the responsibility for their own learning" (p.32). Learners, therefore, should be provided with some meta-cognitive knowledge about the nature of autonomy and its most successful strategies. In the same vein, Pichugova, Stepura and Pravosudov (2016) maintain that "learner autonomy cannot be learned or taught but it can be developed through conscious awareness of the learning process" (p.2). We, teachers, always blame our students for not seriously relying on themselves. But have we ever tried to provide the most effective solutions to this problem?

According to Pichugov, Stepura and Pravosudov (2016) “such aspects as choice, goals and needs, support, emotional climate, learning strategies, learner attitude and motivation, and self-esteem should be considered as the goal to promote learner autonomy in EFL context” (p.1).

1.3.1. Teacher’s Role: Borg and Al-Busaidi (2013) claim that teachers’ beliefs about the concept of autonomy play a central role in the process of fostering and developing autonomy in learners. This, in fact, constitutes the first step.

The idea of learner autonomy is highly dependent on the development of certain learning strategies that are essential elements for the building of autonomy in learners, and which have to be taught by teachers partly because “learner autonomy is based on the idea that teachers teach how to learn” (Çakici, 2015, p.38). Teachers can manage to do that through investigating the learners’ needs and interests, which have to be cultivated for developing autonomy. Group and pair work activities, for instance, constitute a short-cut to fathoming the notion of autonomy. Nunan (2003) explains a model of nine steps for achieving learner autonomy. He starts by emphasizing the benefits of teachers spelling out the instruction goals to the learners.

As far as the teacher’s role is concerned, Grenfell (2000) maintains that “the teacher provides the framework around which learning is organized and makes materials and resources available that will enable the pupils to carry out their talks” (p.18). This does not completely exclude the role of the teacher; only that, in more autonomous classrooms, the teacher’s role would undergo some changes. It is equally reported that the teacher takes on many roles in the whole issue in the sense that he is required to follow a number of steps before autonomy in language learning becomes reachable to his/her students. In this regard, Little (1991) maintains that “learner autonomy requires teachers to act as catalysts, discussants, consultants, observers, analysts, facilitators and counselors to stimulate the learning process in various ways” (cited in Çakici, 2015, p.38).

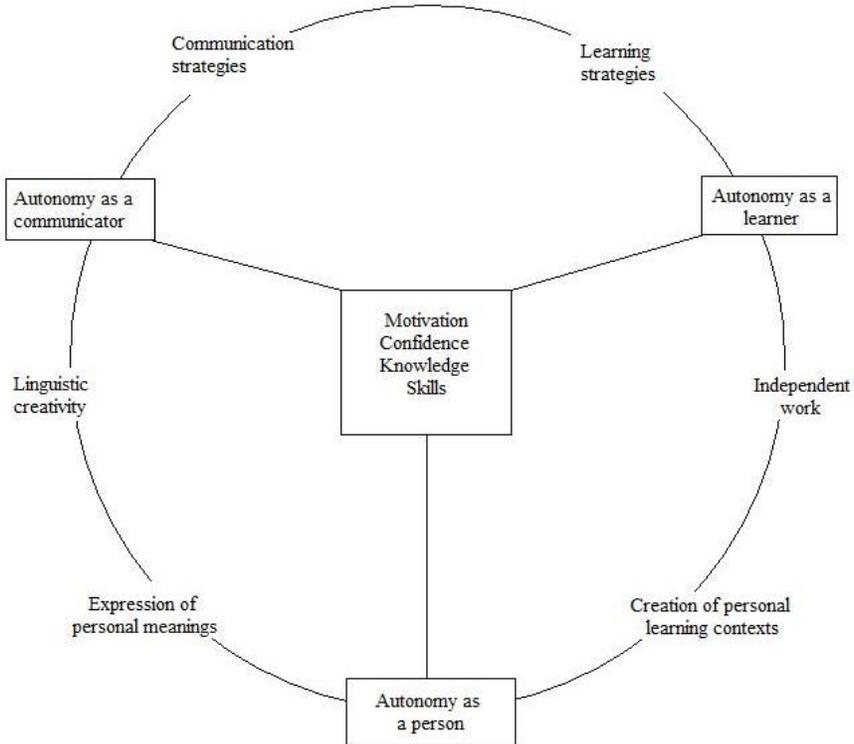


Figure: Developing Autonomy through Teaching (Littlewood, 1997, p.83; cited in *Çakici, 2015, P.33*)

1.4. Advantages of Autonomy for EFL Learning: Many studies have been conducted to investigate the benefits and advantages of learner autonomy for the student him/herself and for the society as a whole. For instance, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2013) report that autonomy “improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and that it allows learners to make best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom” (p.214). Moreover, “teachers should enhance autonomous learning because it is of great significance for their students in universities” (Haddad, 2016, p.788).

1.5. Role of Instructional Technology in Promoting Learners' Autonomy: The current electronic environment that we live in requires a certain number of changes in almost all domains of life including education. The incorporation of technology in EFL instruction has altered

the educational scene in higher education (Hains, Belland, Concelçã-Runlee, Santos, & Rothenberg, 2000).

Instructional/educational technology can be viewed either in terms of media and resources employed or in terms of the processes and systems involved in instruction. Although teachers and educators have always tried to rely on some tools and media to foster teaching and ensure better learning outcomes, this use has not become formal until recently (Hains, Belland, Concelçã-Runlee, Santos & Rothenberg, 2000). In fact, the resulting change covers a variety of aspects and dynamics in relation to teaching and learning. In this paper, light is shed on learner autonomy and the possibility of developing it through technology-based instruction.

The link between instructional technology and the development of learners' autonomy has been the focus of much research during the last few decades. Koryakovtseva (2014) discusses this issue arguing that online language learning, for instance, can be more useful if learners are guided along the learning process. This indicates that it is not the use of technological tools that actually gives fruits, but the right and appropriate implementation of tasks. This way, "we can enable the learner to be truly independent and effective" (Koryakovtseva, 2014, p.46). In the same vein, Koryakovtseva (2014) claims that "...the spread of new technologies in educational domain and the growth of new cyber generation of learners inevitably fosters the teachers, language teachers including, to pursuit the development of learner autonomy on a broader scale" (p.46), and that "technologies, such as teleconferencing, email, blogs, wikis, instant messaging, chat... creates autonomous learning environments" (Koryakovtseva, 2014, p.41).

Gonzalez-Vera (2016) asserts that "ICTs are adapted in novel ways to enrich the learning environment (Stevens & Dudeney, 2009) and their use can foster independent learning" (p.59). Moreover, Gómez (2016) maintains that "working with popular songs and ICT... foster [students'] motivation: they are interested in songs and technologies and they work independently of the teacher in groups. This fosters collaboration and autonomy, builds wholesome social connections, and helps students to use an L2 in a real context" (p.41).

Methodology

The participants in this study are 10 EFL teachers at the Department of Foreign Languages in the University Centre of Mila. The questionnaire as a research tool was used to collect data. The study aims at answering the following questions:

1. How do EFL teachers view autonomous learning?
2. To what extent are EFL teachers aware of the concept of autonomy in EFL learning?

Results

The obtained results are shown in the table below:

Questionnaire Items	Options	%
1. Do you agree that autonomy is a key concept in an EFL context?	Strongly agree	44.44
	Agree	55.55
	Disagree	00
	Strongly Disagree	00
2. Do you have a tendency towards granting your students more responsibility in framing the lesson and setting the objectives?	Yes	77.77
	No	22.22
3. Do you engage your students in self-evaluation activities?	Yes	88.88
	No	11.11
4. Do you encourage individual work?	Yes	66.66
	No	33.33
5. Do you teach your students strategies that can foster their learning autonomy?	Yes	77.77
	No	22.22
6. Do you think that EFL students are ready to learn more autonomously?	Yes	66.66
	No	33.33
7. Do you evaluate autonomy in your students?	Yes	55.55
	No	44.44
8. If yes, how do you rate your students' level of learning autonomy?	High	14.28
	Moderate	71.42
	Low	14.28

	Null	00
9. How do your students view learner autonomy?	Positively	55.55
	Negatively	00
	Indifferently	44.44
10. In your opinion, autonomous learning is basically dependent on:	Teachers' attitudes and beliefs	55.55
	Learners' readiness	66.66
	Learning and teaching conditions	55.55
	Availability and accessibility of aids including materials and media	44.44
11. How would you evaluate your use of technology in teaching?	Intensive	11.11
	Moderate	44.44
	Low	44.44
	Null	00
12. Do you encourage your students to use technological aids?	Yes	88.88
	No	11.11
13. Do you think that the incorporation of technology in teaching and learning can foster learner autonomy?	Yes	88.88
	No	11.11
14. Do you think that autonomous learning is significant vis-à-vis fostering learning outcomes?	Yes	88.88
	No	11.11

Table: Results

Discussion

All the respondents to the questionnaire considered their classroom practices to be in accordance with autonomous learning, and that autonomy is a key concept in an EFL context. The changing educational scene

together with the incorporation of new teaching techniques and aids led to viewing teaching and learning from different standpoints.

As shown in the results, it is noteworthy that teachers tend to support many features of autonomous learning including: more responsibility in the lesson, self-evaluation and individual work. This initially suggests that the informants are aware of the essential components of this kind of learning and are inclined towards incorporating them in their classes.

Engaging students in more autonomous activities requires knowing what to include in those activities and how to implement them. Otherwise, the results would satisfy neither the teacher nor the learner. The teacher's guidance and tutelage are considered as crucial elements for the success of these activities. The latter can render learning objectives clearer to the learner, who would do his potential in order to locate himself in the learning process. This kind of involvement in the learning process would arouse the learner's interest as well as motivation.

Teachers' recognition of the principles of autonomous learning and their readiness for implementing this kind of learning are not what determine its success. Further factors are in fact, of paramount importance including: learners' readiness, learning strategies, availability of learning and teaching materials and aids.

The respondents claim that they teach their students strategies that can foster their learning autonomy (**77.77%**), and that they believe that their students are equally ready to learn more autonomously (**66.66%**), and **71.42%** of the participants rate their students' level of learning autonomy as 'moderate'. On the whole, there is a tendency, on the teachers' part, towards adopting the principles of autonomous learning, and working within its framework. This inclination, together with students' positive viewing of learner autonomy (as reported by **55.55%** of the teachers), constitute the basis of successful implementation of autonomous learning.

In the present study, and in connection with the concept of autonomy in an EFL context, teachers were asked about the effect of technology, if ever incorporated in their teaching, on fostering the concept of autonomy in their students. The results are, doubtless, encouraging in that **44.44%** of the informants consider the use of technology 'moderate', and **88.88%** of them encourage their students to use technological aids in learning. What is more, most teachers (**88.88%**) believe that technology, in general, can increase learning autonomy.

As reported by them, **88.88%** of the participants in this study seem to be aware of the positive effects of learner autonomy on students' learning outcomes. The informants believe that autonomous learning is significant vis-à-vis fostering learning outcomes.

It is believed that learner autonomy, being a crucial concept in the field of EFL learning, seems to base on a plethora of pillars many of which are directly or indirectly linked to the teacher and the learner. Though having different but complementary roles, both the teacher and the learner are considered as cornerstones of the teaching/learning process along with their attitudes and beliefs about the various concepts in EFL teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The concept of autonomy has, then, been discussed and clarified because of its great advantages for language learning. EFL teachers in higher education are asked to cope with the changing linguistic and didactic content of EFL teaching and learning. Reading books, for instance, on the history of language teaching methodology, on the one hand, and language learning styles and strategies, on the other, can be the first step towards ameliorating the teaching/learning situation in all its stages and, thus, ensure better learning outcomes.

We recommend that teachers at the university level adopt a teaching approach in which autonomy is taken into great consideration because it is a noteworthy issue in language learning in general and EFL learning in particular. As a first step forward, teachers need tailor their teaching approaches and methods to the students' interests and needs and encourage the use of the learning strategies that would pave the way for the engagement in more autonomous language learning.

References

1. Borg, S. & Al-Busaidi, S. (2013). Learner autonomy: English language teachers' beliefs and practices. In S. Sheehan (Ed.), *British Council ELT Research Papers* (pp.213-270). London: British Council.
2. Çakici, D. (2015). Autonomy in language teaching and learning process. *İnönü University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 16 (1), 31-42. DOI: 10.17679/iuefd.16168538

3. Farivar, A. & Rahimi, A. (2015). The impact of CALL on Iranian EFL learners' autonomy. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192(2015), 644–649. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.112.
4. Gómez, S. (2016). How working collaboratively with technology can foster a creative learning environment. In A. Pareja-Lora, C. Calle-Martínez & P. Rodríguez-Arancón (Eds.), *New perspectives on teaching and working with languages in the digital era* (pp.39-50). Research-publishing.net.
5. Gonzalez-Vera, P. (2016). The e-generation: the use of technology fo foreign language learning. In A. Pareja-Lora, C. Calle-Martínez & P. Rodríguez-Arancón (Eds.), *New perspectives on teaching and working with languages in the digital era* (pp.51-61). Research-publishing.net.
6. Grenfell, M. (2000). Learning and teaching strategies. In Green, S. (Ed.) *New perspectives in teaching and learning modern languages*. Multilingual Matters.
7. Haddad, R.H. (2016). Developing learner autonomy in vocabulary learning in classroom: How and why can it be fostered? *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232(2016), 784–791. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.106
8. Hains, A.H., Belland, J., Concelçã-Runlee, S., Santos, R.M. & Rothenberg, D. (2000). Instructional technology and personal preparation. *TECSE*, 20(3), 132-144.
9. Holec H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
10. Koryakovtseva N. F. (2014). The use of new technologies in language education and learner autonomy. *Вестник МГЛУ. Выпуск, 3* (689), 40-47.
11. Krabbe, M.A. (1983). Self-Directed Learning of the Basic Skills. *The Clearing House*, 56(8), 372-373. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30186225>
12. Nunan, D. (2003). Nine steps to learner autonomy. Symposium, 193-204.
13. Pichugova, I.L., Stepura, S.N. & Pravosudov, M.M. (2016). Issues of promoting learner autonomy in EFL context. *SHS Web of Conferences* , 28, 01081, 1-4. DOI: 10.1051/shsconf/20162801081
14. Savin-Baden, M. & Major, C.H. (2004). *Foundations of problem-based learning*. Berkshire: SRHE & Open University Press.
15. Thomas, J.W., Strage, A. & Curley, R. (Jan., 1988). Improving students' self-directed learning: Issues and guidelines. *The Elementary School Journal*, 88(3), Special Issue:Schoolwork and Academic Tasks: 313-326. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1001959>.
16. Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear teachers, you are kindly invited to answer the following questions about teachers' awareness of the role of learner autonomy in promoting learning outcomes.

1. Do you agree that autonomy is a key concept in an EFL context:
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

2. Do you have a tendency towards granting your students more responsibility in framing the lesson and setting the objectives?
 - Yes
 - No

3. Do you engage your students in self-evaluation activities?
 - Yes
 - No

4. Do you encourage individual work?
 - Yes
 - No

5. Do you teach your students strategies that can foster their learning autonomy?
 - Yes
 - No

6. Do you think that EFL students are ready to learn more autonomously?
 - Yes
 - No

7. Do you evaluate autonomy in your students?
 - Yes
 - No

8. If yes, how do you rate your students' level of learning autonomy?
 - High
 - Moderate
 - Low

- Null

9. How do your students view learner autonomy?

- Positively
- Negatively
- Indifferently

10. In your opinion, autonomous learning is basically dependent on:

- Teachers' attitudes and beliefs
- Learners' readiness
- Learning and teaching conditions
- Availability and accessibility of aids including materials and media

11. How would you evaluate your use of technology in teaching?

- Intensive
- Moderate
- Low
- Null

12. Do you encourage your students to use technological aids?

- Yes
- No

13. Do you think that the incorporation of technology in teaching and learning can foster learner autonomy?

- Yes
- No

14. Do you think that autonomous learning is significant vis-à-vis fostering learning outcomes?

- Yes
- No