

Teacher Autonomy in Higher Education: A Prerequisite to Learner Autonomy Development

استقلالية المعلم في التعليم العالي: شرط أساسي لتطوير استقلالية المتعلم

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ABSTRACT:

Since its emergence, learner autonomy has always been at the heart of language education; however, teacher autonomy seems to be somehow ignored. Thus, this paper attempts to study the extent to which the development of learner autonomy is dependent upon teacher autonomy. To collect the necessary information, a questionnaire was administrated to 18 teachers at Ahmed Zabana University of Relizane . Findings indicated that effective implementation of autonomous learning requires teachers to be autonomous first.

Key words: EFL context, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, teacher-learner autonomy, higher education.

ملخص البحث

منذ ظهورها ، أصبحت استقلالية المتعلم دائمًا في قلب تعليم اللغة ؛ ومع ذلك ، يبدو أن استقلالية المعلم يتم تجاهلها بطريقة أو بأخرى. وبالتالي ، تحاول هذه الورقة دراسة مدى اعتماد تطوير استقلالية المتعلم على استقلالية المعلم. لجمع المعلومات اللازمة ، تم إجراء استبيان ل 18 معلما في جامعة أحمد زبانا في ولاية غليزان. أشارت النتائج إلى أن التنفيذ الفعال للتعلم المستقل يتطلب أن يكون المعلمون مستقلين أولاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية ، استقلالية المتعلم ، استقلالية المعلم ، استقلالية المعلم-المتعلم ، التعليم العالي.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has been gaining importance in language education since the 1980s. It has been given birth due to the massive reforms that have affected the teaching/learning practices and beliefs. To cope with modern education, the Algerian educational policy-makers also encourage the implementation of learner autonomy.

Speaking about learner autonomy is by no means a matter of expecting learners to take decisions about learning without guiding them towards acquiring the necessary skills to be autonomous learners. This is why many researchers (Smith, 2000; Little, 2000; Benson, 2007; Tholin, 2009) start investigating the teacher-learner autonomy relationships. Thus, this paper aims to explain the way in which the promotion of learner autonomy is based on the development of teacher autonomy and to raise teachers' awareness regarding about this issue. To reach these objectives, a questionnaire was emailed to EFL teachers at Ahmed Zabana University of Relizane.

1.1 Conceptualizing Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is one of the principles brought by learner centered approach which focuses on the learner's role. Autonomy is one of the difficult terms to define due to its multidimensional nature. There is no consensus among scholars about what learner autonomy really means in the context of language learning. Smith and Ushioda (2009) describe learner autonomy as a "multifaceted" concept which means that it takes various definitions and forms in different social, cultural, and educational settings.

Historically speaking, Henri Holec is one of the leading pioneers of autonomy in language education and the first to promote learner autonomy in Europe. In his renowned definition, Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). For him being autonomous lies in the learners' ability to be responsible over all aspects of learning in terms of determining learning goals, materials, activities, controlling learning, and evaluating progress.

This means that autonomy is much more associated to the technical perspective of autonomy which is "the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher." (Benson 1997: 19). In the same way, Sinclair (2000) this is called "Complete autonomy" which is "an idealistic goal". This goal can be achieved through gradual steps by the help of the teacher as there are different stages of autonomy (degrees of autonomy).

To better understand learner autonomy, it should be analysed and examined from different perspectives taking into account all factors characterizing its nature because autonomy may take different meanings across cultures.

1.2 Teacher Autonomy

Since its emergence, autonomy was largely associated to learner's ability to act responsibly and independently; however, little attention is paid to teacher autonomy and its effectiveness in the development of learner autonomy. Teacher autonomy is also considered to be a multifaceted concept with several proportions and layers.

The definition of teacher autonomy is derived from learner autonomy in the sense that similar definitions are stated in the literature to conceptualise teacher autonomy. In the same line of thought, Aoki (2000) views teacher autonomy as follows:

If learner autonomy is a capacity, freedom and/or responsibility to make choices concerning ones' own learning, teacher autonomy, by analogy, can be defined as

the capacity, freedom and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching (p.111).

Aoki uses the same analysis to make sense of teacher autonomy. For Aoki, the latter is determined by the teachers' ability to take charge of their own teaching process; this involves their willingness and capacity to decide what to teach (educational content), and how to teach (teaching methods) in parallel to learners' needs and requirements.

Autonomous teachers are responsible over their profession and critically reflect on their teaching practices so that to identify weaknesses and strengths to ameliorate their personal and professional development. They also have greater control over both "cognitive" and psychological aspects of teaching. According to Little (1995)

Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers (p.179).

Self-awareness is prerequisite to the development of teacher autonomy; without being well-aware of oneself as a teacher, it becomes difficult for teachers to foster autonomy in their learners. Autonomous teachers are reflective, critical, and have the ability to learn from their prior experience and from others. Powell and Powell (2010) point out that being able to evaluate the teaching process and having a clear understanding of what works good and what works less requires high degrees of self-awareness as a teacher.(cited in Egitim, 2015, p23)

1.3- Teacher-Learner Autonomy

To better develop autonomous learning, it is mandatory to have autonomous teachers who are likely to guide learners to be of responsible for the learning process. In this respect, Kumaravadivelu (2001) states that "autonomous learners deserve autonomous teachers" (p.548). It is clear that there is a strong relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in the sense that without autonomous teachers, learner autonomy remains a challenge for teachers who themselves lack autonomy in their teaching practices and decisions.

Additionally, Little (2000) confirms that learner autonomy lies in the development of teacher autonomy. He adds that there are two main ways in which both concepts are intertwined: a) Teachers who lack knowledge about learner autonomy are, of course, unable to promote autonomy in their classrooms. In this view, Little explains that "it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner" (p.45). b) Teachers should have the required skills to be autonomous teachers and use these skills in their teaching profession.

Smith and Erdoğan (2008) point out that teacher autonomy and the promotion of learner autonomy are conclusively interdependent, and that teachers working on learner autonomy are required to have both the capacity and freedom of self-directed teaching (as a teacher) and self-directed learning (the teacher as a learner) (p.85). First, teacher autonomy is the "capacity to self-direct one's teaching" (Little 2000); second, according to Benson (2000) it is "the freedom to self-direct one's teaching"; and third, Smith (2000) believes that it is "the capacity to self-direct one's learning as a teacher".

To this end, there is no absolute freedom of teaching or learning, but rather both processes are said to be a shared responsibility and joint efforts between teachers and learners. In fact, the promotion of learner autonomy requires teachers to be autonomous.

2. Methodology

Every research relies on a certain research design to reach its main objectives. Thus, this section is devoted to the methodology used in this paper. It describes the sample and explains the data collection instruments as show below.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the present research are 18 teachers, both males (4) and females (14) who work at Ahmed Zabana University Centre –Relizane- Algeria, in the department of English. Their teaching experience ranges between 2 to 28 years.

2.2 Data Collection Tool

Teachers' questionnaire is the main data collection instrument in this research. It was sent via e-mail. (Teachers participating in the present paper are colleagues of the researcher). The questionnaire includes 9 questions. The questions are open-ended questions and closed-ended questions .Some statements are adopted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012: 26-27). In this research only 4 statements (8, 18, 24, and 35) are used based on the objectives of this research. The questionnaire also consists of Likert scale questions with a five-point scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Unsure, Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) to maximize certainty and degrees of responses. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) "A Likert scale (named after its deviser, Rensis Likert, 1932) provides a range of responses to a given question or statement" (p.480). After receiving back the answers, the teachers' responses were analyzed as displayed below.

2.3 Questionnaire's Analysis

Question1: What does learner autonomy mean to you?

Despite the differences in views, teachers seem to have some knowledge about learner autonomy. Some teachers associate learner autonomy to responsibility for learning in which it is defined as the ability "*To make learners feel responsible for their own learning, teachers are no more a guider and an adviser*" or being able to completely assume this responsibility without the teachers' intervention except for certain situations of need "*The leaners can use the four skills without referring to his/her instructor...*"

However, the majority of teachers also hold some misconceptions such as learners study by themselves, self-reliance and freedom of learning as follows:

- "*Learner autonomy means that any learner can depend on himself/ herself to acquire or expand knowledge without anyone's help*"
- "*Learner autonomy means a learner who rely on him/herself in his studies, learners who have capacities to study by themselves*"

Question2: Tick one answer in each statement.

Table 1. Teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy

Statements	SA	A	Unsure	D	SD
8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.	0.0%	27.77%	0.0%	66.6%	5.56
18. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.	38.88%	55.56%	0.0%	5.56%	0.0%
24. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be	0.0%	0.0%	5.56%	94.44%	0.0%

totally independent of the teacher.

35. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy. 27.78% 72.22% 0.0% 0.0% 0.0%

As shown above, the results indicate that (27.77) agree that learner autonomy means learning without a teacher, and (66. 67%) of the participants disagree with that, and about (5.56%) only have a strong agreement with the fact that autonomous learning is not learning without the teacher. (38.88%), (55. 56%) of teachers respectively “agree” and “strongly agree” that learners cannot control learning without their teachers’ assistance. While this is the case, almost all teachers (94.44%) think that autonomous learners are not totally independent of their teachers. About (27.78%) of teachers “agree” and (72.22%) of them “strongly agree” that the role of the teacher is a crucial factor in developing learner autonomy.

Question3: According to you, what is teacher autonomy?

Teachers define teacher autonomy using different descriptions; however, the majority of them associate teacher autonomy with freedom and independent teaching as quoted below:

- “refers to freedom of learning and teaching”
- “The autonomous teacher is the one who is independent in choosing the techniques appropriate to his students ...”
- “Freedom to make students develop their skills”

Question4: According to you, what characterizes teacher autonomy?

The respondents seem to have some theoretical knowledge about the characteristics of autonomous teachers. These characteristics are listed in the following points:

- “Responsibility and awareness”
- “share autonomy with his learners”
- “life-long learners, like their jobs”
- “Skillful concerning pedagogy and teaching styles, know their students well”
- “Critical thinker”

Question5: Do you discuss the learning content and process with your learners?

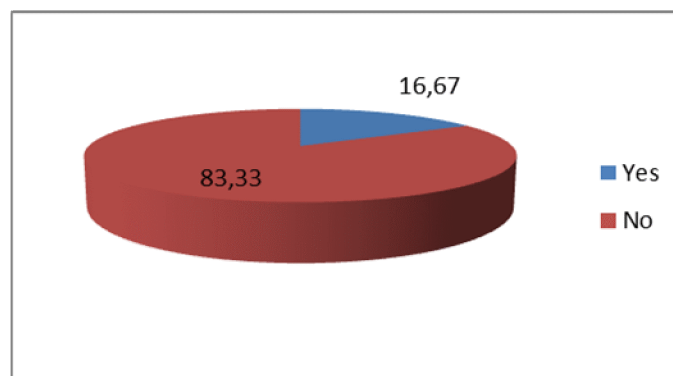


Figure 1. Learners’ involvement in the selection of learning content and process

Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of teachers (83.33%) do not negotiate the learning content and process with their learners and only 16.67% of participants seem to involve their learners in such a process.

Question 6: Do you self-evaluate your teaching practices?

Table 2. Teachers’ self-evaluation

Options	Percentage
Always	0%
Sometimes	11.11%
Often	0%
Rarely	33.33%
Never	55.56%

Table 2 represents the degree to which teachers evaluate their teaching practices. The majority of teachers (55.56%) answer that they have “never” evaluated the teaching process, about 33.33% of informants say that they “rarely” reflect on their teaching practices and only 11.11% of teachers claim that they “sometimes” evaluate their teaching progress; however, none of them (0%) “often” or “always” do so.

Question 8: Have you received any training course about teacher autonomy?

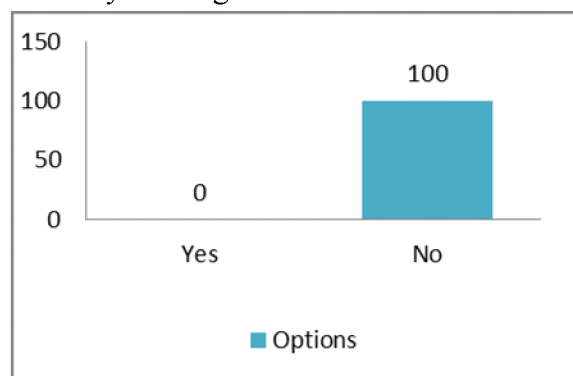


Figure 2. Teacher autonomy training

As displayed above, none of the teachers participating in the current research have received any training course about autonomous teaching. 100% of teachers answer by “no” indicating that they have never been trained to be autonomous teachers.

Question 9: Better promotion of learner autonomy expects teachers to be autonomous first:

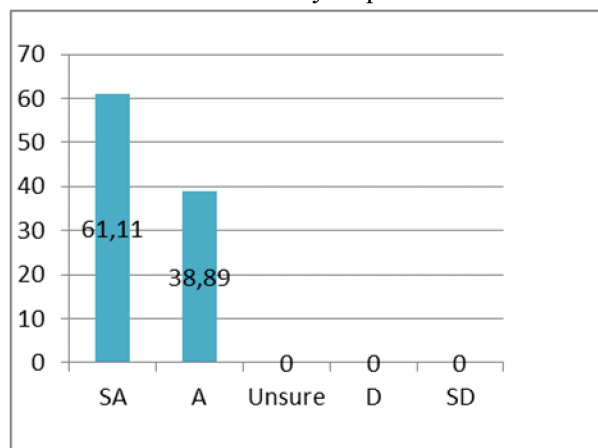


Figure3. Teachers’ attitudes towards the importance of teacher autonomy in learner autonomy development

As shown in Figure 3, about (61.11%) of teachers “strongly agree” with the idea that the development of learner autonomy is strongly linked to teacher autonomy and (38.89%) agree with the dependency of learner autonomy growth on teacher autonomy. Clearly none of them disagree with the above mentioned claim.

3. Results and Discussion

Teachers' provide different definitions and understandings about learner autonomy; however, there are some wrong assumptions teachers hold about learner autonomy such as freedom of learning, individual learning and learning without the teacher. This result goes in line with Little's definition of what learner autonomy is not. In this context, Little (1991) argues that learner autonomy "is not a matter of deciding to learn without a teacher" (p.3). On the contrary, learner autonomy did not come to belittle the crucial role of the teacher in guiding learners towards effective learning, hence being self-directed learners. It is actually a shared responsibility between teachers and students.

The analysis of the second question contradicts the results of the first question where teachers are asked to define learner autonomy. This denotes that most teachers are uncertain about the true meaning of learner autonomy and its misconceptions. Lack of awareness with regard to what autonomy really means in the context of language education is considered to be as an obstacle for teachers aiming to foster autonomous learning as it is stated above in the words of Little (2000). This is no surprise because learner autonomy is somehow a new concept in the Algerian educational context.

It is worth mentioning that all teachers focus on the technical as well as the individualistic dimensions (learning alone) of autonomy and neglect the role of the socio-cultural aspects. So being a teacher in the Algerian context which tends to a multi-cultural society requires certain knowledge about learner autonomy as a social and cultural construct.

The analysis of the fifth question shows that teachers do not involve their students in the selection of both learning content and process. Teachers may only provide their students with the syllabus they used to study when they were students. Lack of collaboration between teachers their learners in deciding what and how to learn? has made it difficult to create an atmosphere where autonomous learning is a prominent goal.

In question six, it is shown that the majority of EFL teachers do not self-evaluate their teaching practices. This means that teachers are somehow less autonomous in the sense that they do not reflect on their teaching methods and techniques to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The absence of teacher self-evaluation and lack of training are among the reasons why teachers are not fully autonomous in their teaching profession. Being as such makes them unable to create an autonomous classroom.

The answers revealed from the last question show that all teachers have positive attitudes towards teacher autonomy. This shows that teachers are well-aware of the importance of being an autonomous teacher and its effectiveness in promoting learner autonomy.

It might be reasonable to say that teachers are certainly not blamed for being influenced by the traditional paradigm of teaching since they have been, as learners, educated in parallel to its principles and then find themselves teaching in new era of education where they are supposed to act autonomously and lead their students towards independent learning. A shift from being totally a dominator of class to a facilitator, guide, and manager cannot be achieved overnight.

4. Conclusion

The study aims to raise awareness with regard to the effectiveness of teacher autonomy in developing learner autonomy. Looking at the issue (autonomy in language education) from the perspective of teacher autonomy is often seen as a constructive intention towards autonomous learning.

Teachers who did not experience learning autonomously as students may face difficulties to promote autonomy into their teaching practices. In the meantime, it is undeniable that the teacher has a great role to play in fostering autonomy. This requires teachers to be autonomous to guide learners towards responsibility and lifelong learning.

In order to reach successful autonomous learning, teacher autonomy must be given full attention by curriculum designers. It must be included in their agenda and seen as an essential element in the enhancement of learner autonomy. Decision-makers should start looking for similar ways to develop teacher professional development and autonomy as those used to promote learner autonomy.

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6. Appendix: Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear teachers,

This questionnaire is administrated to EFL teachers at Ahmed Zabana University. It investigates the notion of teacher autonomy in the Algerian higher education. You are kindly requested to participate in this questionnaire by answering its questions. Thank you for your time.

A. Gender:

- Male
- Female

B. Teaching experience

Q1: What does learner autonomy mean to you?

Q2: tick to one answer in each statement

Statements	SA	A	Unsure	D	SD
8. Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.					
18. Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.					
24. Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.					
35. The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.					

Q3: According to you, what is teacher autonomy?

Q4: According to you, what characterizes an autonomous teacher?

Q5: Do you involve your learners in the selection of the learning content and process?

- Yes
- No

Q6: Do you self-evaluate your teaching practices?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

Q7: What do you do to evaluate your teaching practices?

Q8: Have you received any training course about teacher autonomy?

- Yes
- No

Q9: Better promotion of learner autonomy expects teachers to be autonomous first.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Unsure
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree