

Cultural Values and Readiness for Learner Autonomy in the Algerian Context: English as Foreign Language Teachers' Perspectives

القيم الثقافية والاستعداد لاستقلالية المتعلم في السياق الجزائري :

وجهات نظر معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

ARIB Rahima^{1,*}, Dr. MAUCHE Salima²

¹ University Abderrahmane Mira of Bejaia:

Laboratory of Les Langues étrangères de spécialité en milieux socioprofessionnels
(Algeria), rahima.arib@univ-béjaia.dz

² University Abderrahmane Mira of Bejaia-Algeria

Laboratory of Les Langues étrangères de spécialité en milieux socioprofessionnels
(Algeria), salima_maouche@yahoo.fr

Received: 11 /05 / 2021 Accepted: 18 /07 / 2021 Published: 20 /07 / 2021

Abstract

In Algeria, the notion of learner autonomy, henceforth (LA), is a relatively new concept and research about its suitability in the Algerian context has been accorded a minor share in EFL research. The study at hand aims chiefly at probing into EFL teachers' beliefs towards LA and explores whether the Algerian culture affords or constrains students' readiness for autonomy.

The results reveal that both the national culture and the learning culture are restricting the development of learner autonomy in different ways. Predominantly, participants believe that students' passivity, parental dictatorship and linear institutional norms are the most influential challenges discouraging learning autonomously.

Keywords: Algerian context; culture of learning; readiness for learner autonomy; teachers' beliefs.

ملخص

في الجزائر، تعتبر الاستقلالية مفهومًا جديدًا نسبيًا، وقد اعطي البحث حول مدى ملاءمة استقلالية المتعلم في السياق الجزائري حصة صغيرة في أبحاث اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تهدف الدراسة الحالية بشكل رئيسي إلى التحقيق في تادقتم معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه استقلالية المتعلم ومعرفة ما إذا كانت الثقافة الجزائرية تتيح أو تقيد تنمية هذه الاستقلالية. تكشف النتائج أن الامتثال للمعايير التي تحددها الشخصيات المسيطرة هو من بين التحديات الرئيسية التي تواجه استقلالية المتعلم. كما أن الثقافة الوطنية وثقافة التعلم يقيدان تنمية استقلالية المتعلم بطرق مختلفة. في الغالب، يعتقد المشاركون أن سلبية الطلاب وديكتاتورية الوالدين والمعايير المؤسسية الخطية هي أكثر التحديات تأثيرًا في التعلم بشكل مستقل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياق الجزائري; الاستعداد لاستقلالية المتعلم-ثقافة التعلم -معتقدات المعلمين

*Corresponding Author.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the recent decades, the notion of learner autonomy has become a prominent educational goal in Europe and Northern America, then has gradually expanded to include some parts in Asia and Africa. Algeria for instance started to experiment with LA since 2004 as a reaction to the ever-increasing demands of the 21st century. In theory, the idea of LA seems appealing to language teachers. In practice, however, most of them described it as an ideal hard and a culturally unsuitable goal given the social and the cultural particularities of the Algerian society (Benchaa, 2021; Hadi, 2018).

Riley's (1988) work on 'the ethnography of autonomy' is groundbreaking as it has questioned whether the cultural background of learners predisposes them for or against autonomous methods of learning. Later, research assumed that certain learning cultures are more favorable than others when it comes to autonomy (Shebani, 2018; Nguyen, 2014; Smith, 2003). That is, the particularities of the Algerian society, culture and schools can either promote or hinder learner autonomy.

Cultural appropriateness in this sense bears a wide array of elements because culture is a multidimensional notion which includes national/ethnic affiliation, institutional policies, ideologies, and societal beliefs (Palfreyman, 2003). It is clear that the development of autonomy depends largely on the degree of fit between the societal and the cultural norms of a given society and the principles of autonomy as a learning /teaching pedagogy. In other words, in cultures where teachers and more elderly people like parents are considered the supreme authority, youngsters grow up surrendering and following the rules.

Accordingly, the present study aims at highlighting the place of learner autonomy in the Algerian culture. It is worth noting that readiness for autonomous learning is based principally on an approbation from the part of teachers, learners and parents of the complexities inherent either in the concept itself or in the larger socio-cultural setting. In addition, we aim at identifying the socio-cultural factors that constrain the sound operationalization of LA. Above all, the present study is an attempt to confirm or disconfirm the common sense belief that LA is purely a western construct that could only be applicable in Europe and USA. In other words, we will come to test Palfreyman's (2003) problematic "Is autonomy an appropriate educational goal across cultures?" To attain to the aforementioned aims, the study enquires about the following aspects:

- What are EFL teachers' perspectives towards learner autonomy?
- Does the Algerian culture afford or constrains the operationalization of LA?
- What are the socio-cultural factors affecting the sound operationalization of learner autonomy in the Algerian EFL context?

The Significance of the study

The present study is significant in the sense that it is among the few studies (Ex. Benchaa, 2021; Khenoune, a-b) that have brought the cultural component into the surface in the context of English language learning and learner autonomy in Algeria. Moreover, the present study is also significant as it highlights major challenges for autonomous learning; as a step towards resolving the inconsistency between theory and practice. Last but not least, this research reinforces the literature on the Western/Eastern tensions of autonomy.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Defining Learner Autonomy

Over the last decades, learner autonomy has expanded to various learning contexts in the world and it has therefore gained ground in the field of applied linguistics. Interestingly, it was Henri Holec (1981) who first formulated the concept of learner autonomy in his report for the council of Europe where he defined LA as "*the ability to take charge of one's own learning*". Based on this definition, students necessarily assume responsibility for the entire

teaching/learning process. This is accomplished by selecting learning objectives, teaching strategies and instructional materials that align with objectives, and by determining the most appropriate ways to both monitor progress and evaluate outcomes. Another pioneering figure in the field is, Little (1991), who offered a similar but more elaborated definition saying that autonomy is: “*a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions.*” Importantly, Little (1991) recognized that learner autonomy involves both learner cognitive and social-interactive dimensions. Indeed, the prevailing wisdom among many authors holds that learners engage in autonomy within sociocultural contexts (e.g., Murray, 2017, Palfrayman, 2003, Littlewood, 1999). Murray (2014), among others, asserted that autonomous learning is not synonymous with learning in isolation. Moreover, it is not a contradiction to say that social interactions are essential to the formation of learner autonomy; nor is it unreasonable to think that social isolation may be counterproductive to the development of learner.

1.2. Learner Autonomy in Africa & Asia: Practical Instances

The present critical review of the literature presents case studies dealing with the interaction between culture and learner autonomy across some contexts in Africa and Asia. It is worth noticing that the studies below report on applied research rather than theoretical views.

It is noticeable that research on the relevance of learner autonomy in Africa is a recent endeavour and few publications have treated the issue. In a landmark article entitled “*Autonomous language learning in Africa: A mismatch of cultural assumptions*” Sonaiya (2002) explored the suitability of autonomous principles of learning to students from sub-Saharan Africa particularly the Yoruba tribe- Nigeria. Sonaiya (2002) seemed to reject the idea of ‘culturally neutral’ materials in favor of an approach that reflects the fact that language expresses people’s culture and teaching methods exist within a social context. Sonaiya (2002) further argues in support of instruction that reflects sensitivity to cultural differences and the recognition that there will not always be common cultural norms or values. One of the ironies of autonomous learning which is a central part of the discussion is the fact that students will be responsible for constructing knowledge for themselves. That construction may or may not be reflective of the cultural dimensions that influence foreign language learning. Said in other words, some would argue that efforts to create universal curricula ignores the cultural dimension which is prone to variability across localities.

Responding to Sonaiya cultural opposition, Kuchah’s story in the year of 2011, provides evidence on the validity of autonomy in an African setting. His experience in Cameroon demonstrates how it is possible to identify signs of autonomy within hard working conditions or what Kuchah himself termed ‘difficult circumstances’. In this example, the concept of learner autonomy is embedded in notions of reflection, participation and liveness. The outcome of such a study reveals learners’ readiness for autonomy regardless the surrounding constraints. This definitely hints at motivation as one of the basic affordances for autonomous learning.

With a call for rigorous investigation of how culture influences autonomous learning. Ivanovska (2014) tackles learner autonomy in ELT in the Republic of Macedonia. The researcher planned an e-learning program for an eight term German course. The Macedonian University where the research is taking place receives foreign students’ namely Turkish ones. Given this, the aim of Macedonian education is to set for an environment that encourages learners to take charge of their learning regardless sociocultural affiliations. We believe that given the individual and the social dimensions of learner autonomy, the study program of the Macedonian Universities helps to promote interpersonal relationships and students’ agency level which subsequently serve learner autonomy. In Ivanovska’s terms, learner autonomy is the interdependence that occurs among the teacher and the learners and the learners themselves to respond to social change regardless the cultural diversity. Therefore, the parameters that differentiate the development of learner autonomy concern mainly cultural and educational traditions, past experiences, and the contexts in which learning takes place (Littlewood 1999).

In their attempt to relate learner autonomy and culture, Permatasari & Arianti (n.d) investigated the relationship between learner autonomy and culture in the Balinese context - Indonesia. They consequently referred to reticence and passivity as major attribute in their collectivist society. Walia (2012) (as cited in Arianti and Permatasari) involved the efforts delivered by the Indonesian governmental system to invest in learner autonomy. As a result,

curriculum designers introduced the 2013 educational reform as a reaction to the 2006 curriculum structures. The focus now is to produce active and dynamic citizens able to communicate in real world settings. The results of the guided interview reported on the discouraging situation of learner autonomy in Bali. Learners lack even awareness about the concept and the cultural element was of a major influence, learners had a great fear to face issues in relation to taking more responsibility for their own schooling.

II. Methods and Materials

1.1. Setting and Participants

In the present paper, the investigation of the relationship between autonomy and culture is done in the Algerian Context. The sample of the study is comprised of 50 EFL teachers based on a random selection to fit the purpose of our research (the aim was to gain geographically dispersed views rather than quantitative statistics for generalization). We have sought to include different universities in the sample of the study to involve one national culture regardless the existing cultural stereotypes and ethnic divides. It is worth noting that Algeria is a land which has been marked by different cultural ethos (Romans, Spanish, Arabic, and Turkish).

Indeed, the participating teachers are affiliated to different Universities, either from the North (UAMB, Blida 2 University), the south (U. ADRAR, UMKB), the east (ULBM, U. MSILA, UB2), or the west (UHBC, UABT, UDL). In so doing, we will build a general perceptual framework on learner autonomy; one which is particular to the Algerian culture (learning culture and societal culture). Moreover, this is a safe way to generalize findings among the majority of Algerian University teachers. Concerning participants' teaching experience and gender, their experiences vary from 5 to 30 years with 58% of them being male teachers and 42% were females.

1.2. Method of Data Collection

Teachers' beliefs were gathered by means of a questionnaire comprised of five sections. The first one for instance, is a demographic account including questions about gender, years of teaching experience and participants' home institution. The second section, is a four points Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, it principally deals with teachers' beliefs about the influence of culture on EFL students' autonomy. While the third part was a six point Likert scale probing teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and students' role in autonomous learning. An open ended question finalized the questionnaire, the question asked participants about socio-cultural barriers they face in the promotion of LA in their language classrooms. As we did not find any research instrument exploring the link between LA and culture, so questions were generated after reviewing the relevant literature. For instance, questions related to the second section and third one were instigated from the following resources (Althaqafi, 2017; Missoum, 2017, Hadi, 2018; Smith & Palfrayman, 2003).

III. Results of the Study

1.1. Reliability

Table (1): Reliability Statistics

Cronbach Alpha	Number of items
.711	13

The estimated reliability for the 13 items below was .711. This index was beyond the minimum required (from .60 and on) suggesting that the reliability of the teacher belief questionnaire was fairly acceptable.

1.2. Teachers' Questionnaire

After estimating the reliability of the questionnaire, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were computed for the responses provided by the teachers. The following tables demonstrate descriptive statistics for the questionnaire results.

1.2.1. Autonomy and Culture

Table (2): Learner autonomy within the Algerian culture (i.e. family, and society)

Statement 01-02	Mean	Std. Deviation
Within the Algerian culture (including family and society) students have insufficient opportunities to make decisions for themselves and for their learning	3.23	.95
Parents particularly the father, controls every aspect of children's life; they actually do nothing to scaffold their first attempts to autonomous learning	3.80	.84

Within Western cultures, students' voices are deemed fundamental for successful learning and critical questioning (Mason, 2007). In the Algerian context however, things seem to be different. As shown in the table above, the (M= 3.23) and M (3.80) clearly demonstrate that students have very few opportunities to voice their opinions, expectations and preferences in learning which explicitly hinders EFL students' readiness for learner autonomy. It is therefore the case of the majority of learners immersed in a collectivist society where knowledge of strategies for life and learning are not having a big share in both the general culture and the educational one. The standard deviation relative to both items (.95) and (.84) respectively show that there is no variability around the mean and thus reinforces the strength and the significance of the findings. Little (1999) emphasized the point made previously saying that learner autonomy has to do with the whole person in the particularity of his or her environment.

Table (3): The effect of religion on learner autonomy

Statement 03	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learners may lack autonomy because the religious doctrines encourage obedience towards elderly people.	2.16	1.14

It is undeniable that religion is a vital component of culture which impinges upon different aspects of life; that is the reason we sought the necessity to question the potential influence of religion on LA. The (M= 2.16) value for this item clearly points that EFL teachers disagree with the assumption that religion might be a barrier for the development of LA; however, the standard deviation (1.14) is relatively high and points at the uncertainty around teachers' disagreement. In this sense, teachers' might have denied the potential influence of religion but are not sure if religion might probably have some underlying effects that we cannot clearly spot out through a close ended question.

1.2.2. Teachers' beliefs and learner autonomy

Table (4): Educational Culture and Learner Autonomy

Statement 04	Mean	Std. Deviation
Conformity (compliance to the educational policy assigned by the faculty) is one of the factors that hinder the development of both learners and teachers.	3.00	.948

Culture does not only refer to the general or better said the societal culture, but it also

encompasses the organizational one. In this statement, the focus is on the educational (organizational) culture rather than the general one, not to deny that the two are unconditionally interrelated (Palfreyman, 2003). The Mean value 3 (M= 3) reports that EFL teachers in Algeria agree on the fact that blind conformity to the norms assigned by the higher instances like the faculty or the ministry (including linear syllabus design, curriculum fulfilment, evaluation procedures...etc.) is a serious barrier to their professional development and that of their EFL students. The standard deviation is apparently low (.94); this is a deterministic indicator on the significance as well as the strength of teachers' agreement.

Table (5): Students' resistance to the culture of autonomous learning

Statement 05	Mean	Std. Deviation
Promoting learner autonomy in our learning culture is difficult due to students' unwillingness to abandon spoon feeding habit.	2.90	.76

This item alludes to learners' degree of readiness for autonomous learning. As shown in the table above, teachers somewhat agree on the fact that learners' reluctance towards adopting autonomy is due to learners' attitudes towards it. The mean score value 2.90 is reminiscent of teachers' belief that students' passivity is often a reason behind teachers not being able to move towards a more learner autonomy policy in EFL classes. This view is sustained by the relatively low standard deviation (.76) which demonstrates that views are closely related to the mean.

Table (6): teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy

Statement 6-7-8-9	Mean	Std. Deviation
06. As an EFL teacher, I believe learner autonomy is merely a method of learning adopted by students outside the physical classroom.	3.88	1.76
07. As an EFL teacher, I believe learner autonomy concerns joint decision making between students and teachers	4.16	1.43
8. As an EFL teacher, I believe learner autonomy concerns is typical characteristic of higher achievers	5.53	.50
9. As an EFL teacher, I believe only instructors with huge teaching experience and academic qualification can promote learner autonomy	2.12	1.23

As shown in the table above, we enquired into teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy including some of its aspects like out of class learning, decision making, in addition to learners' and teachers proficiency levels. As for out of class learning, the mean score value 3.88 shows that teachers believe that this is the only way for being autonomous; however, the relatively high standard deviation (1.73) shows some variability around the mean. Concerning decision making, the mean score value 4.16 points at teachers' firm agreement on the significance of joint decision making as a fundamental step toward autonomy based pedagogy. Learners' proficiency level has been a prominent variable in many pedagogical processes; accordingly, we sought to enquire into the value that EFL teachers assign it vis-à-vis learner autonomy. To clarify, the mean score value 5.53 demonstrates that EFL teachers firmly agree that higher achievers are potentially autonomous learners; this is further reinforced by a low standard deviation (.5) which conceals any variability around the mean. Finally, the influence of the teaching experience on LA is evoked, in this regard, most teachers do not go for the claim that more experienced teachers have the tendency to contribute more to LA; this apparent disagreement is clearly demonstrated by the mean score value (2.12) , the relatively high standard deviation shows a strong variability around the mean and thus teachers are not quite sure about this disagreement and that teaching experience might have some implicit significance in this regard.

1.2.3. EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Students and their Roles

Table (7): teachers' perceptions (degree of trust and reciprocity) with their students

Statement 10-11-12-13	Mean	Std. Deviation
As an EFL teacher, I believe that students using a library data base are more likely to become autonomous ones.	3.44	1.41
As an EFL teacher, I believe EFL students are able to negotiate learning plans	5.12	1.05
As an EFL teacher, I believe all students are able to develop a sense of responsibility for their learning.	4.64	1.11
As an EFL teacher, I always believe that learners have important ideas to share for their own learning and I generally approve them.	4.54	1.00

As shown in the table above, teacher's beliefs of their students is analysed at four different levels; database access, the negotiation of learning plans, students' sense of responsibility and students' participation in the formation and conceptualisation of ideas. The first item on students' usage of libraries and databases has a mean score value (3.44) which shows that teachers somewhat agree on the significance of personal research and queries in promoting a sense of autonomy within learners; there exist a relative variability around the mean score; this is shown by the standard deviation value (1.41) which is considered to be relatively high. Concerning the second item on the negotiation of class plans, teachers strongly agree that this is definitely one way for the practice of autonomous learning; a fact which is clearly demonstrated by the mean score value (5.12) which is further sustained by a moderate standard deviation (1.05). In another vein, teachers agree on the potential ability of all learners to incline themselves in LA; the mean score value (4.64) is representative of the agreement which is further sustained by a moderate standard deviation (1.11) i.e. there is no significant variability around the mean. Finally, it seems that teachers trust their learners to a quite good extent as most of our participating teachers agree on the fact that students might have a good deal of ideas that may serve to promote learning; the mean score (4.54) value is representative of the agreement and the standard deviation (1) could be considered low and thus points that the item is significant.

1.2.4. Socio-cultural Barriers Preventing Students' Readiness for Learner Autonomy

Based on their experience in teaching English as a foreign language, participants were asked to identify the most common challenges they perceive as negatively influencing the development of learner autonomy. The following are the major recurrent themes.

a. Student's Related Challenges

As mentioned in EFL teachers' accounts, students related issues revolve around misunderstanding responsibilities and roles in EFL classes, in addition to students' lack of self-motivation (as revealed in the questionnaire). Most participants (T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T7, T8, T9, T12, T14, T15, T19, T20, and T24) agree that students in Algeria are not motivated to hold responsibility for their own learning and in case they are given enough space to decide for activities or setting goals, they generally feel lost or anxious. Consequently, teachers do not trust their students with major decisions and are generally reluctant to give up on the teacher-centred approach. The following extract by (T2) summarizes a view about the Algerian learner:

“The majority of students seem to have a preference for passive learning. That's, they want everything to be done for them, as if they do not care or they do not trust their own skills

or judgments. As an EFL teacher, I try to involve my students in the choice of activities but they feel reluctant. Just like a kid who would want his parents to choose for him."

Three other participants (T5, T11, and T19) share similar beliefs regarding EFL students' lack of motivation, they therefore described students as being passive and lacking initiatives; T11 for instance declared: *"students learn for very limited objectives like exams, parental satisfaction and getting a certificate. Their ultimate objective is exam oriented; they therefore never do extra efforts to develop their language in use."* Some other respondents (T21, T23) hinted to students' obedience for teachers whom they consider as the authority figure and the source of all knowing, T23 puts forward the following claim *"learners in our context are like robots responding only to some mechanical orders"*. Consequently, teachers control not only the teaching process but also determine the success or the failure of the EFL student. T21 reinforced the preceding idea saying *"teachers assume more responsibilities in classrooms than students do, even when students fail, teachers also fail in the eye of everyone."*

Indeed, students' lack of autonomy is generally related to teachers and students misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities. Students on the one hand perceive the teacher as the ultimate source of knowledge; and the decision maker while teachers conceive students as passive, reluctant, and lazy. T10, T13 for instance believe that understanding one's roles appropriately is the first step towards autonomy; T13 hence assumes *"if students believe that the learning is their own matter and teachers are there to guide and help them achieve their objectives...we will be able to move promptly towards learner autonomy."*

These extracts came to demonstrate that the persisting culture of dependency is not the issue of students alone. The culture of learning still encourages traditional methods which are restrictive and restricting in terms of opportunities for individual and/ or group autonomy. In short, the old teacher-centered methods engendered the feeling of dependency in learners and reinforced the sense of authority in teachers. It is therefore necessary to reconstruct the ways learners learn and the ways teachers teach if we are to aspirate a certain level of autonomy among learners within the particularities of one's context.

b. Teacher Related Challenges

Although teachers are considered potential agents in empowering students to take ownership and create a culture of autonomous learning (Abdelrazaq, 2014; Chan, 2001), it seems that old practices still persist. Like learners, teachers are faced with the fear of losing their authority for several reasons amongst which is the lack of teacher training or the training content is contradictory (not conducive) to autonomy principles; teachers' lack of awareness about autonomy in learning; as well as lack of dialogue between students and teachers. Notably, the majority of respondents (T01, T02, T04, T05, T07, T10, T14, T15, T19, T22, T23, T24 and T25) rejected the potential suitability of LA arguing that autonomous learning is culturally inappropriate (see later the influence of educational culture).

Participants talked about the lack of teacher training and the need to transform the whole traditional options encompassing rote learning, and focus on exams into a novel strategy which consists of distributing roles and promoting communication. It is important to note that training teachers to teach students how to learn for themselves and by themselves is becoming a hard deal because most of them are accustomed to a textbook oriented teaching. T10 pointed that teachers' ultimate goal is to fulfill the regulations set previously by the institution. Therefore, it is difficult to foster autonomy in classes where teachers still monopolize the whole discourse and keep students with no room to voice their learning expectations.

Paradoxically, learner autonomy is viewed as purely learners' responsibility and is usually misconceived as out of class learning, and high school achievements (as shown by the numerical results above). PA12 asserted that autonomy of learning is a complex concept which is largely defined as a western centric policy alien to contexts outside the European lands. Generally, the construct can be defined as self-instruction or freedom in decision making. PA11 further adds that one of the challenges towards LA is the recurrent misconceptions among teachers, she therefore claimed: *"there is no clear definition for the notion 'learning autonomy'. The concept itself is somehow problematic and researchers/experts still have not come to an*

agreement on its nature.”

Interestingly, T13 talked about the importance of negotiation and dialogue as two important facets of learner autonomy, T13 therefore claimed: *“most EFL teachers perceive negotiation in classroom as a waste of time, while I think it is a time gained as it allows EFL teachers’ valuable insights into their students’ needs, expectations, and preferences.”* From the quote above, it seems that nurturing students- teacher dialogue is of paramount importance in encouraging students to voice their views which is a serious step towards autonomous practices in class.

c. Culture Related Challenges

The results further reinforce the existing bound between learner autonomy and culture in the Algerian context. To illustrate, T33, T35, T45, T46, T49 describe how students grow up reluctant and unable to set their language learning agendas. T33 for instance claims *“during their primary education, learners are given few opportunities to talk about their preferences in learning, teachers focus mainly on knowledge transmission, and setting rules for classroom management, even the evaluation modes are to a large extent paper and pencil based. Therefore, every aspect in students’ learning is bound to the teacher.”*

T45 have a prior experience with the field of LA, he describes the ways in which the culture of learning determines teachers and learners’ beliefs and responsibilities, he therefore posits *“having grown up in a collectivist society where the norms of the elderly and the supreme other were a standard framework for the best practices, individuals end up growing reluctant and over-reliant upon others. Institutions have also a great influence, the philosophy of the Algerian schools and Universities is undeniably a traditional one; meaning that learners have less opportunities for agency than expected. As an EFL teacher in this context, I believe I am doing less than required to bring this radical change in teaching/ learning.”*

At a quite different level, it is apparent that the cultural background of students limits their use of the target language outside the boundaries of the physical classroom, some of our participants reported their students’ reactions after having been asked to use the target language with peers, T49 for instance claimed *“my students feel ashamed to use English outside the classroom, for them it is a sort of being odd in a social milieu where only Berber, Arabic and French govern communication”*

IV. Discussion of the Results

Findings on teachers’ perceptions about LA seem to indicate that both society and culture of the organization (i.e. the learning environment at University) influence negatively students’ autonomous learning. Teachers believe that students probably feel more confident when they are directly dictated what to do, when and how to do it. This reluctance is due to the cultural background of both students and teachers. Students for instance have always had little opportunities to voice their choices and preferences either at home or at school and teachers have a constant fear to lose their monopoly. Consistent with the present study, both Althagafi (2017) and Palfreyman (2003) underscored the significance of cultural norms, the values and customary ways of behaving on students’ readiness for autonomous learning. Much like in the present study, Benson, Chik, and Lim (2003) proposed that autonomy is a sociocultural process and that the development of learner autonomy is often hindered by externally imposed beliefs.

The status quo of learning autonomy, as perceived by EFL teachers demonstrates complimentary views with the previous literature. As shown in the results above, teacher-student role relationship is of paramount importance to the development of LA. Palfreyman (2003) acknowledges the significance of the relationship that holds between students, teachers, and institutions in influencing learner autonomy and that culture shapes the roles of the aforementioned. Likewise, Missoum (2015) places a considerable amount of importance on attitudes and beliefs of both teachers and students in facilitating or restraining learner autonomy in the Algerian context. Missoum further asserts that students’ dispositions towards autonomy may need to be fostered in early years at home and that learning autonomy requires a high level of motivation and willingness to accept a high degree of responsibility. Palfreyman (2003) indicates that student independence from the teacher is a sign of autonomy. Similarly, in the

present study, teachers' opinions hold that student autonomy is demonstrated by the degree to which students successfully perform outside the classroom.

Drawing on another body of literature, some authors refer to the ways cultures inhibits the promotion of learner autonomy. Perhaps the most compelling example is that offered by Benson et al, (2003) who discuss the tension between the Western and the Asian cultural contexts. They maintain that conformity and respect for authority are engrained early in children, by parents at home and by the teachers in educational institutions. Recall that Missoum emphasized that cultural norms dictate roles of both students and teachers and that students' needs have to be addressed when they are young members of the community. Obviously, there is an inherent conflict between different parties. Mirroring one of the conclusions of the present study, one possible outcome is for students to become 'passive learners'.

In reflecting upon other works with relevance to the present study, some other themes emerge. First, both in the present study and in the reviewed literature there is a clear indication of the relationship between language, learner autonomy and culture. Second, sociocultural factors appear to exert a powerful influence on children at an early age which serves as an inhibitor in the later development of learner autonomy. Third, and relatedly, attitudes and beliefs of teachers are equally susceptible to the same external forces and, in some cases, further constrained by systemic and institutional norms. Forth, there is a tension between Western cultural norms and non-Western cultural norms, which is probably a matter of philosophy. It seems safe to say that learner autonomy and language are complex issues that warrant continued investigation.

V. Conclusion

From the present study we conclude that the cultural norms appear to impose certain constraints on students' opportunities to develop learner autonomy in English language learning. Noticeably, culture relates to both social and educational (organizational) norms that altogether exert an influence on individual behaviour. At the classroom level, Algerian EFL teachers' beliefs suggest that learner autonomy is mostly out of class learning and higher achievers are more likely to exhibit autonomy than their counterparts.

Among the most common barriers to autonomous learning in the Algerian context is the lack of a sense of 'ownership' of the learning process. When teachers feel motivated to hand on control of the learning process to their students, they generally misperceive their students' ability to self- direct their own learning; further, teachers assert that students prefer the role of 'passive learner'. Although speculative, it may well be that there is an interaction effect between students and teachers about a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities (semi- structured interview can answer further for this inquiry). We believe as researchers that both parties are hindered by their own set of beliefs.

From a broader perspective, a major theme that appears to be present throughout the current study is the issue of teacher preparation. For instance, traditional emphasis on rote learning is antithetical to the development of the concept of learner autonomy. One consequence of flawed teacher preparation is the teacher perception that responsibility for learner autonomy rests within students.

Another issue directly linked to teachers' readiness for autonomous learning relates to roles and responsibilities; and the absence of clarity and understanding of the concept itself. It becomes impossible for teachers to communicate autonomous learning scenarios to students as they themselves lack necessary background about its complexity and applicability. To illustrate, when preservice teacher preparation programs fail to teach aspiring teachers to assume their respective roles, once they accept a teaching position, they will struggle with communicating their roles appropriately. If the curriculum of teacher training relies on outdated instructional practices, such as rote learning it becomes more difficult to promote the concept of learner autonomy. These and other practices make it more likely that students will retreat to the role of passive learners.

In all, there are numerous issues surrounding the challenge of promoting learner autonomy in Algeria. Some unquestionably are culturally- related; whereas, in the present study, religion did not appear to be a factor. However, current teacher preparation practices appear to be called in question. Differences exist from country to another. For change to occur, it can be best accomplished in two ways: (a) reform of the curriculum of teacher training and preparedness and (b) administrative support for teachers to engage in alternative classroom practices (the role of institutional culture). In so doing, it may be possible to create a learner autonomy based culture in our schools.

References:

- Abdel Razeq, A. A. (2014). *University EFL Learners' Perceptions of Their Autonomous Learning Responsibilities and Abilities*. *RELC Journal*, 45(3), 321–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688214547035>
- Althaqafi, A. S. (2017). Culture and Learner Autonomy: An Overview from a Saudi Perspective. *International Journal of Educational Investigations (IJEI)*. Vol. 4, No. 2: 39 – 48. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317235822_Culture_and_Learner_Autonomy_An_Overview_from_a_Saudi_Perspective
- Benchaa, L. (2021). “*Autonomy in Advanced Language Education: Considerations of the Socio-cultural Dimensions and their Impact on EFL Algerian Students' Learning Expectations and Attitudes*.” [Doctoral thesis, SBA University]. Dspace of Djillali Liabes University of SBA.
- Benson, P., Chik, A., & Lim, H. Y. (2003). Becoming autonomous in an Asian context: Autonomy as a sociocultural process. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures* (pp. 23–40). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chan, V. (2001). “Readiness for learner autonomy: What do our learners tell us?” *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6 (4), 505-519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510120078045>
- Hadi, K. (2018). “*Investigating Learner Autonomy among EFL Students and Teachers: Readiness and Concept Perception*.” [Doctoral thesis, Tlemcen University]. <http://dspace.univtlemcen.dz/bitstream/112/12876/1/kheira-hadi.pdf>
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe).
- Ivanovska, B. (2015). *Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Education and in Cultural Context*. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 180, 352–356. DOI:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.02.128
- Ghout-Khenoune, L. (2019a). “*Learner Autonomy and Context Specificity: A Study of Students' Discourses on EFL Learning and Teaching at Abderrahmane Mira University of Béjaia, Algeria*.” [Doctoral thesis, Aboukacem Saadallah University]. Dspace of Algiers 2 University.
- Ghout-Khenoune L. (2019b). Is There a Place for Learner Autonomy in the Algerian EFL Learning Culture? *Independence*, 77, 8-10.
- Kuchah, K., & Smith, R. (2011). *Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances: from practice to principles*. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 5(2), 119–140. DOI:10.1080/17501229.2011.577529
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (1999). “*Strategies, Counselling and Cultural Difference: Why we Need Anthropological Understanding of Learner Autonomy*”. *BELLS (Barcelona English Language and literature studies)*. 10, 17-33.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). “*Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts*.” *Applied linguistics*, 20 (1), 71-94. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/20.1.71>
- Mason, M. (2007). *Critical Thinking and Learning*. Blackwell Publishing Malden, MA, USA, 2007, Downloaded on 19 November 2020.
- Missoum, M. (2015). “*Culture and learner Autonomy*.” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Languages* 15 (4), 57 – 92. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318659843_Culture_and_Learner_Autonomy

- Murray, G. (Ed.). (2014). *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nguyen, T, N. (2014). “Learner Autonomy in Language Learning: Teachers’ Beliefs.” [Doctoral thesis] Queensland University of Technology.
- Palfreyman, D. and Smith, R.C. (eds.) (2003) *Learner Autonomy across Cultures Language Education Perspectives*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Palfreyman, D. (2003). *Introduction: Culture and learner autonomy*. In D. Palfreyman & Richard. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives (1-1)*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI:10.1057/9780230504684_1
- Permatasari, N.P.I., & Arianti, M. (n.d.). Learner Autonomy and culture in Bali: Perspectives from Secondary School Indonesian EFL Context. http://www.vnseameo.org/TESOLConference2016/materials/13_1.pdf
- Riley, P. (1988). “the ethnography of autonomy.” In *individualization and autonomy in language learning*, edited by Brooks Arthur and Grundy Peter, 12-34. Modern English Publications in association with The British Council: London.
- Shebani, Z. (2018). “Cultural Values and Their Effect on Learner Autonomy in an Omani EFL Context.” http://25qt511nswfi49iayd31ch80-wpengine.netdnassl.com/wpcontent/uploads/papers/ecll2018/ECLL2018_42312.pdf
- Smith, R. (2003). “Pedagogy for Autonomy as (becoming-) Appropriate Methodology” *Learner autonomy across cultures: language education perspectives*, Edited by Palfreyman,
- Sonaiya, R. (2002). “*Autonomous Language Learning in Africa: A Mismatch of Cultural Assumptions.*” *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 2. 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310208666637>
- Walia, D.N. (2012) ‘Traditional Teaching Methods vs. CLT: A Study’. 3. https://www.academia.edu/2442163/Traditional_Teaching_Methods_vs_CLT_A_Study

Appendix

In the present research, we are interested in your views and perspectives about learner autonomy and how culture influences students’ readiness for autonomous learning.

Background information:

Sex:

Home institution:

Years of teaching English as foreign language:

Section I: Autonomy and Culture

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements about how the Algerian culture (both institutional culture and the larger socio-cultural milieu) influence the development of learner autonomy. 01 (strongly disagree), 02 (disagree), 03 (agree), 04 (strongly agree)		01	02	03	04
1	Within the Algerian culture (including family and society) students have insufficient opportunities to make decisions for themselves and for their learning				
2	Parents particularly the father, control every aspect of children’s life; the latter do nothing to scaffold their first attempts to autonomous learning				

3	Learners may lack autonomy because the religious doctrines encourage obedience towards elderly people.				
4	Conformity (compliance to the educational policy assigned by the faculty) is one of the factors that hinder the development of both learners and teachers.				
5	Promoting learner autonomy in our learning culture is difficult due to students' unwillingness to abandon spoon feeding habit.				

Section II: teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy

Along your experience as an EFL teacher, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements.		01	02	03	04	05	06
01 (strongly disagree), 02 (disagree), 03 (neutral), 04 (somehow agree), 05 (Agree), 06 (strongly agree).							
6	As an EFL teacher, I believe learner autonomy is merely a method of learning adopted by students outside the physical classroom						
7	As an EFL teacher, I believe learner autonomy concerns joint decision making between students and teachers						
8	As an EFL teacher, I believe learner autonomy is a typical characteristic of higher achievers						
9	As an EFL teacher, I believe only instructors with huge teaching experience and academic qualification can promote learner autonomy						

Section III: EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Students and their Roles

As an EFL teacher, what perspectives you hold about your EFL students' abilities for autonomous learning.		01	02	03	04	05	06
01 (strongly disagree), 02 (disagree), 03 (neutral), 04 (somehow agree), 05 (Agree), 06 (strongly agree).							
10	As an EFL teacher, I believe that students using a library data base are more likely to become autonomous.						
11	As an EFL teacher, I believe EFL students are able to negotiate learning plans						
12	As an EFL teacher, I believe all students are able to develop a sense of responsibility for their learning.						
13	As an EFL teacher, I always believe that learners have important ideas to share for their own learning and I generally approve them.						

Section IV: the impact of the Algerian socio-cultural milieu.

What socio-cultural barriers do Algerian EFL teachers/learners face in promoting learner autonomy in English language courses?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....