

Promoting Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning in Secondary Education in Algeria

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Abstract:

New approaches have been introduced in language teaching throughout the world to meet the demands of modern society that requires not only the mastery of language, but also a mastery of life long study skill. This is the aim behind introducing the notion of learner autonomy in the educational context. The autonomous learner is capable to take charge of his own learning, to share responsibility with the language teacher and, moreover, do further research so as to improve his level in language learning. The present article strives to find out whether or not pupils are ready to take on an autonomous language learning. Because before any interventions aiming at fostering autonomy are implemented, it is necessary to explore EFL learners' readiness as well the roles of teachers in developing learner autonomy. To achieve this, a case study was held at Tafna secondary school in Ain Temouchent Algeria on First year EFL pupils.

Key-Words: learner autonomy – learners' readiness- teachers' roles- promoting.

Résumé

De nouvelles approches ont été introduites dans l'enseignement des langues dans le monde entier pour répondre aux exigences de la société moderne qui nécessite non seulement la maîtrise de la langue, mais aussi une maîtrise de la vie longue étude compétences. C'est le but derrière l'introduction de la notion d'autonomie de l'apprenant dans le contexte éducatif. L'apprenant autonome est capable de prendre en charge son propre apprentissage, à partager la responsabilité avec le professeur de langue et, en outre, faire des recherches afin d'améliorer son niveau de l'apprentissage des langues. Le présent article s'efforce de savoir si oui ou non les élèves sont prêts à prendre sur un apprentissage de la langue autonome. Avant toute intervention, il est nécessaire d'explorer l'état d'empressement des apprenants ainsi le rôle des enseignants dans le développement de l'autonomie de l'apprenant. Pour ce faire, une étude de cas a eu lieu à l'école secondaire Tafna a Ain Temouchent, Algérie sur les élèves de première année.

mots-clés : autonomie de l'apprenant- les rôles des enseignants- empressement des apprenants.

ملخص:

لقد تم إدخال أساليب جديدة في تعليم اللغة في جميع أنحاء العالم لتلبية مطالب المجتمع الحديث الذي يتطلب ليس فقط التمكن من اللغة، لكن أيضا امتلاك مهارة الاعتماد على الذات لمواصلة الدراسة، هذا هو الهدف من وراء إدخال مفهوم استقلالية المتعلم في السياق التعليمي. المتعلم المستقل قادر على تحمل مسؤولية التعلم بنفسه، يتقاسم المسؤولية مع مدرس اللغة، وعلاوة على ذلك يقوم بالبحث لتحسين مستواه في اللغة. يسعى هذا المقال لمعرفة ما اذا كان تلاميذ الثانوي مستعدين لان يكونوا أكثر استقلالية و اعتماد على الذات لأنه قبل أي تدخل لتعزيز استقلالية المتعلم يجب اكتشاف مدى استعداد التلاميذ وادوار الاساتذة من اجل تطوير استقلالية المتعلم. و لتحقيق ذلك عقدت دراسة في المدرسة الثانوية تافنة في عين تموشنت عن تلاميذ السنة الأولى.

الكلمات المفتاحية : استقلالية المتعلم- استعداد المتعلمين- ادوار الاساتذة- تعزيز الاستقلالية.

1. Introduction

The English language enjoys a great importance as a world language. It is spoken now by more than 508 million people. No one can consider himself as part of this globalization if he does not master two things: English and computing. Concerning the first skill, Burchfield believes that any literate, educated person on the face of the globe is deprived, if he does not know English. (Bruchfield, 1998: 14). In recent years plenty of innovation systems are implemented for the sake of better English learning. There is a change in the view of language learning from a set of rules to be transmitted to learners from teachers to a process in which the learner takes more responsibility in learning. By doing this, the learner becomes autonomous in language learning. Autonomy is one of the bases on which learner – centeredness stands on because autonomy is a precondition for an effective learning. (Benson, 2001:24). For this reason promoting learner autonomy is a desirable goal not only in Algerian educational system but in all countries in which English is taught as a second or foreign language. But first let us define learner autonomy.

2. Towards a Definition of Learner Autonomy

There is no consensus on the concept of autonomy in education. It is a multifaceted concept whose meaning has been discussed from many perspectives. One of the fields in which the concept of autonomy was firstly developed is politics. Autonomy as a political concept originated in the Ancient Greek, philosophers such as: Aristotle, and Socrates who claimed for citizens' right to self-government. Cities were governed according to citizens own laws. In this sense, individuals were considered free beings in command of themselves and not subjected to others' authority. In the same context, Yule (1996) says that the autonomous person (like the autonomous state) must not be subject to external interference or control but must rather freely direct the course of his own life.

It is generally agreed that the concept of autonomy first entered the field of learning and teaching through the council of Europe 's Modern Languages Project which was founded in 1971. The current debate about autonomy in second and foreign language learning originated in Holec's *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* first published in 1979, where he provides a definition of learner autonomy as: **“to say of a learner that he is autonomous is to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning and nothing more ...to take charge of one's learning is to bear responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. (Holec , 1981:3)** Little (1991) also argues that autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action according to him:” **The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns, and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.” (Little , 1991: 3-4).**

Dickinson (1987) on the other hand, views learner autonomy as decision making in leaning context. A more elaborated definition of learner autonomy is also put forward by Jeffries (1990) who views it as **“learning in which an individual or a group of learners study on their own possibly for a part or parts of a course, without direct intervention from a tutor, so that to take a greater responsibility for what they learn.”(Jeffries, 1990:35).** Jeffries definition of learner autonomy seems to be the most suitable for the

purposes that are dealt with in this article (1AS pupils). This is because we are much more concerned with this kind of partial autonomy not with the full or total autonomy.

The difficulty of defining learner autonomy is mainly due the fact that there are degrees of autonomy, and that the behavior of autonomous learners can change depending on their age, and how far they have progressed with their learning.

3. Research Procedure

There is no doubt that the notion of autonomy in English learning can be partially or gradually implemented in the secondary education. When learners reach university they find themselves able to take charge of their own learning. However, Algerian English learners do not arrive at university with the capacity of learning English autonomously. This is because they have been accustomed to spoon feeding in the secondary education. They consider English as a secondary subject (except for those in foreign languages stream). For this reason, they are to certain extent not highly motivated and feel that the teacher is more responsible for the learning process. And responsible even for their success and failure in English learning. The solution lies on promoting learner autonomy so that learners become gradually independent from the teacher, and rely much more on themselves in English learning both inside and outside the classroom. However, English teachers need to investigate first to which extent students view themselves as responsible for their learning, whether or not they are aware of the importance of learner autonomy and are ready to develop it in learning. Just after doing this, looking for ways to foster learner autonomy seems to be highly recommended.

During this phase we have tried to gather data that enable us to investigate learners' view of autonomy and teacher's role in promoting it. The data collection has been carried out in an analytic approach. By analytic we mean: **".. an approach that will identify and investigate a single factor or a cluster of factors which at some level are constituents of one of the major systems."** (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:27). Thus, during the gathering of data we have collected information to analyze learners' readiness for learner autonomy and how can this autonomy be promoted. That will be done through the following research instruments: a questionnaire to learners and teachers, because autonomy in learning is a process resulting first from interdependence between teachers and learners. Questionnaires are addressed to both of them, and an observation of the classroom practices, in which learners' autonomy and their dependence on the teacher will be observed and analyzed. In the same vein, the General inspector of English language is interviewed about teacher training programs and how much they are helpful in putting the teacher in the right road towards autonomy.

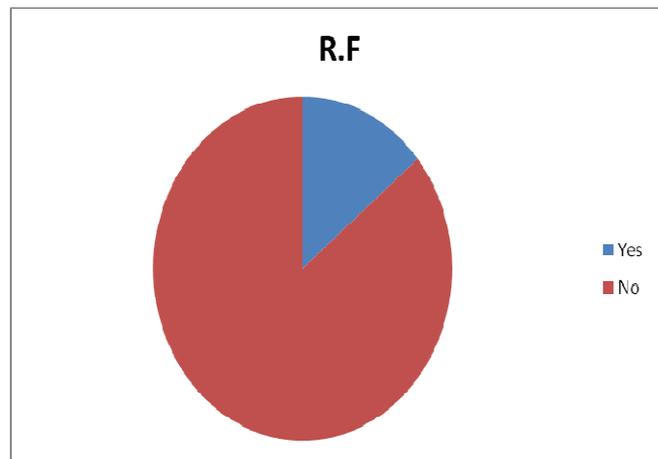
4. Case Study: Objective and Application

The selection of the type of research is based mainly on the nature of the research itself. Learner autonomy is a phenomenon that actually happens both inside and outside the class. Nunan states that : **"a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real- life context."** (Nunan1997:76). It is held in the class of first year pupils in Tafna secondary school. According to Nunan methodologically, the case study is : **"a "hybrid" in that it generally utilizes a range of methods for collecting and**

analyzing data, rather than being restricted to a single procedure.” (Nunan, 1997:74). Thus, we use a questionnaire for teachers, another one to learners, in addition to a classroom observation and an interview with a General inspector of English. The questionnaires help us to collect the following data:

Pupils' readiness for autonomy	A.F	R.F
Yes	07	14 %
No	43	86 %
Total number	50	100 %

Table 1: Pupils' readiness for autonomy in English learning

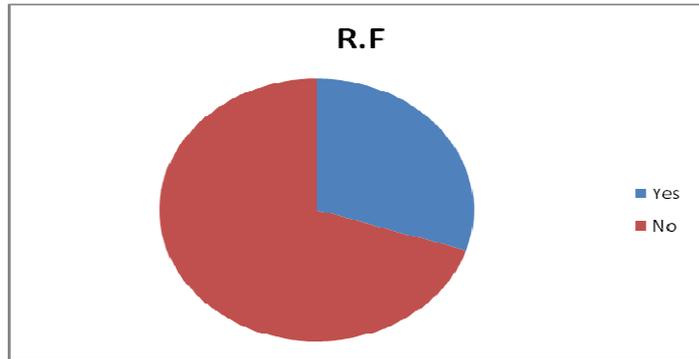


Graph 1: Pupils' readiness for autonomy

In basic terms autonomy is defined as taking the responsibility for one's learning. However, this is not as simple as it may look. Pupils responses to the questionnaire show that they are neither ready to be independent from the teacher nor to take charge of their learning

Teacher readiness	A.F	R.F
Yes	15	30 %
No	35	70 %
Total number	50	100 %

Table 2: Teacher's readiness for developing learner autonomy

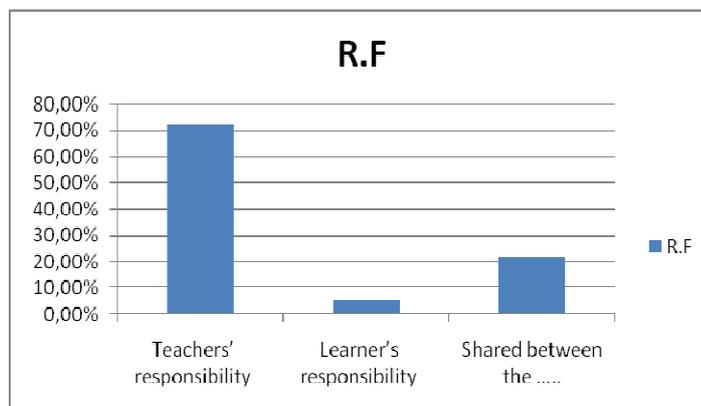


Graph 2 : Teacher's readiness for developing learner autonomy

EFL teachers too seemed not ready yet to develop their learners' autonomy though they are aware of its usefulness in effective English learning. Teachers are not prepared during their training program for dealing with autonomy.

Pupils perception responsibility	A.F	R.F
Teachers' responsibility	26	72.22 %
Learner's responsibility	02	05.55 %
Shared between the	08	22.22 %
Total number	36	100 %

Table 3: Responsibility in learning English in the classroom



Graph 3: Responsibility in learning English in the classroom

Pupils still consider the teacher as more responsible for most of the tasks during their own learning process. They are unwilling to take responsibility and continue to see the teacher as a dominant figure who is the decision maker in the classroom. In fact, this is one of the remaining of the traditional approach. Therefore, the change in language teaching and learning is not easily accepted and applied. That is to say neither teachers nor pupils are prepared for such a change towards autonomy.

5. The Research Findings

As put by Seliger and Shohamy (1989), once the data have been analyzed and the results obtained, the last phase in the research process is to summarize the main findings. The core interest of this research is looking for ways in order to foster learner autonomy in the secondary education. In the light of the results obtained from the questionnaires, the classroom observation and the interview, the major findings are as follows.

5.1 Pupils Readiness for Autonomous Learning

- 1- Pupils feel more secure in the presence of the teacher, because first they are used to rely on the teacher, second because of a lack of self-confidence
- 2- Even self- assessment cannot be conducted by pupils themselves owing to the lack of training. They are evaluated through exam and test marks and teacher comments, the fact that makes them subjective in assessing themselves. This was teachers' opinion towards self assessment.
- 3- Pupils readiness is tightly related to their motivation in learning English. The results reveal that motivation has a strong impact in this readiness.

5.2 Secondary Teachers and Learner Autonomy

- 1-EFL teachers in Algeria seem not familiar with the notion of learner autonomy, though they are aware of its usefulness in English learning. Introducing learner autonomy for teachers and learners who have used to certain roles in the classroom is not an easy task at all. Miliani (1991) questions in his paper on self-access learning, whether an educational system that is known for its conservatism could lead to learner's autonomy.
- 3 -The Algerian reform of the educational system (2003) has already predicted changes in curricula and methodologies and advocates the autonomy of the learners together with the shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach. However, secondary teachers were not prepared for such change as a result change will not be easily accepted and applied.
- 4- Fostering learner autonomy in secondary education is not based only on change in both teachers' and learners' roles, but also on some pedagogical matters such as teachers' training programs, textbooks, and projects works.
- 4- The results obtained show diverse shortcomings of the teacher's training programs. The teachers questioned have highlighted the mismatch between teacher's pedagogical preparation and what actually happens in the classroom (Samoud, 2007). Most teachers do not find these programs beneficial in introducing and promoting learner autonomy.
- 5-In this research some Algerian EFL teachers claim that autonomy should be dealt with in the level of university. In contrast, the secondary level is preparatory phase for university, so spoon feeding will not make pupils go further in English learning. In this respect, a strategy for developing autonomy in language teaching will require self-awareness to improve motivation and willingness to take charge of learning.

5.3 Observation and interview findings

After having observed the classroom over a period of nearly two months, the observation confirmed that this classroom was far to be autonomous. Still the teacher

centeredness appears. The teacher was still the dominant and the most responsible of learning. What is clearly noticeable is that only few pupils are actively engaged in their learning, and here one should mention that the low coefficient of English can be one cause since: “...**Low coefficient as well as limited teaching time and resources allocated to French and English language teaching..led the younger generations..to encounter real learning problems in both foreign languages.** (Hamzaoui, 2006:73) In secondary education pupils give much attention to subjects of high coefficient.

To conclude with what E. Ushioda (2001) says that the concept of autonomy in the classroom invariably brings to mind the vision of learners working happily in groups, pairs or individually while the teacher hovers in the background. (E. Ushioda, 2001:9). Taking into consideration what she says and the results obtained from the classroom observation we confirm that the observed classroom is not an autonomous one.

According to the interviewee various factors prevent the teacher from implementing the CBA in his teaching. This approach which has been adopted for a decade now and which advocates

autonomous learning meets some limits in the Algerian classroom for a number of reasons:

- a) Overloaded classes that do not leave much space to promote pupil-centered teaching and autonomous learning.
- b) Lack of equipment and material.
- c) Insufficient teacher development.
- d) Resistance to the new approach.
- e) Fear to lose authority.
- f) Use of official yearly distributions of the syllabus which are content-based.
- g) Discordance between teaching which is meant to develop competences in using a language

and certificative assessment which is content-based: teachers choose and concentrate on teaching what is tested in the baccalaureate at the expense of enabling pupils to learn and use a language.

These obstacles, among others, hinder the development of learner autonomy in Algerian schools.

6. Promoting Learner Autonomy in English Learning

The task of moving from learner autonomy as a philosophy to an application in the classroom is really a demanding one on teachers since they must learn to “let go” and pupils must learn to “stand on their feet”. Besides certain factors that should be available such as learners’ training . The language teacher also plays a role in promoting learner autonomy, and instructional materials too.

6.1 Preparing Teachers to Promote Learner Autonomy

Teachers can be the best guides for pupils in developing their autonomy in English learning if the training programs give them a helping hand. Reflective teaching as well plays a role. By keeping portfolios and diaries their performance as a whole progresses and not only fostering autonomy in their classrooms.

6.1.1 Teacher Training Programs and promoting learner autonomy

-Teacher Training Institutions should provide teachers with adequate training, so as to be able to cope with the reform objectives. As suggested by Little (1996): **“we must provide trainee teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in the learners who will be given into their charge, but we must also give them a first hand experience of learner autonomy in their training.”**(Little, 1996: 179-180). However, We wonder how teachers who have not been confronted with learner autonomy in their initial teacher training develop autonomy in their classes. One obvious impact on learners’ autonomy is their teachers’ understanding of what autonomy means, and their ability to implement it in the classroom. Teachers need to be provided by techniques how to reduce pupils’ reliance and dependence on them for making them more and more autonomous.

6.1.2 Teacher professional development

Professional development is one of the basic needs for teachers so as to overcome all barriers in their job, and to promote their autonomy as well as that of their learners in particular. To do so, teachers have to reflect on their teaching through professional portfolios, diaries and classroom action research. A portfolio is a living history of a teaching-learning life, Like other professionals, teachers need evidence of their growth and achievement over time. The professional portfolio is a vehicle for collecting and presenting that evidence.

In order to promote learners’ autonomy, teachers may benefit from certain strategies for reflective practice such as writing diaries and journals as means of professional development in the foreign language classroom. Personal events, thoughts, and observations are recorded in a diary; this is what is referred to as a personal diary. Teachers may use a diary as a reflective aspect on their teaching. EFL teachers in Algerian schools are advised to keep diary writing. It is based on honest reflections. Diaries not only help teachers developing themselves as teachers and improve the level of their learners. They also provide a rich source of experience that is helpful in guiding other teachers in the field of language learning .Certain roles are to be played by the English teacher for the sake of developing his students’ autonomy. He should be a guide and a counselor. A facilitator and a partner in the process of learning.

7. Preparing Learners for Autonomy in Language Learning

Learning English successfully is based on the motivation of the learner himself. The teacher strives to make the learner learns in vain if the learner is uninterested as Scharle and Szabo (2000) invoke the saying: **“you can bring the horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink.”** (Scharle and Szabo, 2000:4). If the English teacher seeks effectiveness in his teaching, he should start first by motivating learners. Before any attempt to motivate learners according to Thanasoulas (2000) certain basic motivational factors should be available such as: a good teacher student rapport, a pleasant supportive classroom atmosphere, cooperativeness, and learner self-confidence. In fact, Teacher’s behavior is a powerful motivational tool. To foster learner autonomy, the language teacher has to motivate the learners first. But this aim cannot be attained unless the teacher establishes a good rapport with learners, so as to reduce their anxiety and establish a suitable atmosphere for learning in which learners become more self - confident.

7.1 Fostering Autonomy through Developing Learner Responsibility

EFL learners should take responsibility for their learning, and believe that their success and failure in English learning is due to their own attitudes and responsibilities in learning. However, taking responsibility for one's learning is not an easy task because: **“People do not normally wake up a fine day and find that they have become responsible overnight. More likely, they go through a slow gradual process as they are approaching adulthood.”** (Scharle and Szabo, 2000:9). Developing learner responsibility is crucial in establishing learner autonomy, however, learners should go through stages so as to become gradually independent from the teacher, these stages are illustrated by Scharles and Szabo (2000) in the table 7.1.1 below

Stages	Name of the stage	Characteristics
Stage 1	Raising Awareness	-Presenting new viewpoints and new experiences to the learner. -Most activities in this stage are structured -Students are not yet very responsible.
Stage 2	Changing attitudes	-A slow process requiring a lot of practice and patience. -Preparation to practice new roles -Breaking away from stubborn old patterns.
Stage 3	Transferring Roles	-Considerable change in the classroom management. -demanding phase on the teacher. -Giving freedom to learners to accomplishing tasks and even deciding about tasks.

Table 4: Steps in the process of developing learner responsibility. (Scharles and Szabo, 2000: 9)

7.2 Journals, Self-Reports and Writing Diaries

In order to improve their language skills, pupils in the secondary education are recommended to keep a reflective journal. In these journals pupils can write about all what happened in school in general and in the classroom in particular. Pupils should focus on areas where they experience difficulties. The benefits of the writing of a journal are to help learners in bettering their writing skill. Self-reports also are one of the good ways for collecting information about how pupils deal with certain learning tasks. According to Wenden (1998) self-reports help learners becoming aware of their own strategies by reporting what they are thinking while performing a task.

According to Thanasoulas (2000) diary writing is a means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences. The advantage of writing diaries is to make pupils plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. EFL teachers in Algeria are highly recommended to keep a diary writing as a tool for professional development and so EFL learners. Through diary writing pupils will develop a sense of independence and self-reliance in overcoming the obstacles in English learning.

7.3 Promoting Learner Autonomy Through Strategy- Based Instruction (SBI)

Strategy based instruction is one of the best ways for promoting learner autonomy especially in the secondary education. Learning strategies have long been recognized as a key tool to empower students and promote learner autonomy. For Wenden (1998) learner strategies should be given a lot of attention in foreign language classrooms, for the purpose of making students aware of their own learning processes. However, one of the research findings is that pupils do not use strategies that help them becoming independent.

EFL teachers in Algeria may find the theoretical presentation of strategy instruction beneficial, but what they really need is how to apply strategy instruction in their classrooms and which model seems the most suitable for pupils in this level. One question worth to be asked here, it is how language strategies can be instructed? The researcher has tried to answer this question in the table below.

Name of the strategy	Its usefulness	Suggested activities
Note taking	-To understand difficult and long texts. -Organizing ideas -Analyzing a text.	-Listening or reading a text -To organize the ideas according to the text -To analyze or summarize.
Key words	-Words for memory techniques. -To skim and scan a text. -to form a title and a general idea.	-Reading a text. -Identifying what is it about? -Finding key words. -Forming a title or an idea.
Self-monitoring	-Check one's performance in speaking -Become aware of one's weaknesses -Develop self-reliance through self-correction	-The teacher may repeat the utterance or stress the mispronounced or the wrong word. Or make learner writes it on the board
Self-evaluation	-Check how well one is learning. -Identify strengths and weaknesses -Notice the progress in English learning.	In writing tasks as an example learners may be asked to: reflect on their written essay through checking the tense used, connectors, punctuation...etc. Helping learners decide how well they master certain tasks (good-fairly good-bad..)

Table 5: Suggested activities for strategy training.

7.4 Staying in Touch with Language outside Classroom Settings

Learning English during class sessions only is not sufficient. Language learning is too complex and varied to be dealt with in two or three sessions a week only. Learning a language needs staying in touch with the language outside classroom settings because: “ not everything can be taught in class”(Nunan, 1997:3). So pupils have to do self-study tasks outside school for strengthening their abilities

in reading, writing and speaking in English. Homework is one of the best ways for promoting

learner autonomy in the secondary education. Learners find themselves in front of a problem to be solved individually without teacher's guidance or assistance. In fact, through this task pupils can develop a sense of independence in English learning.

7.5 Suggested Materials for Promoting Learner Autonomy

In the information age, the availability of a variety of instructional materials can facilitate the task of becoming autonomous and independent from the teacher as far as our pupils are concerned. The widespread use of information technology in several domains of life and in schools particularly enables EFL learners in Algeria to enhance and take charge of their own learning. Both EFL published and authentic materials play a great role in fostering learners' independence and self-reliance. There are plenty of resources that can be drawn from the internet for the purpose of fostering learner autonomy. There are also other tools that can serve in promoting learner autonomy such as TV channels, mainly documentaries, news and other programs that help language learners to enrich their knowledge in different skills.

7.6 Semi-Autonomous Learning as a Preparatory Phase

In Algerian EFL context, we cannot expect pupils to be fully autonomous over night. For this reason, a transitional phase is necessary to be implemented so as to ensure a safe move to autonomy in our schools. This learning process can be called "Semi-autonomous learning". No doubt it is useful for students to learn autonomously, but through the research findings we realized how much difficult is to make pupils in our schools completely autonomous. So it is necessary to establish a semi-autonomous learning for better English learning in the classroom. Dickinson defines semi-autonomous learning as: "**The stage at which learners are being prepared for autonomy**". (Dickinson, 1987:11). These are the basic steps that should be taken during the "semi-autonomous stage." EFL teachers in Algerian schools will surely find it useful to put some responsibilities in pupils' hands through certain language tasks such as:

- Give pupils freedom of choice between working individually or in groups.
- Freedom of choice of materials to be used in the classroom such as data show, diaporama, posters, etc.) mainly in the presenting of the project works
- Pupils free choice of project topics and themes other than those provided in the textbook is highly recommended.
- Pupils should be provided with a wide range of activities to choose from.
- Pupils should be given the opportunity to negotiate with their teachers and peers what present difficulty for them so as the teachers can modify or delete.
- Pupils can be offered a chance to give their opinion on the teaching unit's theme.

Semi-autonomous learning is for bridging the gap between secondary and university in term of English learning. If pupils are well prepared in the secondary level (to be at least partially autonomous) the problem of spoon feeding and overreliance on the EFL teachers will be solved. EFL learners can be fully autonomous only when they reach university, because learner autonomy in the secondary level as put by Milliani (1991) is more a decision taking rather than a decision making. Semi-autonomous learning is a first and basic step to take for promoting learner autonomy in Algerian secondary education.

8. Conclusion

EFL teachers in Algeria and pupils alike are poorly prepared for the move to learner autonomy and training them both is necessary. In Algerian EFL context, teacher training programs should provide teachers with adequate training to foster their autonomy as well as

that of their learners. As for learners, the first basic step in fostering their autonomy is to raise their awareness of the importance of autonomy in their learning. Teachers can do this through creating basic motivational conditions and establish Strategy based instruction may be the solution of pupils' overreliance on the English teacher, and prepare them for taking much more responsibility in their learning.

In attempts to promote a higher level of learner autonomy in Algerian schools, it is important to encourage homework assignments and project works as well as the use of a variety of published and authentic materials that will help students explore greater interest in autonomous learning. As English teachers, should be guides and counselors it becomes their responsibility to not only teach a language, but also inform and instruct learners how to study outside the classroom. Finally, autonomy in learning is a process and not a product that many EFL students seek today. Autonomy requires understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses. And as it is hard to establish learner autonomy in our schools in which both teachers and learners need preparation. Semi-autonomous learning may be the best solution. It is a preparatory step towards achieving the goal of learning autonomously in Algerian secondary education.

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