Developing EFL Learners' Autonomy through the European Language Portfolio: a Vehicle to Enhance Algerian Learners' Ownership of Learning

Développer l'Autonomie des Apprenants de l'Anglais Langue Etrangère à travers le Portfolio Européen des Langues : un Moyen d'Améliorer le Sens de Responsabilité d'Apprentissage des Apprenant Algériens

تنمية التعليم الذاتي لدى طلبة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من خلال ملف اللغة الأوروبي: نحو تعزيز ملكية التعلم لدى الطلبة الجزائرين

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-**Abstract:** In an age of globalisation, language teaching/learning is facing new challenges that require the promotion of a host of new methods to attain the international standards. In view of this, learner autonomy in EFL/ESL context has become one of the most debated topics among researchers, educators and policy-makers as it constitutes a cornerstone for assuring efficient learning. Accordingly, the present paper endeavours to highlight the advantages of integrating an authentic instrument widely used in Europe, Canada and some Asian countries as Turkey: The European Language Portfolio (ELP henceforth). Moreover, the paper assesses students' attitudes towards learning through the use of ELP. To bring about these objectives, an experimental design was conceived using a pre-post-test in a form of "Learner Autonomy Questionnaire" (LAQ) and another questionnaire to investigate students' attitudes of the ELP use. As it stands, a random sample of 60 undergraduate students from the department of English at Tlemcen University (Algeria) participated in the study. The results demonstrated statistically significant differences between pre-post-tests chi-square values indicating the positive effects of ELP on EFL learners' autonomy. As well, students held positive and supportive attitudes towards the use of

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ELP. It is then advocated that ELP is effective to mediate the main factors to autonomous learning.

- **Keywords:** Algerian educational system - EFL— ELP - higher education learner autonomy — reflective learning.

- **Résumé:** À l'ère de la mondialisation, l'enseignement / l'apprentissage des langues est confronté à de nouveaux défis qui nécessitent la promotion d'une multitude de nouvelles méthodes pour atteindre les normes internationales. Compte tenu de cela, l'autonomie des apprenants dans le contexte EFL / ESL est devenue l'un des sujets les plus débattus parmi les chercheurs, les éducateurs et les décideurs, car elle constitue une pierre angulaire pour assurer un apprentissage efficace. En conséquence, le présent article s'efforce de mettre en évidence les avantages de l'intégration d'un instrument authentique largement utilisé en Europe, au Canada et dans certains pays asiatiques comme la Turquie : le Portfolio européen des langues. De plus, la recherche évalue les attitudes des étudiants à l'égard de l'apprentissage grâce à l'utilisation du PEL. Pour atteindre ces objectifs, une conception expérimentale a été conçue en utilisant un pré-post-test sous forme de « questionnaire d'autonomie de l'apprenant » (LAQ) et un autre questionnaire pour étudier les attitudes des étudiants face à l'utilisation du PEL. Dans l'état actuel des choses, un échantillon aléatoire de 60 étudiants de premier cycle du département d'anglais de l'Université de Tlemcen (Algérie) a participé à l'étude. Les résultats ont montré des différences statistiquement significatives entre les valeurs du chi carré pré-post-tests indiquant les effets positifs du PEL sur l'autonomie des apprenants EFL. De plus, les étudiants avaient des attitudes positives et favorables à l'utilisation du PEL. Il est ensuite avancé que le PEL est efficace pour médiatiser les principaux facteurs d'un apprentissage autonome.

- **Mots clés :** apprentissage des langues — autonomie de l'apprenant — enseignement supérieur — mondialisation - Portfolio Européen des Langues

- **الملخص:** في عصر العولمة يواجه التعليم/ تعلم اللغة تحديات جديدة تتطلب تعزيز مجموعة من الأساليب الجديدة لتحقيق المعايير الدولية في ضوء ذلك أصبحت استقلالية المتعلم في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية/ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية واحد من اكثر الموضوعات إثارة للجدل بين الباحثين والمعلمين وصانعي السياسات لأنها تشكل حجر الزاوية لضمان التعلم الفعال وفقا لذلك يسعى هذا البحث إلى إبراز مزايا دمج أداة أصيلة مستخدمة على نطاق واسع في أوروبا وكندا وبعض الدول الآسيوية مثل: تركيا؛ المحافظة الاوربية للغات (ELP) علاوة على ذلك يقيم البحث اتجاهات الطلاب تجاه التعلم من خلال استخدام المحفظة الأوربية للغات.

لتحقيق هذه الأهداف تم وضع تصميم تجريبيا باستخدام اختبار ما قبل اللاحق في شكل استبيان استقلالية المتعلم (LAQ) واستبيان آخر للتحقيق في مواقف الطلاب من استخدام (ELP). شاركت في الدراسة عينة مكونة من 60 طالباً جامعياً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة تلمسان -الجزائر. أظهرت النتائج فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين قيم مربع كاي قبل الاختبارات اللاحقة والتي تشير إلى الآثار الإيجابية لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية على استقلالية متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك كان لدى الطلاب مواقف إيجابية وداعمة تجاه استخدام (ELP) من ثم يمكن القول إن (ELP) فعال في تمكين العوامل الرئيسة للتعلم المستقل.

- **الكلمات المفتاحية:** استقلالية المتعلم؛ طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية؛ محفظة اللغة الأوروبية؛ تنمية مهارات وكفاءات؛ تحديات عصر العولمة.

INTRODUCTION:

During the last few decades, research in the field of language education has focused more on resolving issues that pertain to learner autonomy. In the Algerian context, many efforts have been made in higher education, since 2003, emphasizing the implementation of Learner-centred approaches as an attempt to enhance learners' autonomy. Contrariwise, one might assert that, according to the researchers' experience as language teachers, Algerian undergraduate university students of language have been more incited with the change of the learning setting rather than the shift from dependent learners to autonomous learners.

As far as learner autonomy in language education is concerned, European Language Portfolio (ELP) is one of the supporting materials that has been widely used in Europe in the last decade and recently in other non-European countries. In fact, the

integration of ELP as a support to boost learner autonomy in language education has attracted many practitioners' attention. Accordingly, the present research paper addresses the question as to whether the implementation of the ELP in the department of English at Tlemcen University would have an effect on learners' autonomy as adult learners.

In the same vein, a body of literature has documented and underlined a set of educational as well as pedagogical deficiencies at the level of EFL learners' responsibility and ownership of their learning in the context of Algeria. Therefore, before broaching the topic of the effects ELP may have on Algerian EFL learners, a selective literature spans to the fourth to pave the way for the experimental phase of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Learner Autonomy in the Algerian Context:

In an attempt to prepare learners to take responsibilities of their own learning at university, the Algerian education has adopted the Learner-Centered paradigm since the academic year 2002-2003. This latter entails teaching through the Competency-Based Approach (CBA). Despite the implementation of CBA in middle and secondary education, based on the concept of learner autonomy, Algerian EFL learners join university with incapacity to conduct their own learning outside the classroom (Hadi, 2017). Hadi adds that learners are accustomed to a spoon-feeding learning, and they attribute their learning, success and failure to the role of their teacher (2017). According to the same study findings, Algerian EFL learners are unaware of their responsibility in the learning process. Furthermore, and are not yet ready to be autonomous due to the lack of support to promote autonomy.

Teaching methods and approaches are culture driven, and it is challenging to transfer them from one culture to another without falling in the traps of failure. An example of this latter is demonstrated in Schweisfurth's description of the exportation failure of 'Learner-Centered' approach from the Western Culture (2011). Conversely,

autonomy is no methodology; it can be promoted worldwide as an important characteristic of successful learners. The unique condition for that is to cultivate autonomy in learners using appropriate support. In this respect, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), a tool validated by the Council of Europe after a long process of design and research (about 10 years), has been created as a unified document for use in the European educational systems in order to broaden learners' mobility throughout Europe. Furthermore, the basic premises of the ELP focus on reflective learning and learner autonomy. Ushioda suggests that this kind of tools would lead to "promoting reflective learning, motivation and autonomy" (2006, p. 152).

The European Language Portfolio:

The last century has witnessed a great deal of research, which advocates learning methods that are of advantage to genuine experiences, i.e. that emphasize preparing individuals to meet the needs of real life. More account is given to higher education as attempt to make the transition from instruction to employment as smoother as possible. This interest calls for dedicated academic techniques that would increase the instructive experience of learners inside and outside the educational settings.

Therefore, the main objective of the E LP is to create autonomous learners, who are not only able to take responsibility of their own learning, but also able to reflect on their individual experiences to attain the required competency of an appropriate target language use (Little, 2007). Evidently, there is no "one-size-fits all" approach to enhance language learners' competence. However, learning experience worldwide may be beneficial to learners; this depends on the relevance of each experience and on how learners reflect on their previous experiences.

Different researchers have used different terms to refer to the process of learning from experience. John Dewey uses the concept of "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1915), later in 1975 referred to the term "experience-based-learning" was used by Wolfe and Byrne. From another perspective, cognitivists refer to "trial and error" to explain experimental learning processes or inductive learning. Plainly, experience leads to

learning. Nevertheless, the learning becomes useless if reflection does not take place; therefore, experience represents only the starting point in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). Hence, for learning to be a result from experience, reflection should follow and be the next step. Reflection on one's experience is indeed the missing piece of puzzle of the relationship between experience and learning. Thus, the ELP seems to contain this missing piece of the puzzle (Little, 2007).

The ELP is an individual document for learners to record their formal and informal experiences in language learning, to evaluate their own learning, and to compile official certificates obtained, and the different activities and experiences that best illustrate their learning process. In Trim's words, the ELP is **"an individual record of language learning achievement"** (Trim, 1992, p. 26). The ELP is closely related to the Common European Framework of Reference for language learning, teaching and evaluation of language aptitude. In addition, it can be used as a support to particular learners in order to meet their specific needs. The ELP is considered as an authentic instrument that represents learner's experience and reflective learning (Doel et al., 2002). Thus, it is widely used among European students all over Europe and recently outside Europe in some Asian countries and Canada. This led to the creation of a multitude of adapted versions of the ELP. According to the ELP Principles and Guidelines (2000), three fundamental units are obligatory in all versions of the ELP namely the language passport, the language biography, and the dossier.

Authentic learning is expressed in coherent headlines of communicative exercises in "can do" descriptors of language ability (Little, 2005), metacognitive awareness activities and figuring out how to learn exercises (Cavana, 2012). The scales and descriptors of language ability abovementioned came out after ten years of research on language instruction and acquisition accomplished by the Council of Europe's language policy division. Research has generated a complete account "Normal European Framework of Reference for Languages Learning, Teaching, Assessment" (2001), currently known as the Common European Framework of Reference. It is worth

mentioning that the ELP was piloted from 1998 to 2000 by fifteen (15) European countries (Little, 2007). Today it is validated and accredited by the Council of Europe.

The ELP Structure:

The tripartite structure of the ELP is composed of both educational and informing functions. The informing functions are intended to put forward extra data about the learner's language experiences and provide proof of language abilities and achievements (COE, 2019). In its educational function, the ELP sets up "to promote plurilingualism, raise cultural awareness, make the language learning process more transparent to the owner, and foster development of learner autonomy." (Little, 2006, p.182). The three components are:

a) The Language Passport: it functions as a referral to show the learner's current linguistic level. It contains a brief overview of the learner's linguistic status, the foreign languages acquired, language achievements, particular experiences of foreign language exercising, and learner's evaluation of his/her present linguistic aptitude in the learnt foreign languages. The passport should be up-to-date regularly (Little, 2012).

b) The Language Biography: The language biography is devoted to report the learner's language proficiency in each language learnt according to the Common Reference Levels. It functions as a language learning account, including both formal and informal use of foreign languages. It offers a common criterion accepted by the European Council through which the learner can evaluate his own acquired abilities and consequently monitor his/her progress. The evaluation is presented as **'can do'** form in which the learner can state exactly what he/she can do in each foreign language. The language biography is designed to involve the learner in taking responsibility to set his/her learning goals, reflecting on his/her learning process, and evaluating his/her improvement (Little, 2012).

c) The Dossier: The dossier is a file where the learner collects his/her experiences that best illustrates the achievements previously recorded in the language biography or the passport. In addition, the learner can include the official language certificates

that he/she obtained during the learning process, and the informal activities that are valuable in improving their linguistic proficiency. In fact, the dossier can reflect the real exercising of a foreign language and may serve as a recorded source that helps to determine the strategies to be adopted to improve the skills that need to be emphasized compared to others that are already mastered (Little, 2012).

Thus, the biography and dossier contribute to the development of the learner's language reflection, and the passport serves as a gauge to show the learner's level.

Early studies on ELP:

In the field of language education and many other fields, portfolios have been widely used by painters, model makers, designers and architects, as a means of saving pieces of their performance and recording their achievements (Gonzalez, 2009). These portfolios are used not only as a proof of their best experiences but also to show how their skills have developed over time as a result of their learning experience (COE, 2019).

The ELP is based on similar objectives with regard to learner's linguistic competence and learning strategies. In this sense, Crosbie argues that the main principle of ELP is "the promotion of life-long language and intercultural learning" (2006, p. 234).

According to Little the main contribution of the ELP is particularly to support language learners "the ELP was seen, above all, as a means of fostering the reflective processes associated with learner autonomy" (2012, p. 9), the aim is to boost the learners to take responsibilities of their learning and to record in-depth files of their learning experience (Little, 2012).

In the same line of thought, Ushioda asserts that ELP is an "effective tool for promoting reflective learning, motivation, and autonomy" (2006, p. 152). Moreover, little argues that when learners use the ELP they are guided to reflect on "the reasons for learning languages, the language learning process, and the criteria by which learning might be evaluated" (1995, p. 184). Thus, the ELP is closely related to reflective learning which in turn leads to the effectiveness of language learning (Little, 1995).

The point of learner autonomy is for ELP designers the self-directed learning skills to language learners, henceforth because of ELP use, they are able to improve and carry on their individual language learning. In this sense, Kohonen (1999) refers to "invisible learning outcomes" (p. 34) that are crucial for the improvement of language proficiency.

In addition, the results of a pilot study conducted in Finland within the framework of the ELP pilot project as part of the large ELP promotion program showed a positive effect on students' metacognitive awareness in terms of language skills and communicative strategies due mainly to the use of checklists and descriptors (Kohonon, 2000). In fact, the use of checklists provided them with a clear plan of the language learning tasks that they were involved in. It has been demonstrated that the use of ELP during three years piloting project in Finland has positive impact on students' autonomy (Kohonon, 2000).

METHODOLOGY:

Research setting and participants:

The present study was conducted at the department of English language in Tlemcen University (Algeria). The participants consisted of 60 second year English undergraduate students of the scholar year 2017-2018 who were conveniently sampled into an experimental group (n=30) and a control group (n=30).

Research Instruments:

This study involves two main instruments; the first instrument consists of a pre/post-test "Learner Autonomy Questionnaire" (LAQ) developed by Zhang and Li (2004) in order to investigate the effect of the use of ELP on learners' autonomy. It consists of two parts; the first part contains five likert scale questions targeting students' perceptions of their academic self-efficacy, and the second part comprises multiple choice questions imparting students' perceptions of their role as language learners. The second instrument is a questionnaire, adapted from Perclová (2006), about the positive and negative points noticed by students while using the ELP, the extent to which it has been useful to them, and whether they would like to continue

using this kind of portfolios during their learning process at university. The quantitative data generated from both instruments were analysed using SPSS version 20.

Procedures:

The present study was arranged in two phases. The first phase consisted of submitting the pre-test on two groups: the experimental group and the control one. However, before implementing the ELP with the experimental group, a three-session awareness raising instruction was delivered by the researcher. This awareness raising initiative was to introduce the E L P, its components and objectives in the ultimate goal of generating terms of students' self-direction and responsibility of their language learning success.

The researcher provided some websites to the students to learn more about the ELP for the session after. In the second session, learners brought their portfolio printed-version that was sent to them via email. A presentation of each part of the ELP was provided by the instructor with an explanation of the usefulness of each component. The third session was devoted to the use of self-assessment grids and the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their efforts to improve their language skills. The experimental group voluntarily used the ELP during the academic year 2017/2018 under the researcher's supervision in case of any doubt about the use of the ELP.

The second phase consisted of administrating the post-tests on both groups in order to determine whether the use of ELP has contributed to a change into learners´ autonomy, and a questionnaire to the treatment group to crosscheck the extent to which the use of ELP has affected their learning habits and attitudes.

Results

LAQ Pre-test Control and Experimental Group:

This test was administered to both groups before the integration of ELP to the experimental group. It aims to document the learners' performance from both groups

to prove the homogeneity of the two groups and then to compare it with their performance in the post-test in order to assess the hypothesised progress. The table below displays the pre-test differences between the two groups of the study.

Table 1.1 Chi-Square analysis of differences between control and experimental groups in LAQ pre-test responses

Part 1 (title)				Part 2(title)			
Item	Pearson Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Item	Pearson Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
01	Constant	2	//	12	3,126[a]	4	,537
02	13,464[a]	2	,061	13	8,457[a]	4	,076
03	4,627[a]	2	,099	14	2,267[a]	2	,322
04	3,467[a]	3	,325	15	6,476[a]	4	,166
05	2,333[a]	2	,311	16	6,667[a]	3	,083
06	1,186[a]	2	,553	17	18,425[a]	4	,091
07	8,457[a]	4	,076	18	3,600[a]	3	,308
08	4,899[a]	4	,298	19	1,000[a]	3	,801
09	4,893[a]	4	,298	20	10,580[a]	4	,082
10	11,471[a]	2	,057	21	7,038[a]	3	,071
11	6,645[a]	3	,084	22	8,997[a]	3	,069

From the values of significance level (**p**) displayed in Table 1, ranging from 0.071 to 0.801 that are all more than 0.05 (p>0.05) it can be said that Chi-square values are not significant. Since p>0.05. Therefore, the Null hypothesis is accepted and the alternative one is rejected which means the absence of statistically significant differences between control and experimental groups in LAQ pre-test. Furthermore, since item one received similar responses in both groups, it was treated as a constant by the SPSS. This finding confirms the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups having the same levels of autonomy.

LAQ Post-test Control and Experimental Group:

After having experienced the use of ELP for one semester, the same LAQ test was administered to both groups to seek if there is any difference in learners' performance.

Table 1.2. Chi-Square analysis of differences between control group pre and post LAQ test responses

Part1				Part 2			
Item	Pearson Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Item	Pearson Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
01	Constant	//	//	12	,000ᵃ	4	1,000
02	,000ᵃ	1	1,000	13	,000ᵃ	2	1,000
03	,802ᵃ	2	,670	14	1,319ᵃ	4	,858
04	,504ᵃ	3	,918	15	,725ᵃ	3	,867
05	,000ᵃ	2	1,000	16	4,444ᵃ	4	,349
06	,000ᵃ	2	1,000	17	3,839ᵃ	3	,279
07	,000ᵃ	3	1,000	18	1,688ᵃ	3	,640
08	1,914ᵃ	4	,752	19	1,426ᵃ	4	,840
09	,807ᵃ	4	,938	20	,000ᵃ	3	1,000
10	,606ᵃ	1	,436	21	,000ᵃ	3	1,000
11	,000ᵃ	3	1,000	22			

From the above table, it is clear that the values of Chi-square test, between experimental group's and control group's responses in post LAQ test, are significant at the level p =0.000, and since (p<0.05), it can be said that the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative one is accepted indicating the presence of statistically significant differences between experimental and control group post LAQ test responses except for items 12,15,17,19, 20.

Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Questionnaire

This questionnaire was administered to the experimental group after the post-test. It intends to seek information about learners' perceptions about the usefulness of ELP as a supportive tool to enhance their language learning autonomy. The findings indicated that the fast the participating students (100%) showed positive perceptions about the use of ELP as a supportive tool which allows them to know about their strengths, to see their progress, to be fully involved, and to be more responsible in the learning process.

Furthermore, the participants' responses affirmed that learners should be encouraged to keep a language portfolio. In terms of the role ELP in activating students' reflection on their learning experiences, the participating students confirmed that it helps to know what one still needs to learn and helps to evaluate where one stands. Despite the fact that some students said that the ELP is time consuming, the majority of them think that the ELP makes sense only if it is used regularly. Moreover, the participants agreed to compare their language competence on a European scale and the majority of them showed preference to keep using the ELP for the rest of their learning process. The table below summarises the aforementioned results.

Table 1.3. students' perceptions on the use of ELP

Items:	Min	Max	Mean	S. D	Rank
Item 1	1,00	3,00	1,75	,90	15
Item 2	1,00	4,00	2,77	1,14	6
Item 3	1,00	400	2,10	1,10	13
Item 4	1,00	3,00	2,51	1,10	11
Item 5	1,00	5,00	3,55	1,30	1
Item 6	1,00	5,00	2,57	1,04	8
Item 7	1,00	5,00	2,25	,88	13
Item 8	1,00	5,00	3,02	,91	3

Item 9	1,00	5,00	2,84	1,27	5
Item 10	1,00	3,00	2,92	1,20	4
Item 11	1,00	3,00	2,33	,80	12
Item 12	1,00	4,00	2,63	,99	7
Item 13	1,00	4,00	2,52	1,34	9

DISCUSSION

The obtained findings reveal that the experimental group showed a valuable progress in language learning autonomy after having had the ELP as a supportive tool to learning. The test results confirmed that the integration of ELP to EFL undergraduate learners is influential. Learners' autonomy has been enhanced after experiencing the use of ELP during one semester; as it is shown in their results in the post-test compared to those of the control group. Similarly, (Gonzalez, 2009) asserted that his experiment with two adult language schools in northern Spain showed that the use of ELP had positive effects on learners' autonomy and ownership of their language learning.

The data obtained from the reflective questionnaire shows that the use of the ELP among Algerian learners allows them to know about their strengths in language learning. Furthermore, it helps to see the progress in learning thanks to the biography file. Indeed, it stimulates learners to engage in the language learning process. It seems that the use of ELP puts more responsibility on learners as experienced in the finnish experiment with the ELP as part of the pilote project which showed "a close connection between students responsibility, motivation, and personally meaningful learning. ELP pedagogy seems to promote a cyclical development in autonomy" (Kohonen, 2006, p.15), "this cyclic dynamic process has been prominent in the findings of the Irish ELP projects" (Sisamaki, 2006, p.23). Essentially, learners unanimously confirmed the need to use the ELP for all EFL learners.

As a result, the present research paper adheres to achieve the researcher's rational, found solutions to the raised issue and confirmed the suggested hypotheses. The findings proved the effectiveness of ELP in raising EFL learners' autonomy.

CONCLUSION:

This research paper has given an account to the benefits of ELP in relation to the realizations of developed learner autonomy. After analysing data, it was obvious that the use of ELP as a pedagogical medium was beneficial for enhanced learner autonomy. Henceforth, it is suggested that ELP is a resourceful pedagogical method that has to be employed in all language institutions.

To sum up, this study has been conducted in an attempt to shed light on the value of ELP in enhancing learners' autonomy, thus, encouraging practitioners in higher education to use the ELP in order to compensate EFL learners' autonomy deficiencies. Therefore, this research is presumed to offer valuable insights to university teachers and administrators to apply ELP for the sake of developing learners' autonomy.

In addition, the participating students showed positive attitudes towards the ELP. They consider it as an important instrument to improve their learning and raise their self-awareness about their strengths and weaknesses as language learners, they also show interest to keep using the ELP for the rest of their learning experience.

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