Autonomous Learning in the Algerian

(EFL) Education: State of Affairs

Kheira Arab

Department of English, Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts, Djillali Liabes University, DLALA, Algeria

sabrinaarab26@gmail.com

Abstract

Developing autonomy among learners is one of the overarching objectives of education worldwide. Autonomous learners usually develop into active adults who benefit themselves and their societies. Algerian learners; however, are often depicted as lacking autonomy and the related self-directed learning skills. Accordingly, this paper tries to reflect on the concept of autonomy in the Algerian education; namely on the negative overall image that is attributed to our (EFL) learners. To this end, the study drew upon the body of literature that has already been produced on this subject to check whether it supports or refutes the aforementioned assumption. Unfortunately, the analysis of different studies confirmed our learners' lack of autonomy, yet it revealed that the latter are not the first to blame. It is the whole system; both the educational and the societal, that contribute to the shaping of the learner's character. It is particularly the use of spoon-feeding in early education and its persistence throughout the different grades that make autonomous learning a hard experience for our learners when they reach university.

1. *Introduction*

Dissemination of knowledge is no more the only and unique mission of modern education. Providing learners with the necessary means and capabilities to develop into autonomous and responsible individuals is rather the leading and overarching objective and mission of the latter. Education seeks to form individuals who can benefit themselves as well as their communities. Morris (1997) states that: "*Developing children as rounded people and active members of the community is at the heart of what schools are about*" (In McCarthy, 2000, p. 81). Hence, to endow educational systems with such capacity, new theories, teaching approaches, methods and techniques are constantly innovated. The result has been a shift in educational paradigms from one centred on the teacher towards its opposite that is focussed more on the learner.

The former considers the teacher the sole source of knowledge which is transmitted to the learner mostly through spoon-feeding. Learners are thus limited to mere recipient of knowledge and depend heavily on their teachers. However, in the second paradigm, teachers' and learners' roles are challenged. Teachers are required to make the learning process profitable and successful; putting the physical, moral, spiritual and cultural well-being of the learner at the forefront (Best, 2000).

The main outcome expected from this change of role is to nurture and promote learners' autonomy and responsibility for learning as a way to prepare them for real world and adult life. This is the case of education at least in developed countries such as the United Kingdom where "*the current concern for personal and social education has at its centre moral development, helping young people to be better persons (not better mathematicians or physicists)*" (Pring, 1984, cited in White, 1989-2015, p.7). Devjak, Žmauc and Benčina (2021) further argue that autonomy fostering should begin at childhood; in kindergarten so as to harvest its positive effects later in adulthood. (p. 67)

Learner autonomy originated in Europe (Smith, Kuchah, and Lamb, 2018) and then it has been a question of great interest in the developed countries that are increasingly moving towards embracing this paradigm in their education. These countries are furthermore helped by the advancement in technology which contributes considerably in the effectiveness of autonomous learning (Mun, 2012). But, this shift in paradigms seems to virtually not exist in many developing countries such as Algeria, whose educational systems lag behind the developed countries in many aspects. Winthrop (2015) points to this fact in a survey that compares between developed

and developing countries in terms of basic educational needs stating that: "*the developing world is about 100 years behind developed countries. These poorer countries still have average levels of education in the 21st Century that were achieved in many western countries by the early decades of the 20th Century*" (p.3).

In the context of language learning, Smith, Kuchah, and Lamb (2018) highlight the mismatch that exists in developing countries between formal education and the actual needs of learners. While technologies are facilitating access to knowledge, language teaching in these countries still relies on the same traditional methods (ibid). This is true for Algeria which is currently facing a dilemma; it is torn between the urgent need to rapidly cope with the successive and continuous changes brought about by Globalisation and by the new Information Era on the one hand, and the necessity to undertake profound, serious and long term reforms on its basic and higher education on the other hand.

Such reforms are certainly a prerequisite to 1) carry out the physical, moral, spiritual and cultural development of young Algerian people to help them be better persons and to 2) allow them develop as rounded people and active members of their community. It is with such individuals and such qualities that Algeria could rise to the challenge.

Unfortunately, the teacher-centered class paradigm seems to persist throughout the Algerian educational system and with such teaching/learning environment; learner's autonomy seems to be just a distant mirage. This paper aims at demonstrating this assumption not by conducting a new field-work study on autonomous learning in Algeria, but by analysing the body of literature that has already been produced on this subject through the different case studies conducted across the country. Thus, the questions leading this work are formulated as follows:

1. What has research shown about autonomous learning in the Algerian context?

2. Did the implemented reforms change the landscape of education in Algeria in favour of autonomous learning

2. *Literature Review*

2.1 *Autonomous Learning?*

Widely varying definitions of autonomy have been suggested since the emergence of this concept whether in general context or in relation to education. Dryden (2023) explains that debate over autonomy is very old and that it derives its origin from ancient Greek philosophy. Taylor (2013) argues that the concept; holding moral and political values, has evolved over time and

has reached this modern era with a shift in its focus from being limited only to "*self-ruling city-states*" to including "*self-ruling persons*". However, the particular concepts of learner's autonomy and autonomous learning were the result of Europeans' strong interest in promoting language instruction that emerged in the 1970s (Pu, 2020). This study is mainly concerned with autonomy in relation to "*self-ruling persons*" and particularly within the sphere of education that is one of the pillars of nations' development. So, what is meant by autonomy?

To avoid the philosophical discussions on autonomy which is not the interest of this current work, we opt for two simple definitions. As for the general meaning of autonomy, we might quote Tucker (2014) who defines it as a "*person's ability to act on his or her own values and interests*". This means that no control is exerted over an autonomous individual who obeys no one except his own values and interests. Tucker (2014) further explains that this ability starts in childhood and develops as we grow up and she claims that everything in our environment plays a role in reinforcing and enhancing or restricting this autonomy.

Moving to autonomy in the particular context of education or what is commonly referred to as autonomous learning, it is defined by Holec (1981) as: "*the ability to take charge of one's learning*" (p.3). As

such, autonomy encompasses learners' awareness about their learning interests and their desire and more importantly their ability to work towards achieving these interests inside and outside class. Put this way, autonomy may be confused with motivation. While they are completely different, they are closely interconnected as two sides of the same coin.

Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) point to the strong relationship between autonomy and motivation by describing autonomous learners as self-regulated learners who are intrinsically motivated. As for self-regulated learning, they define it as: "*self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are systematically designed to affect one's learning of knowledge and skills*" (p.7). So, motivation is a feeling; it is that burning desire that is hidden in someone's mind and heart to do or obtain something, and autonomy is the capability that makes such desire comes true. Autonomy maybe seen as the motor that converts those feelings into mechanical energy and imparts motion into the individual in the form of visible actions.

In the same vein, Pintrich (2000) and Zimmerman (2002) consider autonomy and motivation as the main characteristics of self-regulated learners. They further claim that this type of learners is more likely to be successful learners and that autonomy and motivation are the main features behind their academic success.

Qates (2019) explains that autonomous learning is a tangible behaviour interpreted in terms of actions and reactions as learners are "*proactive in pursuing their own goals for their learning and* […] *take control of the process of their learning*" (p.2). As such, the researcher claims that self-regulated learning aka autonomous learning can be taught; a belief that is shared by old and recent studies, such as Holec (1981) and Mun (2021) respectively.

Since it can be taught, autonomous learning is not limited to the Western cultures and the developed countries. Smith, Kuchah, and Lamb (2018) explain that there is even an urgent need for integrating and promoting autonomous learning in developing countries. Due to the difficult circumstances that both teachers and learners suffer from, autonomous learning can be the adequate solution to overcome challenges caused by the limited resources and the large classes with varied learners' needs as well as the high number of teaching hours (ibid).

In view of that, autonomous learning can be applied in different contexts certainly with different requirements; still there are shared factors that need to be made available for its successful implementation. Han (2020) refers to these factors collectively as "*the supportive context or environment*" (p. 154). According to Han (2018), the

appropriate environment for promoting autonomous learning consists of three factors which are: "*language teacher's guidance, learning facilities (e.g. self-access centers, learning softwares, smart phone English learning applications), and learning materials and resources (electronic and hard copies)*" (ibid). These factors are definitely essential, yet researchers (Darby, 2005; Aoki, 2002; Breen & Mann, 1997; Little, 1995; Sierens et al, 2009) point out to the particular role of the teacher in fostering learner autonomy.

2.2 Spoon-Feeding

Spoon-feeding is a traditional teaching approach that is typical to the teacher-centered class (Lucantoni, 2019). Antwi and Fredua-Kwarteng (2022) define spoon-feeding as: "*a metaphor that describes a situation where lecturers or professors do everything for their students, while the students only have the responsibility to listen and absorb what is fed to them*". Spoon-feeding is as such the reverse of independent or autonomous learning since it deprives the learner from the opportunity to experience learning by him/herself and from the benefits of such experience, while most of the efforts are produced by the teacher. The latter eventually feels the burden of this type of teaching; it is tiring and time and energy consuming.

When this approach persists throughout grades, the logical outcome of such situation is to form passive, lazy and dependent students who are "*sitting back with their mouths open, waiting to be fed by teachers*" (Lucantoni, 2019). The harm of spoon-feeding is felt when students are required to act differently, i.e., when they are expected to rely on themselves and do what the teacher used to do for them. This shift in roles usually takes place when students reach the university. Then, it will be too late to repair the harm that lasted a very long time.

Antwi and Fredua-Kwarteng (2022) refer to the negative consequences of spoon-feeding stating that on the long term students will "*lack problem-solving, problem-identifying and problem-posing skills*". Moreover, they claim that these spoon-fed students are easily deceived and manipulated as they lack the necessary intellect to face the different types of "*manipulation, deception and media propaganda*" that is facilitated by the current technological development (ibid).

3. Research Methodology

As the objective of the current study was to check whether research supports or refutes the idea that Algerian (EFL) learners lack autonomy, so a review of the literature was the appropriate research methodology for collecting data. This methodology has many benefits as pointed out by Snyder (2019) who refers to its

strength claiming that: "*By integrating findings and perspectives from many empirical findings, a literature review can address research questions with a power that no single study has.*" (p. 332). Besides, the review of literature is an integral part of any research work. It guides researchers; regardless of their field of work, and provides them with an overview of what has been achieved in a given area and what is missing. It enables them to identify the points of strength and the points of weaknesses, and what gaps need to be addressed (ibid).

4. Discussion of the Main Findings

It is worth noting that the review of the literature was focused on the published studies, mainly journal articles. The review has revealed that minimal research has been published on the concept of autonomy in the Algerian EFL class. The oldest work dates from 2012 which reflects the newness of interest in this field of study and explains the limited number of researches included in the current work.

4.1 Findings on Autonomous Learning in the Algerian (EFL) Context

So, a decade or so is the age of published research and formal interest in autonomy in the Algerian EFL context. After the analysis of the literature produced on this subject, we have identified two categories of beliefs that are discussed in the

following account alongside the results of the educational reforms.

4.1.1 Category One

This category represents the predominant view; it reflects pessimistic beliefs about autonomy in the Algerian EFL class. Researchers of this category are definitely convinced that Algerian EFL learners lack autonomy. For them, it is a fact that is nonnegotiable and their research was conducted not to demonstrate their belief but rather to find out the causes behind learners' lack of autonomy Examples of these studies include Idri (2012), Hadi (2015), Ghout- Khenoune (2015), Benaissi (2015), Fedj & Benaissi (2018), Arib & Maouche (2021), Baraka (2021), and Belmekki & Baghzou (2022).

Hadi's (2015) investigation was conducted at the secondary school level, in the Willaya of Ain Temouchent (North West of Algeria), and it involved the participation of 36 first year secondary school pupils, 50 EFL teachers and the general inspector of English. Her findings revealed that the participants; both teachers and learners are not conscious of the significance of autonomy and are not even ready to adopt it. She additionally explains that: "*neither project works, nor teacher training programs are adequate and helpful in providing teachers and pupils alike with the skills to develop autonomy in English learning*". Besides, and quoting the inspector, Hadi states that:

"*the teaching/learning environment in Algeria is not ideal to promote autonomous learning*" (ibid).

According to the inspector in Hadi's study, the project work is meant to foster learners' autonomy, however; it is rarely applied in an appropriate way. The inspector blamed the teacher for such situation; claiming that: "*teachers rarely took time to promote autonomous learning. They rather dealt with the project work as a burden and suggested it to their students, just because it was part of the approach they were supposed to implement in their teaching.*" The inspector further argues that the students did not receive any assistance from their teachers in achieving their projects leading to: "*a meaningless 'copy and paste' patchwork from the Internet, which neither their teachers nor themselves have read entirely*". (ibid)

Always dealing with secondary level, Belmekki & Baghzou (2022) distributed a questionnaire to twenty (20) English teachers from different secondary schools in Khenchela (North East of Algeria). The primary objective of their study was to investigate EFL teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy and to identify the challenges they may encounter. Their findings revealed that teachers were well aware of the significance of autonomy, but they faced different obstacles to implementing it in their classrooms, such

as lack of resources, teacher experience in learner autonomy, lack of time, prescribed curriculum, and learner dependence. (ibid)

Moving to the university level, eight years after the implementation of the LMD system (2004), Idri (2012) conducted a study to check whether "*a link exists between: education, reform and learner autonomy*". Her aim was to raise "*awareness about why educational reforms seem to fail when put into practice*". To achieve her objective, Idri (2012) analyzed the journals of 12 master students (7 Master 1 and 5 Master 2) at the University of Bejaia, North East of Algeria, and her results showed that autonomous learning at the university postgraduate level was still unachieved. Most of the participants in her study believed that: "*the educational reforms were non-suitable* [because they] *did not reflect administrative practices*".

These findings are corroborated with those of Ghout- Khenoune (2015) who investigated the prevailing EFL culture of learning and the place of learner autonomy in this culture of learning. The study of Ghout- Khenoune (2015) confirmed again students' lack of autonomy at the university level with undergraduate students, always from Bejaia University. But, it revealed that the main cause was not the students; it was rather the absence of an environment that supports autonomous learning.

Like with the project-based approach and the secondary school level, the LMD reform aims at promoting learner autonomy at the university. Yet, Ghout-Khenoune (2015) explains that the new system "*did not seem to bring about the expected changes*" simply because "*Teachers continued using the same old pedagogic practices*". Even more, she claims that: "*many teachers expressed reluctance to promote learner autonomy in their classes without any in-service training*" and the expected consequence of that situation as reported by Ghout-Khenoune (2015) is that: "*students were reluctant to take part in autonomy-based activities such as undertaking a research project or preparing an oral presentation* ... [they] *were passive, lacked initiative and were over-reliant on the teacher*"

A more recent study conducted by Baraka (2021) in the North West of the country, at the University of Mascara, came to confirm the previous findings about teachers' negative role. Baraka (2021)'s study demonstrated that: "*teachers are not doing great to promote their learners' autonomy. They remain loyal to the spoon-feed strategy*"

In the same line of thought, Arib & Maouche (2021) aimed at probing into EFL teachers' beliefs towards LA and exploring whether the Algerian culture affords or constrains students' readiness for autonomy. What is interesting about

their study is that it involved the participation of EFL teachers from different Algerian universities which ensures the validity of the results and may allow the generalizability of the findings. The participants represented the Algerian North (UAMB, Blida 2 University), the South (U. ADRAR, UMKB), the East (ULBM, U.MSILA, UB2), as well as the West (UHBC, UABT, UDL).

So, Arib & Maouche (2021) added more evidence to the findings of the previous studies. Their concluding result was that: "*both the national culture and the learning culture are restricting the development of learner autonomy in different ways.* But, while the previous researches put the blame on the teacher, the current study examined teachers' beliefs and reported that teachers in turn blame other parties as they believe that: "*students' passivity, parental dictatorship and linear institutional norms are the most influential challenges discouraging learning autonomously.*"

In the same vein, Fedj & Benaissi (2018) recognize the impact of the cultural environment on learning autonomy and state that: "... *for the Algerian context, there seems to be a set of cultural traits that can be regarded as inhibiting in the road to autonomy*". Benaissi (2015) identifies these cultural traits and distinguishes two types of cultural traits; those related to the Algerian individual;

described as someone who typically *progresses in a culture of the group, including the family, the community, etc.; takes decisions with the parents (family);* and *shares experience with others.* The second type is associated particularly with the Algerian learner for whom the presence of the teacher is indispensable for learning; they depend on the teacher's knowledge and cannot take decisions without consulting the teacher as regards their learning and the family as regards their studies and career. Fedj and Benaissi (2018) further explain that:

This sense of collective involvement in one's own life is, thus, reflected in students' approach to learning, in that, they readily accept teachers' full command in outlining their learning path, in determining the 'what', 'how 'and 'why' of their learning. As such, they show little capacity to take the initiative and suppose that their learning progression and outcome are in a large part their teachers' responsibility.

These beliefs and cultural values certainly impede the promotion of autonomy among our learners and any countereff orts to change this situation will involve the participation of the whole community

4.1.2. Category Two

This category included a limited number of studies, all of which investigated either the beliefs/attitudes of teachers and/or

students or the means to enhance students' autonomy. Thought, they did not state it overtly, their research, like in category one, was evidently guided by their deep-rooted belief that autonomy was missing in the Algerian EFL class. Thus, we may advance that the true motive behind their research was to find out whether the lack of autonomy was related to the mindset of the Algerian teacher and learner and accordingly if there was room and hope for future change.

The good news is that their findings revealed the positive attitude and the awareness of the participants about the importance of autonomous learning in the Algerian EFL context. For instance, Maamar (2015) questioned thirty five teachers and one hundred and thirty students from the university of Blida 2 (Central North of Algeria). His results indicated that: "*teachers and students hold positive attitudes and conception of learner autonomy and its effects on EFL students' academic achievement*".

Similarly, Messen & Hammou (2020) conducted a research involving 128 students from the University of Saida (West of Algeria). Likewise, his findings revealed that: "Students are motivated, they are aware of their own and their Teachers' responsibilities". What is new about this research work is that it indicated the high usage of Meta-cognitive strategies by the participants. Nouioua

(2018) corroborated these findings and demonstrated: *"learners' positive attitudes to learner autonomy and substantial use of strategies, with most preference for cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies and least preference for social strategies"*.

A more optimistic study conducted by Snouci (2019) aimed at investigating *the effect of strategy-based instruction (SBI) on promoting learner autonomy in relation to the use of meta-cognitive strategies with different language learning skills and tasks.* 51 first-year undergraduate EFL learners from the University of Setif participated in this study and the findings revealed *significant improvements in meta-cognitive strategy use as an indication to their learner autonomy development.* (ibid)

Likewise, at the middle school level, Boudouaia et al (2022) conducted a nationwide survey with random sampling, involving 129 English language teachers from different regions in Algeria. The study revealed that there was a "*strong belief in teachers' roles in promoting learner autonomy as well as in the latter's role in enhancing the learning process.* Nonetheless, the findings of this study also showed that "*teachers' desirability to involve learners in decision-making and assist them in developing skills for learning how to learn outweighs their feasibility*"

Fedj & Benaissi (2015) attempted to explore ways to foster autonomous practice at the secondary level and to lead pupils gradually towards taking greater responsibility for their learning. They reported that "*the obtained findings displayed that most participants did not exhibit a quite remarkable enhancement in autonomy levels.* Yet, the results indicated that the participants started developing some specific fundamental autonomous skills, namely "*awareness of the learning goals and strategies, the capacity for detachment in specific learning activities and the practice of some self-evaluation techniques*".

4.2 *Educational Reforms and their Outcomes*

Since the independence, Algeria has endeavoured to promote the economic and social situation of its population and the best way to achieve such objective was obviously to promote education that constitutes a key factor in the development of nations. Hence, the Algerian educational system; both basic and higher education, witnessed different reforms; in 1971, 1976, 2002 and 2004. The reforms that have been implemented targeted different aspects of the Algerian education through shaping and reshaping its structure, syllabuses and curricula, as well as the teaching methods and materials.

Unfortunately, the outcomes of these reforms indicate that Algeria has failed to meet its expectations. Bellalem (2014) goes further claiming that these reforms: "*were doomed to failure*" (p.4). Though the intentions were good, the ways of proceeding were ineffective simply because the officials in charge of these reforms did not consult the field expert staff. In basic education and according to Bellalem, Mr. Benbouzid the ex minister of education "*has constantly ignored Algerian teachers' and educational experts' views on his reforms and relied mostly on foreign consultants*" (ibid).

Alas, such practice was also adopted by the successors of Mr. Benbouzid namely Mr. Baba Ahmed and Ms BenGhabrit, who likewise excluded Algerian teachers and experts from their search for the supposed betterment of the national education. Not only the Algerian teachers were not consulted, but were not appropriately trained to apply these reforms either; which generated much dissatisfaction and ambiguity among them as described (Miliani, 2010).

> This new development at school level has generated uneasiness of teachers who are supposed to teach through it but know nearly nothing about it. Furthermore, the textbooks that have been designed along CBA characteristics are posing problems to the teachers who return systematically to their old ways and practices. (p. 71)

Mansouri and Lettal (2022) overtly recognize the failure of the Algerian educational reforms at the basic level, stating that: "*The various reform projects adopted over time lack conscious planning and were not based on sound studies likely to make the deciders comprehend realities and realize the dimensions of the transformations that have come to impose themselves.*" (p. 664). The situation is hardly better in higher education as reported by Metatla (2016) who, quoting the then head of MESRS, states that:

> The introduction of LMD reform was not preceded by adequate evaluations of the state of higher education in the country; it also did not take into account the realities of regional and national contexts; and did not incorporate appropriate consultations and dialogue with those most concerned on the ground.

Agreement on the failure of the reforms has been expressed and demonstrated by a number of other studies; most of them have already been mentioned in the previous section including Idri (2012), Hadi (2015), and Ghout- Khenoune (2015). It is clear thus that the Algerian educational reforms have created an unhealthy environment where neither the teachers nor the learners are able to fully assume their natural roles. The teachers are lost amid the diverse curriculums, text books, teaching approaches and methods

that they have been bombarded with before even having the time to master any of them.

Besides, having been the product of this educational system and with lack of training, teachers themselves seem to lack autonomy. As a result of this vicious cycle, it is of no surprise to form students who lack autonomy as: "*effective implementation of autonomous learning requires teachers to be autonomous first*" (Benchaa & Benaissi, 2021)

4. *CONCLUSION*

This study reviewed the literature produced on autonomy in the Algerian (EFL) context and found evidence supporting the plain truth which is the lack of autonomy among Algerian learners at all levels. The findings also revealed the contribution of the predominant home culture to the shaping of the learning behaviour. Algerian learners do rely too much on their teachers simply because they have learned to behave in such a way. Through spoon-feeding, Algerian teachers reinforce and perpetuate this behaviour, while they blame learners for their limited involvement in the learning process in class and mainly outside class. Likewise, the inspectors blame the teacher for remaining faithful to their traditional practices.

For this reason, there have been reforms to bring about changes to the Algerian educational system and promote autonomous learning, but exclusion of the teachers from an active participation in these reforms and lack of teacher training outweighed their good intentions. A shift from spoon-feeding towards autonomous learning is a difficult equation but a possible one. Nonetheless, it cannot be achieved overnight; it rather needs time and a supportive cultural environment.

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