The Importance of Teaching Ralph Emerson's "Self-Reliance" in Developing Learners' Autonomy: Attitudes and Perceptions of Third Year Students at the ENS of Laghouat.

Mohammed Taha ABDELALIM [1] *

[1] **Ecole Normale Supérieure, Laghouat (Algeria), mt.abdelalim@ens-lagh.dz**

Abstract:

The study investigates how encouraging students' autonomy might be achieved through teaching Emerson's "Self-Reliance" essay. Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of self-reliance places a strong emphasis on the virtues of individuality and self-belief. The purpose of this study is to look into how teaching this essay might help students become more autonomous and explore their attitudes and perceptions towards it through conducting a survey in which their responses were collected and later discussed to determine the effects of studying the essay on their view about autonomy. The results revealed favorable attitudes about the students' willingness to embrace autonomy and independence in learning and decision-making, which are highly encouraged by the principles of Emerson's essay.

Keywords: autonomy; education; emerson; individuality; self-reliance; transcendentalism

1. INTRODUCTION

---

* Mohammed Taha ABDELALIM

In modern life, individuals struggle with the constant stream of conformity as their uniqueness is hindered by the unrelenting waves of peer pressure and cultural expectations, and students are no exception. Ralph Waldo Emerson's voice, made famous by his landmark essay "Self-Reliance," rises above this turbulent state, all-pervading the mist of uncertainty and pointing the way toward independence. Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance", thus, can be transformed from a simple educational assignment into a crucial guide, for its compelling writing act as a compass to direct readers' minds toward self-discovery and autonomous thought. The difficult challenge facing modern education is how to foster students' individuality and independence while still helping them to become thoughtful individuals. Therefore, The battle to support student autonomy becomes especially important. This research investigates the effects of teaching Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" essay on students autonomy. Emerson's principles, according to the research, serve as a spark for students to accept self-ownership and develop their capacity for autonomous thought and action.

1.1 Research Problem

Education helps develop knowledge and skills, but in today's society, it can be difficult for individuals to maintain their individuality and independent thinking due to societal pressures and expectations. This issue is emphasized in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," which encourages self-discovery and autonomous thinking. The question at hand is whether "Self-Reliance" can be used as a tool to guide students towards critical thinking and individualization, while also fostering their responsibility and thoughtfulness as members of society. This research aims to explore this challenge by examining the impact of teaching "Self-Reliance" on students' autonomy. Our hypothesis is that Emerson's principles can empower students to take ownership of their own lives and develop

their ability to think and act independently. By investigating the effectiveness of this approach, we hope to contribute to the important effort of supporting student autonomy in a world that demands conformity. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following questions:

- How can teaching Emerson's Self-Reliance promote students' autonomy?

- To what extent does the level of students' autonomy vary across different contexts?

1.2 Research Objectives

This research endeavors to examine the mechanisms through which the instruction of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay titled "Self-Reliance" facilitates the development of students' autonomy in relation to critical thinking, independent decision-making, and self-expression. Furthermore, it aims to explore the impact of various educational environments on the efficacy of teaching "Self-Reliance" in fostering student autonomy.

1.3 Research Methodology

After studying Emerson's essay, participants, students who have been studying the essay "Self-Reliance", were questioned in a survey about their attitudes with relevance to autonomy. They were asked a few questions and their responses were recorded and will be displayed in this paper in pie charts. The questions will infer responses related to the essay's themes including individual freedom, nonconformity, and self-directed thought. The lectures on "Self-Reliance" included a variety of interactive teaching techniques, such as close reading, group discussions, critical reflection exercises, and writing assignments. The responses of the participants will be presented below with a thorough description and analysis for a better understanding of the role of the lectures on their autonomy.

2. Review of Literature

The following is a discussion of the relevant theories from different researchers about the significance of autonomy in learning as well as integrating Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance" into educational curricula.

2.1 From Moral Guidance to Self-Control: Individualism in Emerson and Kant

Within the framework of Enlightenment philosophy, Kant defended individuality as the cornerstone of human worth. He maintained that humans are able to transcend beings of instinct by using our special capacity for reason to create our own moral compass and make decisions about what to do based on principles rather than whims or impulses. This innate ability to rule ourselves, which is a cornerstone of Enlightenment principles, distinguishes and defines us (Kemp, 2001).

One of the pillars of American individualism, Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance," exhorted readers to trust their own inner judgment and rebel against conformity. This well-known essay, which reflects Emerson's personal philosophy of life, has influenced many writers over the years and still motivates independent thinkers today with its potent message of independence as the cornerstone of a meaningful existence.

In Self-Reliance, Emerson writes, "These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (Emerson, Self-Reliance, 1967). This emphasizes how individuality and social cohesiveness within a group are intricately related, which makes the voices of independence more difficult to notice by the individual. It implies that a community made up of many individuals thrives when there is an ongoing cycle of

service and contribution, in which each individual actively uses their special abilities and resources to help others. This focus on personal agency is consistent with some sociological and philosophical viewpoints that emphasize the inherent worth of every individual as a self-sufficient being with the ability to give and receive in the social realm.

2.2 Emerson' Call for Non-Conformity and Independence

According to Emerson, a dynamic process of religious growth culminated in his own distinct vision of pure Theism, which was sparked by the Protestant Reformation. He contends that the stress Calvinism placed on a person's connection with God planted the roots for Unitarianism's eventual challenge to established hierarchies. The final result of this developing dialectic is Emerson's favored Theistic paradigm, which is defined by an immediate and direct experience related to the divine (Emerson, 1883).

The Transcendentalist movement advocated "the private state" as a means of advancing individual freedom because it saw the American Revolution and the Protestant Reformation as historical preconditions. This resulted from their conviction that literature had a special capacity to spread their message of emancipation and that Americans had to be freed from custom and authority (Thoreau, 1973).

Although close relationships certainly make our lives better, (S.R, 2013) suggests that people have an inbuilt need to feel like they belong to a bigger community. Rather than being harmful to personal identity, this broader societal structure actually strengthens it since it gives us the crucial framework for understanding our uniqueness. We can only fully understand the distinctive characteristics that make each of us stand out from the crowd when we examine ourselves within the context of a group.

2.3 Finding Individuality in the Community

Inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson's article "Self-Reliance," Serah Welborn describes in her essay her journey of self-discovery and self-reliance that has transformed her. Emerson's advice encouraged her, who was living in a religious environment, to follow her own views and question social standards. This gave her direction and comfort. She bravely dropped out of college, moved to a small town, and simplified her lifestyle—all the while battling her own uncertainties and anxieties. She gained a strong sense of self from Emerson's teachings, which enabled her to go back to school and follow her own path in spite of opposition from her family and community (Welborn, 2017).

Emerson used his essay "Nature," published in 1836, to make a strong case for the Transcendentalist literary and philosophical movement. This school of thought promoted the idea that people are inherently good and value experience and intuition over tradition and inflexible reasoning. Nature was adored as a heavenly source of inspiration and a conduit to the transcendental, realm beyond the physical world, because of its astounding immensity and uncontrolled passion. Emerson was eager to create a literature and culture that was uniquely American, together with his fellow Transcendentalists. They promoted independence, self-sufficiency, and a profound respect for the natural environment. They believed that America had the capacity to lead the world in growth and optimism and that its literature should act as a mirror reflecting these values.

3. The Significance of Learners' Autonomy

The idea of learner autonomy is no longer on the sidelines; rather, it is revolutionizing the field of language acquisition. Leading academics and an abundance of evidence support the compelling conclusion that the key to mastering a language is to embrace

autonomy and give up the position of the passive student. For (Hurd, S, Beaven, T, Ortega, A, 2001), Learner autonomy is a fundamental concept that is driving a radical transformation in the language learning environment. The overwhelming body of research, as supported by academics, shows that learners may achieve language mastery by eschewing the role of passive receivers and adopting an autonomous approach Plenty of advantages for learning arise when one embraces autonomy.

Learners are discovering their own strategies for learning languages that align with their interests and objectives, as opposed to adhering to conventional classroom approaches. Due to increased motivation and self-awareness among learners, this self-directed method is producing superior results. They are able to concentrate on the areas in which they want improvement and design their own special route to fluency, akin to creating a masterpiece of individualized language learning (Sara C., 1995)

By an internal motivation, self-directed learners actively seek out chances to interact with the language outside of the classroom. This sense of empowerment causes individuals to become more self-aware and alert, tracking their development like expert mappers and continuously improving their learning techniques. By highlighting their individual strengths and shortcomings, this tailored method enables individuals to narrow in on areas that need development with extreme precision. Their experience becomes a customized tapestry, crafted with thoughtful effort and adapted to meet their own requirements (William, 1996).

In a community made up of discrete parts, every individual actively participates in contributions or services aimed at other people. The underlying reality of human autonomy—that is, the fact that

every person lives as a unique entity and engages in giving and receiving within the social fabric—is highlighted by its reciprocal nature (Cavell, 1988).

3.1 Self-Reliance and Learner's Autonomy

It can be deduced that Kant's viewpoints can be relevant to the language-learning community through their belief in the strength of independence. As Kant believed that reason was the way to morality, so too do modern theories of language acquisition hold that real mastery occurs when students take initiative and create their own learning experiences. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" connects these concepts: follow your instincts and pave your own path. This is similar to learner autonomy, which substitutes learning experiences catered to each individual's interests and passions for preset classes and rote memorization.
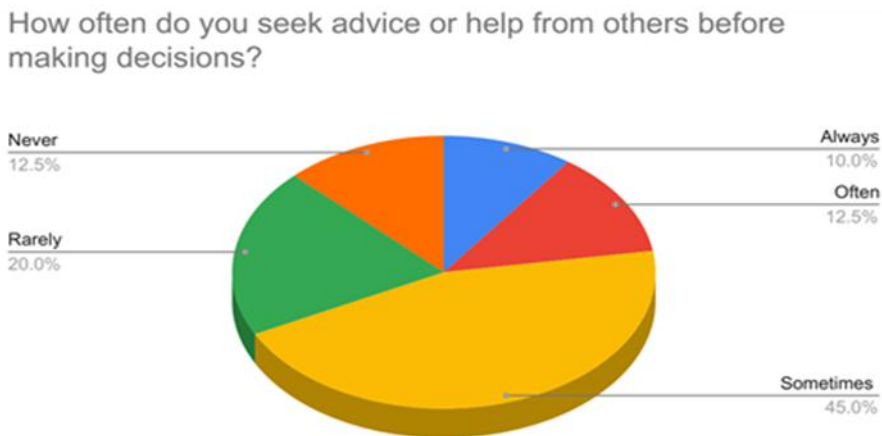
In "Self-Reliance", Emerson presents a daring and appealing case. It seems like a strong appeal for originality and authenticity to value "gleams of light" over social voices and bodies of knowledge. But there are several difficulties with it. He argues that the secret to living the ideal human life is to put one's own natural insights— symbolized by "gleams of light" and "spontaneous impressions"— above one's own body of knowledge and other people's opinions, even in the face of tremendous external pressure. He contends that this inner insight is the cornerstone of independence, directing us even when "the whole cry of voices is on the other side" (Emerson, Self-Reliance, 1967).

This supports the claim made by Hurd et al. (2001) that learner autonomy is a key component of the language learning revolution rather than just an incidental idea. Learners internalize the language more deeply and develop true mastery rather than just memorization when they give up the passive role of a "receiver" and actively

participate in the process. This is further supported by the large body of research they mention, which shows a direct correlation between improved language competency and learner autonomy (Murphy, 2007).

4. Description and Analysis of the Questions of the Survey

Figure (1): Seeking Advice from Others

How often do you seek advice or help from others before making decisions?

Never 12.5%

Always 10.0%

Often 12.5%

Rarely 20.0%

Sometimes 45.0%

Source: Students' Survey, Question 1

According to the data, students appear to be finding a good mix between making decisions on their own and asking for advice. simply a tiny percentage (12.5%) regularly seek guidance, but over half (57.5%) rarely or never depend simply on their own judgment. This trend shows the growth of autonomy together with an awareness of the possible advantages of cooperation and criticism. The chart, which maintains a balance between autonomy and collaboration, implies that students understand the importance of both autonomous thought and a variety of viewpoints.

Figure (2): Comfort with trying new things

How comfortable are you with taking risks and trying new things?
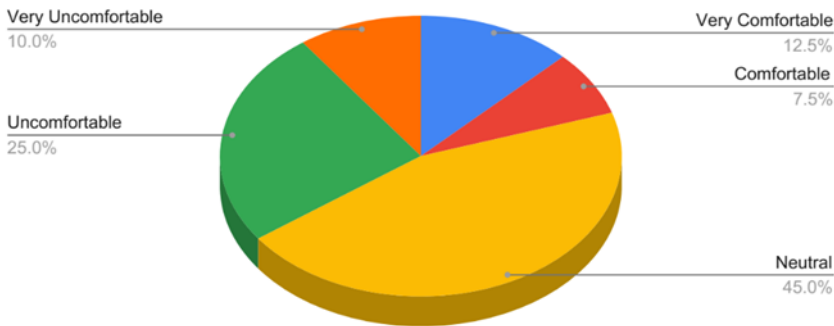
Source: Students' Survey, Question 2

The above pie chart illustrates a variety of viewpoints among the participants and provides a useful window into student opinions regarding taking risks. Forty percent of respondents clearly had no trouble navigating unfamiliar areas with confidence. This group represents a spirit of curiosity and a readiness to push limits, and it is joined by the extra 26% of individuals who willingly welcome such challenges. A significant portion of students, or 14%, take a more cautious approach, carefully balancing the risks involved in an endeavor against any possible advantages. 10% exhibit a cautious attitude, suggesting that thoughtful consideration and encouraging words are required.

Figure (3): Depending on others' opinions

How often do you find yourself relying on the opinions of others to make decisions?

| Never | 12.5% |
Rarely	20.0%
Often	17.5%
Sometimes	50.0%
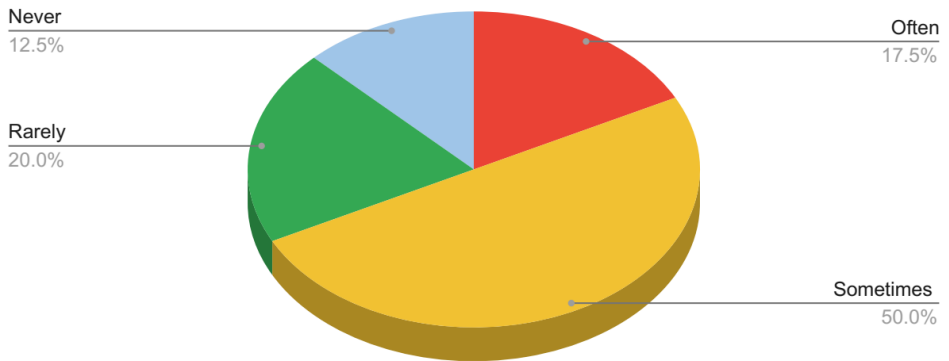
Source: Students' Survey, Question 3

An interesting overview of how students include others in their decision-making processes is provided by the pie chart. 50% of them occasionally use other people's perspectives, indicating a measured approach where outside information enhances particular situations or verifies their own ideas. 12.5% of participants never ask for outside advice, indicating that they trust their own judgment and prefer to make decisions on their own. However, 17.5% frequently depend on others, which may be a sign of a desire for cooperation, comfort, or shared accountability. In addition, 20% of them rarely involve others, indicating a selective approach wherein other opinions are sought out under particular conditions while retaining personal liberty in their decisions. This complex image highlights the various reasons people

seek out or resist outside advice, demonstrating a variety of elements beyond the straightforward choice between independence and conformity.

Figure (4): Ability to keep positive attitudes in difficulties

How able are you to maintain a positive attitude, even in difficult circumstances?

Neutral
25.0%

Very Able
20.0%

Able
55.0%
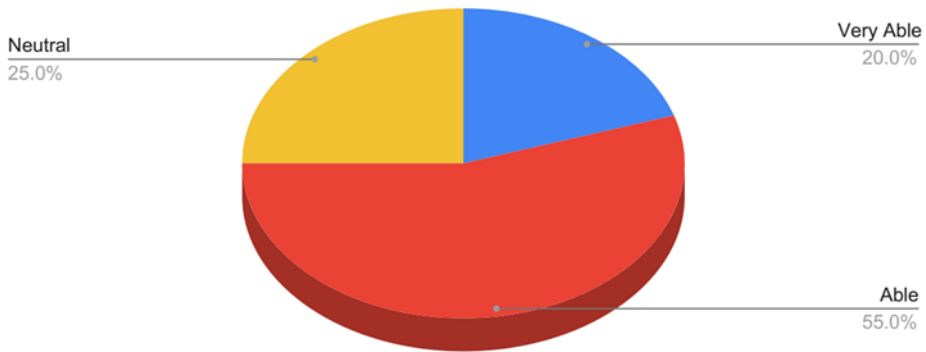
Source: Students' Survey, Question 4

The responses of the students, as indicated in the pie chart above, show an overall capability of facing difficult circumstances and keeping a positive attitude. The majority, 75% of the students, are either able or very able to maintain a positive attitude when facing difficulties, which reflects their willingness to take responsibility for dealing with different situations without complaining or resorting to others. Therefore, Instructors ought to provide students with the skills and strategies they need to deal with challenging circumstances. It is also advisable to motivate them to engage in activities that foster problem-solving and resilience. Lastly, it's important to provide students with the chance to think back on their experiences and share

them with their peers.

Figure (5): Handling criticism and feedback

How well do you handle criticism and feedback from others?

Very Well • Well • Neutral • Poorly
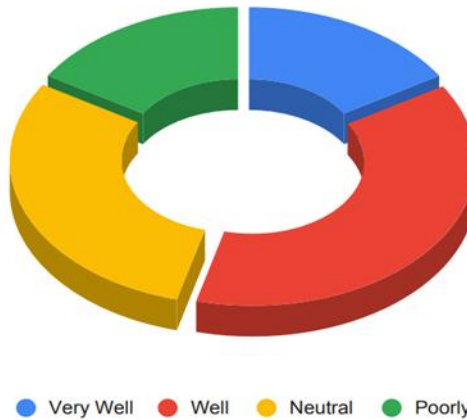
Source: Students' Survey, Question 5

The pie chart shows the participants' attitudes towards criticism or comments from others. 55% respond positively to the circumstances in which they are criticized or receive negative feedback, and 45% are either neutral or respond poorly when criticized. This shows that while many people use criticism to improve constructively for personal development, others find the process difficult and may get defensive or angry.

5. Discussion and Findings

The results of this survey show that students use a variety of strategies while making decisions, trying out new things, and getting feedback that is critical of them. This diversity most likely results from a combination of elements, such as individual personality characteristics, cultural upbringings, and the distinctive fabric of life events. Also, challenges and sustains an optimistic attitude when faced with obstacles. This implies that a considerable proportion of students have an admirable degree of resilience and flexibility.

Notwithstanding these positive trends, other students reported feeling uneasy about trying new things and showed difficulty constructively interpreting negative criticism. This insight is important because it suggests that these people may have a tendency to avoid obstacles and give up on their attempts too soon when faced with difficulty. Therefore, it can be argued that the students' attitudes in gaining the knowledge and self-assurance necessary to take charge of their education and make their own decisions can be influenced positively by studying the principles of "Self-Reliance" as it can yield favorable outcomes. Interacting with "Self-Reliance" gives students the ability to set off on a life-changing path of self-discovery. They develop a sense of inner confidence, make better decisions, and accept the lessons that come with every decision, both successful and unsuccessful, by acknowledging their inherent strengths and shortcomings as well as their self-awareness and being responsible, thus, for their actions. The significant independence from conformity sharpens their minds, triggers their intellectual interest, and promotes their determination, strengthening their will to overcome obstacles in life with courage and resilience.

6. CONCLUSION

Teachers play a vital role in helping students develop autonomy and self-assertion. Teachers may assist students in identifying their strengths and shortcomings and provide opportunities for them to make their own decisions and learn from their mistakes by encouraging them to read and discuss Emerson's essay. This aids students in gaining the knowledge and self-assurance they need in their lives. Emerson's essay can support students in strengthening their sense of self-awareness, resilience, adaptability, openness to new experiences, and self-confidence in addition to encouraging autonomy and decision-making. Both the general well-being and academic achievement of students depend on these attributes.

Based on these findings, teachers should provide students with the necessary capabilities to be active and autonomous learners. In addition, they may enable students to face obstacles with confidence and resiliency by giving them the opportunity to make decisions on their own, encouraging them to take calculated risks, giving them constructive criticism, and teaching them good critique management. Emerson's essay on self-reliance is therefore a useful tool for teachers who wish to assist their students in gaining the abilities and self-assurance necessary to succeed in school and beyond.

7. Bibliography

Cavell, Stanley. *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 1988.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-Reliance.* Ney York, 1967.

—. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson.* Cambridge, Cambridge: Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1883.

Hurd, S, Beaven, T, Ortega, A . "Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: Issues ." *System, 29(3)*, 2001: 341-355.

Kemp, John. *The Philosophy of Kant.* St Augustine's Press, 2001.

Murphy, Linda. "Supporting learner autonomy: theory and practice in a distance learning context." *Learner Autonomy 10: Integration and support*, 2007: 72–92.

S.R., Najeeb Sabitha. "Learner Autonomy in Language Learning." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 70*, 2013: 1238-1242.

Sara, Cottrell. "Readiness for Autonomy: Investigating Learner Beliefs." *System 23(2)*, 1995: 195-205.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden.* New York: Amsco School Publications, New York, 1973.

Welborn. "Learning Self-Reliance with Ralph Waldo Emerson." *Agora Vol. 26, Article 4*, 2017.

William, Littlewood. "Autonomy": An anatomy and a framework." *System Volume 24, Issue 4*, 1996: 427-435.