EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Learner Autonomy in the 21st Century Algerian Secondary Classrooms

Belmekki Asma✴ [1], Baghzou Sabrina [2]

[1] Abbes Laghrour University, Khenchela (Algeria)
belmekki.asma@univ-khenchela.dz
[2] Abbes Laghrour University, Khenchela (Algeria)
baghzou.sabrina@univ-khenchela.dz

Abstract

Over the last few years, traditional classroom instruction has been gradually replaced by learner-centered approaches that place students at the center of the learning process. The drive towards these approaches has emphasized learner autonomy in language learning. Therefore, teachers have to aid students in becoming self-directed to meet their needs. However, Secondary school teachers face challenges in implementing learner autonomy in their classrooms. Thus, the fundamental purpose of this descriptive study is to investigate EFL teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy and shed light on the challenges they encounter. The findings revealed that although teachers know what learner autonomy entails, there are obstacles to implementing it in their classrooms.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy; Algerian Secondary Education; Teachers; Perceptions; Challenges.

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✴ *Corresponding Author*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, teaching approaches primarily focus on helping students become active individuals who participate in lifetime learning because of their capacity to exercise control over every condition and successfully meet the requirements of every given circumstance. In learner-centered teaching and learning, students have an active role in the EFL classroom. However, while traditional techniques encourage teachers to shift their roles from information providers to facilitators, students must be more independent to develop a sense of responsibility for customizing their learning experience. For example, when learners are unaware of their duties in a language class, they will be unable to learn the language effectively, and the class hours can quickly sap learners' excitement and foster a negative attitude.

In EFL contexts, students always respond in accordance with their actual abilities. For the teacher to change a student's current knowledge into explicit awareness of becoming more confident and mature, the student must demonstrate this awareness. This maturity enables students to conduct a thorough analysis of each step he or she takes in order to carry out educational activities (Begum, 2019).

It has been stated that learning autonomy helps improve students' language acquisition quality and better prepares them for learning throughout their lives. (Palfreyman, 2003; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Furthermore, this type of learning allows students to make the most of learning opportunities both within and outside of the classroom setting. Indeed, learner autonomy, motivation, and instructor and learner accountability are interconnected. Thus, fostering learner autonomy within the language classroom presents a challenge for teachers and students (Chan, 2003; Al-Shaqsi, 2009).

In Algeria, the competency-based approach (CBA) was implemented in 2002 into the educational system at all levels to allow students to put what they have learned in class into practice and to get them ready to be competent and autonomous. This reform stresses the role of the student through a learner-centered approach, which empowers students to take

responsibility for managing their learning and improves their EFL skills. Consequently, learner autonomy is emphasized in the teaching-learning procedure (Nadia, 2011). However, Algerian EFL learners are still overly dependent on their instructors. In many situations, they immediately seek the teacher for the correct answers rather than attempting to figure it out on their own. Teachers are challenged by students who are hesitant and passive. Then, it is vital to identify the obstacles to provide a guide for EFL teachers to improve their English teaching and assist students in becoming independent and autonomous. Therefore, this paper contributes to a greater comprehension of the challenges associated with fostering autonomy in the language learning of EFL teachers and describes the teachers' views and practices.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, numerous scholars and researchers have focused on learner autonomy and have given various definitions to the term. According to Holec (1981), learner autonomy is the ability to decide what to learn and how. David Little (1991) also defines autonomy as a situation in which the learner is entirely accountable for all decisions pertaining to their learning and the implementation of those decisions.

Autonomous learners are those who are actively involved in their own educational process. (Begum, 2019). Learner autonomy is a dynamic process in which students are expected to have increased responsibility and the capacity to assume responsibility for their learning (Bashir, 2014). Autonomous learners learn independently and decide their learning direction. As a result, they have opportunities to assume responsibility for their education.

Benson & Voller (2014) distinguish between "self-directed learning" and "learner autonomy," saying that the former is the capacity of learners to engage in learning, whereas the latter is the unique feature connected with such a capacity. This paper defines learner autonomy as the capacity for students to study wholly or partly on their own, making their own choices about what to learn and how without a teacher's aid.

Various researchers state that learner autonomy can be achieved through conscious knowledge of the learning process (Pichugova, Stepura, & Pravosudov, 2016). Learner autonomy, defined as the capacity to direct one's education, implies that the student makes independent decisions regarding his or her learning. Consequently, learner autonomy must be related to learning decisions (Usuki, 2007). This also indicates that learners are responsible for determining their educational objectives and needs, a form of goal-oriented behavior. Of course, educators must provide help, guidance, and support to students as their abilities progress (Ikonen, 2013).

Moreover, knowledge about the students' learning styles and strategies helps them make choices, organize how to move forward with a learning task, evaluate their performance and progress, and resolve their problems (Pichugova et al.,2016). The authors further explain that learners' attitudes and motivation have much to do with how well a learning activity works. The more the learner perceives that he or she is performing well, the greater the desire to perform even better. Much effort, time, and energy are required to acquire a second language, and motivation and a positive attitude are also crucial to this process. However, teachers must be careful and avoid negative feedback, affecting students' self-esteem because a lack of self-esteem might cause the student to doubt his or her capacity as a learner or even believe that they cannot learn appropriately.

To foster autonomy in a language class, teachers should be aware of their roles in each context. According to Little (2007), developing learner autonomy begins with teachers involving their students in the learning process and giving them ownership of the learning goals. In addition, teachers must encourage their students to reflect on their own learning and the language they are studying. Teachers must also encourage their students to use the target language in meaningful ways, including using language for reflection and evaluation.

Camilleri (1999) identifies three essential characteristics for teachers to effectively engage their learners and make them autonomous: a manager, a resource person, and a counselor. First, a teacher must be a facilitator, organizer, and resource person who encourages and provides feedback to

students. In other words, rather than acting as a gatekeeper, a teacher acts as a facilitator, a collaborator, and an initiator. This means teachers should have a good idea of the most likely paths their pupils can take and their repercussions. In this case, providing the information is not his/her job. In addition, teachers should help students become aware of various tactics and options for learning, such as teaching them about different learning styles.

Researchers from many nations have examined teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy recently. Borg and Al-busaidi (2012) examined instructors' positive theoretical attitudes toward learner autonomy and their judgments on its practicability. They asked teachers what hinders learner autonomy. Their study found that students lack enthusiasm and independent learning experience. Institutional constraints like a predetermined curriculum hindered learner autonomy.

Al Shaqsi (2009) investigated the opinions of English teachers in Oman regarding the autonomy of their students. The findings revealed that teachers evaluated all student behaviors favorably. The three highest-scored learner actions were asking the teacher to clarify ambiguous situations, express their thoughts on classroom themes, and correctly use their dictionaries. The female participants chose "Express their opinions on classroom themes," whereas their male counterparts prioritized "Ask the teacher to clarify when anything is unclear." Female instructors believed their students possessed a more independent personality than male instructors.

In the context of Turkish education, Balçikanli (2010) explored the beliefs of students and teachers regarding learner autonomy. According to the questionnaire results, the participants regarded autonomy as crucial in practically all domains. Students were involved in choosing materials and their usage, setting the objectives, and evaluating their work.

Similarly, other studies investigated Algerian EFL teachers' views on promoting learner autonomy in the language class. One study by Boudouaia et al. (2022) examined the beliefs of (129) EFL teachers about learner autonomy. The study's results revealed that teachers perceive

student autonomy from psychological and technical perspectives, implying independence, choice, and collaboration. The ambition of teachers to engage students in decision-making and assist them in developing learning-how-to-learn abilities exceeds their practicability.

Another study by Kheira (2017) investigated teachers' roles and learners' readiness to be autonomous in language learning. It also aimed at exploring whether teachers are well-informed to support student autonomy. This study emphasizes the necessity to incorporate learner autonomy into the language curriculum as a systematic approach focused on increasing awareness, inspiring students, and training them and teachers towards autonomy.

In addition, Hadi (2020) conducted a descriptive study using a questionnaire to investigate teachers' beliefs and identify the strategies for fostering autonomy in language acquisition. The findings indicated that neither the textbook nor the evaluation system plays an integral role in fostering learner autonomy.

The studies mentioned above focused on the perspectives of EFL teachers regarding fostering learner autonomy in EFL classes. However, research on teachers' problems and challenges when promoting learner autonomy was not profoundly studied. Thus, this research attempts to cover this gap by studying both secondary school teachers' perceptions of implementing learner autonomy and the challenges they face when doing so.

3. Methodology

This descriptive and exploratory study aimed to examine teachers' views on practicing learner autonomy in their classrooms and the obstacles they encounter. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What do EFL teachers think of learner autonomy in secondary schools?
2. What challenges do these teachers face in implementing learner autonomy in 21st-century learning?

To explore the issues of promoting learner autonomy in EFL secondary school English classes in Algeria, we have relied on a questionnaire distributed to twenty (20) English teachers during a seminar

to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The participants have full-time teaching positions at different secondary schools in Khenchela, Algeria.

The questionnaire contained closed-ended and open-ended investigative questions to achieve the objective of the present study. The participants' teaching experience ranged from one to twenty years, as shown in Figure 1. More than half of the participants were experienced teachers with more than six years of teaching experience. This means that most respondents participated at least in a course, training, or seminar on learner autonomy.
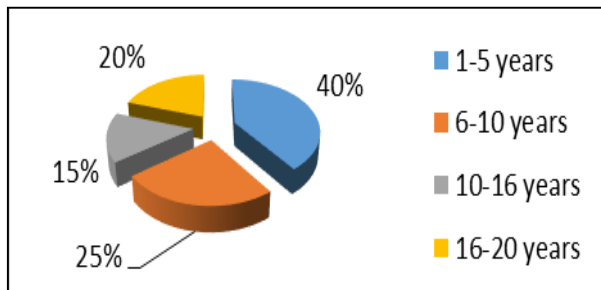

Fig.1. Teachers' Experience

The questionnaire comprised three main parts; the first part investigates the teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the concept of learner autonomy in EFL contexts. The second deals with teachers' difficulties when promoting learner autonomy among their students. Finally, the last part presents some strategies teachers see effective in fostering learner autonomy in the Algerian school.

4. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Teachers' Perceptions of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms

According to Table 1, all respondents state that learner autonomy refers to students' awareness of their learning, which may include understanding their learning objectives, the various approaches used, and the knowledge

content. In addition, teachers highlight the necessity for independent students to participate in decisions regarding learning content and instructional techniques actively. The participants were under the impression that learner autonomy and learner independence were synonymous terms. Contrarily, most respondents (80%) disagree with the premise that autonomous learners were completely independent of the teacher; more specifically, they did not believe that complete freedom could contribute to the growth of learner autonomy. Besides, 90% of the teachers questioned stated that motivation is key to successfully implementing learner autonomy, which may lead one to conclude that unmotivated settings may hinder participants from increasing their autonomy. Finally, almost all participants believe that students' ability to become independent learners strongly correlates with their confidence and self-esteem. Then, teachers had better recognize and reward good work and give students active roles whenever possible. Most importantly, teachers should avoid overcorrecting their students' mistakes as this may harm their confidence.

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions of promoting learner autonomy

Item (N=20)	Yes	No
Learner autonomy means that learners are cognizant of their own learning (e.g., defining goals, designing techniques, and deciding content of materials)	100% (20)	00%
Learner autonomy means that students are actively involved in making decisions about a variety of goals, content and instructional practices	100% (20)	00%
In order to be autonomous, learners must be able to establish learning objectives, provide content for instructional materials, and develop learning tasks)	95% (19)	5% (1)
Learner autonomy necessitates complete independence from the teacher	20% (4)	80% (16)
Motivation plays a significant role in promoting learner autonomy	90% (18)	10% (2)
Confident learners find it easy to develop learner autonomy than those who are less confident	95% ((19)	5% (1)

4.2. Teachers' challenges in promoting learner autonomy among their EFL learners

As shown in figure 2 below, 30 % of the respondents state that it is usually recommended that they adhere to the course's requirements and instructional objectives as closely as possible. Consequently, they have few chances to engage students in the development of the curriculum. This indicates that the learners' contribution is neglected. Approximately 15% of individuals who participated in this study also reported that pupils lack the motivation to study alone and become independent. Some teachers used to assign pupils to read short stories and summarize them, but none of them ever accomplished it. Others used online learning during the covid 19 pandemic to post interesting websites and articles. However, none of the students checked the websites or even read the articles. As a result, teachers do not assist students in becoming autonomous. About 10 % of the informants stated that using English outside the classroom is limited, and the language is not used beyond the classroom as a communication medium. So, learners find it difficult to learn alone in such a context. Another group of teachers (15%) argues that teachers lack essential resources; the only educational resource available is the textbook. Therefore, they cannot foster learner autonomy. Another challenge stated by teachers is the lack of learner autonomy experience. In Algeria, teachers use the teaching methods they learned in training courses. Therefore, they have minimal Learner Autonomy experience and find it challenging to practice. Finally, participants agree that language learners in Algeria depend entirely on their teachers because they lack basic English understanding. That is why low-achieving students struggle to become self-sufficient.
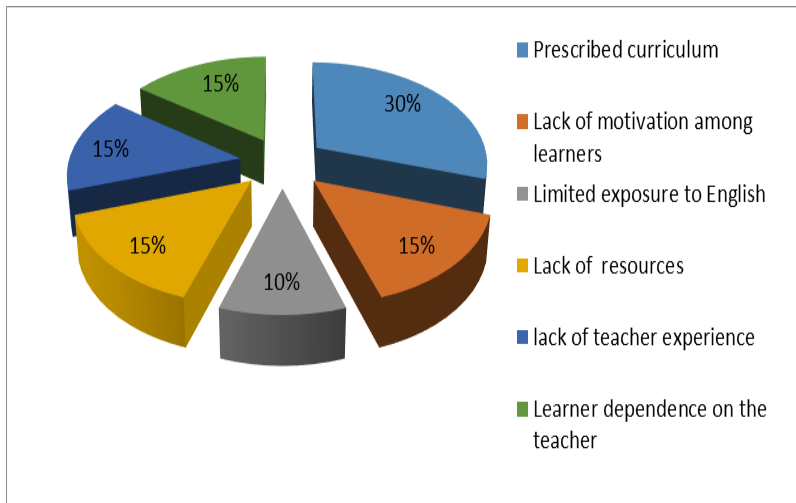
Fig.2. Teachers' challenges in promoting Learner Autonomy

4.3. Teachers' suggestions/ recommendations to promote class interaction and FL speaking

As shown in Figure 3 below, the participants (20%) see that the type of activities teachers give students play a significant role in fostering learner autonomy. Teachers thought that motivated learners could efficiently work independently. Therefore, teachers should begin by planning for interesting tasks that motivate learners to be more autonomous. The activities should also cater to diverse language levels of learners. In the same vein, 23% of the teachers questioned believe that giving more out-of-class assignments to students helps develop autonomy because autonomous learners should hold responsibility for their learning. Besides, out-of-class assignments help learners use problem-solving and critical thinking skills to find solutions to issues they face, which will help them plan and monitor their performance. Moreover, teachers encourage the integration of both cooperative learning and project-based learning as they motivate students to learn, encourage social and academic interaction, and reward successful group work. Working on group projects helps students improve decision-making skills and facilitate peer communication. They develop autonomy through delegating tasks and allocating different roles and responsibilities for the

production of their projects. This also helps students learn how to self-monitor and self-evaluate their progress and final product, as well as learn more about the reasons for any mistakes they may have made. Finally, teachers believe that integrating ICTs can help promote learner autonomy. Therefore, teachers in language classes should give students various options for integrating technology. For example, teachers may ask students to search for and find the information or papers they require on the internet and read documents on their phones or computers. Automatic error detection (grammar and spelling check) can also improve writing without the teacher's interference. In addition, educators should urge students to seek assistance and help online using social media pages, forums, YouTube, and other sites that provide video training. This help students to search for information or complete an assignment without the teachers' assistance. Student motivation and self-reliance would be enhanced through participation in this variety of activities inside and outside the classroom.
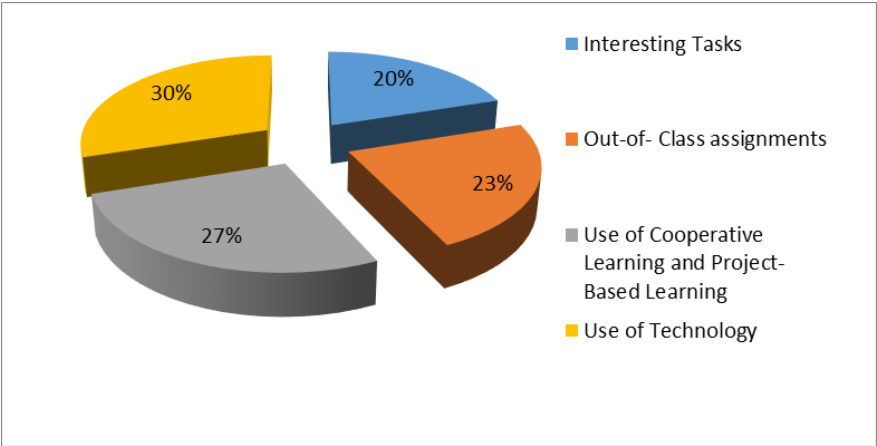

Fig.2. Strategies to Promote Learner Autonomy

5. CONCLUSION

Research on student autonomy in English language learning continues to be a hot topic in academic circles worldwide. In today's world

of language learning, teachers are no longer lecturing their students but rather encouraging them to learn on their own. Instead of lecturers, teachers are increasingly serving as facilitators, advising rather than lecturing, resulting in students becoming self-directed learners.

Despite several limitations, such as time constraints and a small sample size, this study offers important data. Participants comprehend the concept of learner autonomy. They define learner autonomy as the ability to choose how and what to learn while tracking progress. However, encouraging learner autonomy has proven difficult for participants, leading to discrepancies such as lack of resources, teacher experience in learner autonomy, lack of time, prescribed curriculum, and learner dependence. In conclusion, participants conceptually acknowledge learner autonomy but struggle to put it into reality.

Teachers can provide all the essential language input, but students must be willing to contribute for learning to occur. Moreover, the capacity of pupils to perform in school is strongly dependent on their sense of personal accountability.

We can conclude by saying that raising students' autonomy is not an easy task. To change the direction of existing trends in teaching and learning, there needs to be a shared commitment from both instructors and students. Therefore, in order to promote learner autonomy, we suggest the following: first, EFL teachers should understand learner autonomy's importance and gradually enable students to become self-sufficient. Rather than telling students what to do, they should encourage them to do it themselves. They should also learn more about learner autonomy to assess students' levels of autonomy and assist them in growing it. Additionally, teachers with inspectors should conduct learner autonomy workshops for both instructors and students. Finally, educational institutions and schools must embrace the learner autonomy model. They should also assist instructors and students in becoming independent and encourage them to play significant roles in selecting resources, establishing objectives, and suggesting suitable evaluation processes.

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