

## Difficulties of Developing Learner Autonomy in the Algerian ESP Context: The Case of ESSA-Alger Students

صعوبات تطوير استقلالية المتعلم في سياق اللغة الانجليزية كلغة تخصص: طلاب المدرسة العليا للعلوم التطبيقية بالجزائر أنموذجا

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Received: 23- 01-2023

Accepted: 18-04-2023

### Abstract:

This study addresses learner autonomy-related issue within an ESP context in an Algerian engineering institution. It takes departure from a previous study (Selama, 2018), which reported a little attention being given to autonomous learning by ESP students. Based on the aforementioned study results, it has been argued through this paper that developing learner autonomy is conditioned by a set of factors. In line with this, the existing literature has identified a broad range of personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural factors which have a substantial impact—both positive and negative—on student's life-long learning skills. Accordingly, the present research sets out to investigate what may lead students to have such attitudes towards autonomous learning. To achieve research's goal, the targeted students were surveyed through a questionnaire. Based on the obtained results, some recommendations are made in order to overcome learner autonomy constraints within and beyond the ESP context.

**Keywords:** ESP; Learner autonomy; perceptions; constraints

### ملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة القضايا المتعلقة باستقلالية المتعلم في سياق اللغة الانجليزية كلغة تخصص، اعتمادا على دراسة سابقة (Selama ، 2018) ، والتي أشارت إلى القليل من الاهتمام بالتعلم الذاتي من قبل طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة تخصص بالمدرسة العليا للعلوم التطبيقية بالجزائر. وفقاً لذلك، يهدف البحث الحالي إلى استكشاف ما قد يقود الطلاب إلى اتخاذ مثل هذه المواقف تجاه التعلم المستقل. لتحقيق هدف البحث ، تم توزيع استبيان على الطلاب المستهدفين بناءً على النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها، فقد تبين من خلال هذه الورقة أن تطوير استقلالية المتعلم مشروط بمجموعة من العوامل الشخصية والمؤسسية والثقافية التي لها تأثير كبير - إيجابي وسلبي - على مهارات التعلم مدى الحياة لدى الطالب، وعليه فقد تم تقديم بعض التوصيات من أجل التغلب على قيود استقلالية المتعلم. كلمات مفتاحية: اللغة الانجليزية كلغة تخصص، استقلالية المتعلم، قيود، تصورات.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

During the last decades of the twentieth century, an intensified interest in students' autonomous learning skills emerged. One important reason for this is that a serious shift to a learner-centered educational philosophy allows developing students' academic and professional skills. Therefore, helping students become life-long learners is increasingly recognized as a primary goal of tertiary education.

In Algeria, the need to train university students on facing the socio-economic competition in an autonomous way called for innovative pedagogical models likely to develop, among students, citizenship and the intellectual competence in order to integrate into local and global professional environment. The implementation of the new pedagogical models for university degrees has required a renewal of the teaching/learning methodologies and the evaluation processes.

According to the Amziane and Guendouzi (2011), the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, autonomous learning is part of the intellectual capacities to be developed in students across curriculum. The insertion of autonomous learning in all disciplines aims to fill a gap observed among college students. The authors explain that within the introduction of the LMD system, universities seek to achieve the appropriate levels of excellence for optimal academic training, thus guaranteeing the professional training of students. For this reason, the main objective of higher education is to create opportunities that promote the learning of highly capable students.

Though it is widely accepted that developing students' life-long learning skills is an important goal of education; however, there appears to be many constraints to achieve this goal. Nunan (1997) writes: "the extent to which autonomy can be developed will be constrained by a broad range of personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural factors" (p. 203). This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the specific limits as well as the conditions and issues associated with the development of autonomous learning skills among Algerian ESP students.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The importance of Autonomous Learning Skills for the Engineer**

The widespread and vast developments of the 21st century have been accompanied by the presentation of intellectual patterns and theories and the production of modern science and technology. One of the new achievements of this century is emphasis on learning strategies, especially in the field of

engineering studies.

Autonomous learning is a relatively crucial to be developed amongst future engineers. In this type of education, student engagement in decision making process is considered as principle educational approach. The primary goal of engineering education is creating a learning atmosphere which favors student-centered learning methods.

In this type of training, knowledge transmission is diminished, and students can analyze, evaluate, and interpret the material depending on their intellectual skills. Accordingly, in this paper, autonomous learning has been regarded as a reply to the interdisciplinary nature of ESP course and to its teaching/learning challenges in connection with theories, learning styles and strategies, and approaches which can fulfill the academic and professional needs of Algerian future engineers. However, there are many circumstances that are perceived as constraints to developing autonomous learning skills among ESP students.

Student-centered pedagogy is a teaching/learning process in which students are actively involved, i.e. they select the content they want to learn and use personal perspectives and approaches to learn it and, finally, self-evaluate the knowledge they have acquired (Holec, 1981, p.3). Life-long learning skills help the engineer make the right technical decision and provide the best solutions for technical problems based on his/her own intellect.

## **2.2 Previous Studies**

Given that teaching/learning process and influential factors are mutually related, several studies are globally carried out to reveal challenges preventing the development of students' autonomous learning skills (Nunan, 1997; Benson & Voller, 1997; Benson and Winnie, 1998; Musarat and Ayesha, 2018). Although these studies are carried out in different contexts with different research methods, their results share multiple barriers in common: socio-cultural, technical, psychological, and political, among many others.

Benson and Winnie (1998) investigated learners' views about autonomous learning. The researchers analyzed learners' beliefs from, socio-cultural, technical, psychological, and political perspectives. The technical issues are concerned with the physical setting in the learning environment, while the socio-cultural conceptions are related to the social interactions and relationships that are inherent in the society. The psychological perspectives refer to the intellectual readiness that learners possess. The presence or absence of these views can support or hinder the development of learner autonomy.

Drawing on many studies, Musarat and Ayesha (2018, p. 3) highlight the

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following constraints to developing students' autonomous learning skills:

learners' lack of previous experience of autonomous learning, learners' little contact with English outside the classroom, learners' focus on passing tests, lack of incentives among learners, learner dependence on the teacher, learners' proficiency level, lack of learner ability to exploit resources, teacher-learner interaction, teachers' little trust on learner abilities, lack of teacher autonomy, traditional teaching practices, lack of relevant resources for teachers and learners, fixed curriculum, examination system, university entrance exams, lack of time, and educational policies.

These obstacles seem to hinder future engineers from possessing high-level functioning skills for technical decision-making to autonomously deal with complex engineering issues and to professionally identify problems encountered in practice. Therefore, institutions managers and engineer educators need to address this challenge.

### **3. Methodology**

Extensive literature is written about learner autonomy. However, research about students' perceptions of the barriers of developing autonomous learning skills have not emerged, especially in the Algerian ESP context. Thus, the present research will focus mainly the factors that hinder the development of future engineers' autonomous learning skills.

#### **3.1 Population**

This study covered 75 second preparatory year students from the Graduate School of Applied Sciences in Algiers. The sample consists of 23 female students and 52 male students with age range from 20 to 22 years.

#### **3.2 Instrument**

The targeted students were surveyed through a questionnaire. The data collection instrument, i.e., the questionnaire, was introduced to the targeted students with brief information about life-long learning skills and the probable constraints on developing these skills.

The questionnaire is mainly composed of five sections: 1) the significance of autonomous learning; 2) the constraints on autonomous learning in terms of teachers; 3) the constraints on autonomous learning in terms of students; 4) the constraints on autonomous learning in terms of curriculum and materials; and 5) the constraints on autonomous learning in terms of institutional factors.

The five sections are composed of closed-ended questions, for which a five-point Likert scale, where (1) stands for 'strongly agree', (2) for 'agree', (3) for 'neutral', (4) for 'disagree', and (5) for 'strongly disagree'.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Students' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

The targeted students were given five statements about autonomous learning skills and were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

**Table 1.** Students' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

| N | Item   | 1     | 2     | 3    | 4     | 5     |
|---|--|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| 1 | Autonomous learning is needed for developing technical problem solving skills      | 43%   | 29.7% | 6.4% | 18%   | 2.9%  |
| 2 | Autonomous learning skills are needed for the courses to be learned better.        | 37.2% | 34.8% | 9.1% | 11.4% | 7.5%  |
| 3 | Autonomous learning skills allow me to put the acquired knowledge into practice.   | 32.4% | 41.6% | 4.2% | 9.7%  | 12.1% |
| 4 | Learning the content is more important than developing autonomous learning skills. | 4%    | 3%    | 3%   | 70%   | 10%   |
| 5 | There is no need to spend time on developing my learning strategies.               | 9%    | 13.5% | 7.5% | 55%   | 15%   |

The obtained results show that ESP students acknowledge the importance of life-long learning skills. They think that autonomous learning strategies are needed for daily problem solving, learning the content better, and transfer of knowledge between courses. To illustrate, 80 % of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'Learning the content is more important than developing life-long learning skills,' and nearly 70 % disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that 'There is no need to spend time on activities related to autonomous learning.' This may suggest that students would like to emphasize their autonomy clearly in the teaching and learning process rather than expecting them to be developed naturally.

### 4.2 Students' Perceptions of Teacher-Related Constraints on Developing Autonomous Learning Skills

Students were given statements about the teacher-related constraints on improving autonomous learning skills and were asked about the extent to which they would agree or disagree with them.

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**Table 2.** Students’ Perceptions of Teacher-Related Constraints on Developing Autonomous Learning Skills

| N  | Item   | 1     | 2     | 3    | 4     | 5     |
|----|--|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| 6  | Teachers usually use lecturing strategy  | 34.6% | 40.9% | 1%   | 7%    | 16.5% |
| 7  | Tests do not stress autonomous learning skills                                       | 44%   | 39.8% | 0%   | 6.2%  | 10%   |
| 8  | Teachers do not provide sufficient time for individual and collective work in class. | 52.7% | 29.4% | 1.6% | 9.4%  | 6.9%  |
| 9  | Teachers do not have enough time to develop activities on autonomous learning        | 38.6% | 41.2% | 3%   | 11%   | 6.2%  |
| 10 | Teachers are uncomfortable with questions raised by students                         | 56.2% | 14.5% | 2.7% | 17.5% | 9.1%  |

Obtained data show that the majority of the students (82.1%) state that teachers do not provide sufficient time for individual and collective work in class and 75.5% of respondents declared that teachers usually use lecturing strategy. In addition, more than two-thirds of respondents (70.7%) feel that their teachers are uncomfortable with questions raised by students.

**4.3 Students’ Perceptions of Student-Related Constraints on Autonomous Learning Skills**

Participants were also given five statements about student-related Constraints were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with each statement.

**Table 3.** Students’ Perceptions of Student-Related Constraints on Autonomous Learning Skills

| N  | Item                                       | 1     | 2     | 3    | 4     | 5    |
|----|--|-------|-------|------|-------|------|
| 11 | I am afraid of being incorrect             | 47.2% | 33.1% | 0%   | 17%   | 2.7% |
| 12 | In the classroom, teacher is the authority | 17.5% | 51%   | 3%   | 21.4% | 7.1% |
| 13 | Textbook is the main source of information | 53.6% | 35.9% | 2.6% | 4%    | 3.9% |
| 14 | I am not interested in individual work     | 26.6% | 24.4% | 1.3% | 15%   | 33%  |
| 15 | I prefer activities with key answers.      | 33.7% | 59.2% | 2.6% | 3.1%  | 1.4% |

According to the elicited responses, 80.3 % of participating students expressed a degree of anxiety about giving incorrect answers and, therefore, when asked about the instructed activities, 92.9 % of them agreed that the key answer of each question should have provided. More than two-thirds (68.4%) of the surveyed students perceive the teacher as an authority. Similarly, 89.4 of them regard the textbook in same way. Contrary to these, a high number of participating students showed a degree if interest in individual works. Statistically speaking, although more than half (51%) of respondents agreed with the statement “I am not interested in individual work,” almost equal percentage (48%) of them disagreed with it.

Given this results, we may say that the majority of the responses show that students themselves constitute the constraints in improving their life-long learning skills in many ways. The elicited answers suggest lack of readiness from the part of students to explore new perspectives and prefer a structured way of learning by their teachers and that they do not want to spend extra energy to participate in classroom decision-making. Moreover, students do not feel comfortable with the questions or activities that do not have an obvious answer. This may imply that students have a tendency to memorize answers; therefore, they are reluctant in tasks which require creative skills. This may also cause students to perceive the teacher and textbook as the only authority in class.

#### 4.4 Students’ Perceptions of Curriculum-Related Constraints on Autonomous Learning Skills

Students were given nine statements about the curriculum-related constraints on improving life-long learning skills and were asked about the degree of agreement with them.

**Table 4.** Students’ Perceptions of Curriculum-Related Constraints on Autonomous Learning Skills

| N  | Item   | 1     | 2     | 3    | 4     | 5     |
|----|--|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| 16 | Curriculum stresses only the acquisition of simple technical facts, ideas, and concepts. | 52%   | 34.7% | 5.3% | 8%    | 0%    |
| 17 | Curriculum does not give importance to improving my learning and discovery skills        | 61%   | 16%   | 4%   | 13.3% | 6.7%  |
| 18 | Curriculum encourages memorizing knowledge   | 41%   | 32%   | 1.3% | 15%   | 10.7% |
| 19 | Course content is too loaded.  | 54.6% | 25.4% | 0%   | 16%   | 4%    |

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|           |  |       |     |      |      |     |
|-----------|--|-------|-----|------|------|-----|
| <b>20</b> | Textbooks do not provide activities for improving learning strategies. | 49.3% | 14% | 9.3% | 7.4% | 20% |
|-----------|--|-------|-----|------|------|-----|

Results indicate that a majority of informants (86.6 %) highlight that curriculum stresses only the acquisition of simple specialized facts, ideas, and concepts. Therefore, nearly three-fifths (73 %) of students think that curriculum leads to memorization of knowledge. More than three-fifths (77 %) of the students state that curriculum does not give importance to improving their creative skills. In addition, 80 % of the respondents underlined that course content is too loaded. According to more than three-fifths (63.3 %) of the respondents, ESP textbooks do not provide activities for improving learning strategies.

Based on these findings, we can say the majority of the respondents agree with most of the statements underlying the constraints related to curriculum in improving students’ life-long skills. The results indicate that parallel to the students’ perceptions of both teacher-related and student-related constraints, curriculum leads to memorization of knowledge, and it does not stress creative and collaborative learning skills.

**4.5 Students’ Perceptions of Institutional Constraints on Improving Autonomous Learning Skills**

The targeted students were given statements about institutional factors as constraints on improving life-long learning skills and were asked about the express agreement or disagree with them.

**Table 5.** Students’ Perceptions of Institutional Constraints on Improving Autonomous Learning Skills

| <b>N</b>  | <b>Item</b>  | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> |
|-----------|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>21</b> | Administrators do not invite students to participate in decision-making process.       | 70.6%    | 26.8%    | 2.6%     | 0%       | 0%       |
| <b>22</b> | Students do not do projects because they fear administrative disapproval.              | 30%      | 27.3%    | 10.7%    | 20%      | 12%      |
| <b>23</b> | Competition among students has not been established as one of the school’s priorities. | 53.3%    | 21.7%    | 8%       | 17%      | 0%       |
| <b>24</b> | The atmosphere in my school does not support autonomous learning.                      | 52%      | 29.3%    | 4%       | 9.3%     | 5.4%     |



|    |   |       |     |      |       |      |
|----|---|-------|-----|------|-------|------|
| 25 | School's grading system does not take student's learning strategies into account. | 66.7% | 12% | 1.3% | 10.7% | 9.3% |
|----|---|-------|-----|------|-------|------|

Findings indicate that almost all the surveyed students highlighted that they are not involved in decision making process. In addition, three-fourths (75%) of participants stated that improving students' autonomous learning skills, through competition among students, has not been established as one of the school's priorities. Moreover, 81.3% of them underlined that the general atmosphere does not encourage them to do extra curriculum activities. Finally, most students (78.6%) seem to agree that learning strategies are not taken into account by the grading system.

Taking all the factor relating to institution into consideration, the majority of the respondents agree with the statements underlying the constraints related to institutional constraints to the classroom in improving student' autonomous learning skills.

## 5. Discussion

As in many other countries around the globe, the general assumption underlying much of Algeria's support for its engineering institutions is that the future engineer would be equipped with life-long learning skills which will help him/her grow academically and professionally in an autonomous way. Such skills allow the engineer to contribute to a wide range of industries thanks to his/her ability to act professionally about intractable technical problems and to propose creative, science-based solutions.

However, there are many factors which may constrain the development of these skills. In this study, five factors have been investigated. They relate to teacher, student, curriculum, and curriculum. In addition, students' preexisting attitudes have also been regarded as factors influencing the development such skills; therefore, they have been elicited. The participants recognized the importance of self-directed learning skills for academic and professional purposes and thus viewed it as a necessary element of their engineering training program.

An issue the study identifies is the pressure that ESP instructors face in covering content. Another issue is that teachers do not collaborate with students and do not involve them in making decision at the classroom level. Teachers who do not encourage students to take part in classroom decision making process are categorized by Kember and Gow (1994) as knowledge transmission-oriented. These teachers, Kember and Gow explain, are likely to

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view teaching as a process through which experts transmit their knowledge to students. According to Tabulawa (2013), instructors' pedagogical performances and classroom behaviors might be influenced by their backgrounds –both disciplinary and personal– as well as by their beliefs about the purpose of education.

Parallel to teacher-related constraints, participants' responses indicate that students' behaviors do not seem to enhance their life-long learning skills. The fact that most informant students agreed with the statements about student-related constraints may suggest that ESP students have not been oriented towards a learner-centered education. Therefore, institution administrators, teachers as well as curriculum should involve students in the different pedagogical processes; this is known as active learning. Given its importance for strengthening students' autonomous learning skills, Walberg (2010) stresses the act of engaging students in active learning.

Students' perceptions of curriculum-related constraints indicate that there is a mismatch between the curriculum goals and the development of students' learning strategies. Study results also show that ESP textbooks do not foster autonomous learning. A study conducted by Reinders and Balçıkanlı (2011) five English textbooks, commonly used in classrooms worldwide yielded close results. The researchers found that the textbooks evaluated do little to enhance learner autonomy.

In addition, institution educational philosophy is also viewed by participating students as a barrier in developing their life-long learning skills. Students' answers indicate that they have not received institutional support in order to be autonomous learners. In this regard Benson and Voller (1997) caution: "learners who are forced into self-instructional modes of learning without adequate support will tend to rely all the more on the directive element in the materials they use" (p. 9)

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Given its importance for the engineer's academic and professional growth, the attempt along this research is to explore ESP students' perceptions of constraints to learner autonomy. Though overwhelming majority of the participants demonstrated understanding of the concept of critical thinking. However, several barriers that hinder the implementation of critical thinking in were identified.

Results obtained through questionnaire indicate that the constraints on improving ESP students' autonomous learning skills are due to many varying

factors. These constraints can be summarized as follows. First of all, instructors feel more secure with conventional methods such as lecturing in class, which is a teacher-centered pedagogy per excellence. Such traditional classroom practices do not allow student engagement. From the part of students, participating in classroom decision making has not been promoted; therefore, they hesitate in expressing their ideas in classroom. Another factor is the bureaucratic structure in the educational system. Still another factor is the reliance on the textbooks. In brief, those factors can be grouped as teacher-related, student-related, curriculum-related, and institutional as constraints to developing ESP students' autonomous learning skills.

Drawing on students' perceptions, especially those of teaching performances as well as those of institutional support, it seems to be safe to conclude that the approaches to teaching ESP and do not align with the socio-constructivist philosophy of education. Learning in this philosophy is conceptualized as an active process through which students are empowered through a learner-centered pedagogy.

In front of such pedagogical realities, the designers of ESP courses along with those of technical programs in the Algerian engineering intuitions are called to develop a scientific attitude characterized by curiosity, initiation, and autonomous learning among future engineers

This work leads to the following recommendations:

1. To promote autonomous learning among students, the university library must provide resources of ESP.
2. Teachers should evaluate the sites on the internet that the learners consult, and suggest others that are relevant for learning ESP. They can also suggest and recommend other resources that they finds essential (books, audio-visual documents, etc.).
3. It is necessary to encourage exchanges between ESP students, and to encourage their participation in English language events in order to ensure a certain level of social autonomy. Students' scientific clubs must redefine their objectives around interactions. They need to employ English in the proceedings of events they organize.

The present study focused on ESP students' beliefs about constraints to fostering autonomous learning in the Algerian context. It has been delimited to student engineers enrolled in a higher school at Algiers. However, the beliefs of students at other institutions need to be explored, and different results are expected. Moreover, teachers are an important stakeholder of the learning process.

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Therefore, it is highly recommended to probe their perceptions and practices and identify any potential barrier that may hinder their efforts to encourage autonomous learning among their students.

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