The Effect of Expectancy-Value on University Students' Level of Autonomy: The Case Study of Students of English at Si-Lhaoues University Centre

Rida Sellali[1]*, University of Mustapha,(Algeria), redha.sellali@univ-mascara.dz

Habib Yahiaoui[2], University of Mustapha, (Algeria), h.yahiaoui@univ-mascara.dz

Abstract:

The present study aims at investigating the impact of the course-values and graduation expectancies on student's level of autonomy. Using the descriptive method, a survey was distributed on a sample of 90 students via simple random sampling (SRS) within the Department of English at the University Centre of Si-Lhaouas, Barika to gather data on students' perceptions of their expectations, course-values and level of autonomy. The data analysis was carried out through the use of descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, Spearman's correlations and ordinal regression analyses. The findings of this study revealed that course-value and success expectancies are significant predictors of autonomous-learning beliefs and practices.

Keywords: autonomy, course-value, success expectancies, higher education.

Introduction:

Since the execution of major reforms in the Algerian higher education system in September 2004, one of the substantial goals has been to achieve autonomous learning. The reforms attempted to provide a shift in responsibility from the teacher to the students in a manner that urges students to actively seek and produce information rather than being mere passive learners. This implies that students are expected to be in control of their own learning. Autonomous learning is thus considered a key factor for being a high-achiever at the Algerian university. Proactive autonomous learning implies taking the initiative to meet the expected learning goals without the involvement of external parties, namely the teacher. This suggests that voluntariness is a key factor without which learning autonomy cannot be achieved.

Statement of the problem

students in Algerian educational settings are inclined to believe that (a) learning happens mostly in the classroom and (b) that their learning is the responsibility of the teacher. The willingness to be engaged in active learning is at its lowest, and passive learning seems to be the preferable learning method. Although it is almost safe to say that most classrooms are heterogenous and composed of mixed-abilities, several factors might affect students' level of autonomy and, by extension, their academic-achievements. It is clear that most students choose to major in a specific domain based on their choice, and their choice is justified yet again with several criteria including their expectancies of course-taking and overall course-values that

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* Rida Sellali.

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define the socio-economic benefits they expect after graduation.

Aim, Objective, Hypotheses, and Research Questions of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of university students' expectancies and their perceptions of the different course values on their level of engagement in autonomous learning. The objective of this study is to gather data from English Language students at Si-lhaoues university centre undergraduate students to evaluate their perceptions on autonomous learning beliefs and practices, course-values and success expectations. The data sets will be analysed statistically in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive their own autonomous learning beliefs and practices?
2. What is the impact of gender and undergraduate level on autonomy, course-value, and graduation expectations?
3. What is the relationship between university students' autonomous learning and their perception of course value and graduation expectancies?

The hypothesis of the study is as follows:

H_0: there is a significant positive correlation between autonomous learning beliefs and practices, course values, and success expectancies.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW
THE FIRST TOPIC: AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

With the massive impact of globalization and the western individualist, as opposed to collectivist cultures, autonomous learning has become a requirement of academic success. Taking responsibility of one's own learning in higher education settings has become a crucial step for a successful learning experience.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: THE CONCEPT OF AUTONOMY

Several attempts to define and dissect the concept of autonomous learning has been made by relevant scholars in the field. Below are some of the major definitions of autonomous learning, together with a paradigm of subskills of autonomous learning that are incorporated in the practical part of this study.

Firstly: Definition of autonomous learning

1- Defining Autonomy

The concept of autonomy has been defined by a handful of scholars namely Henri Holec, David Little, and Phil Benson. Generally speaking, autonomy by definition is the ability to take control over one's own learning[1]. Autonomous learners have the ability to self-direct and take control over their own learning, with a sense of detachment from the teacher. Learner autonomy is seen as a capacity that includes a set of merits such as independency, critical thinking, and decision-making[2]. It allows the learner to promote a particular kind of psychological rapport to what they learn and how they learn it. Having said that, autonomy is an inner learning characteristic that is manifested through taking responsibility of the learning experience, but with the precaution of taking into account the internal and external conditions with which it might be implemented. Autonomy is a quality of the learner's perception of the learning process rather than a learning method[1]. This makes the measurement of students' autonomy difficult since (a) most of autonomous learning happens outside school settings, and (b) autonomy depends not only on cognitive, but metacognitive skills. In order for autonomous learning beliefs and practices to be adequately measured, three essential metacognitive skills should be taken into account: planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment[3]. These skills can be put in order so that their effect can take place before, during, and after a considerably successful learning experience.

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a- The sub-skills of autonomous learning: The planning skill is mandatory for the initiation of any given task. As far as autonomy is concerned, three metacognitive knowledge subtypes set by Flavell[4] are needed to plan a successful learning experience, that is task, person, and strategic knowledge. The three subtypes of metacognitive knowledge revolve around realizing the purpose of the task of what is needed to complete it, knowing one's abilities and preferences, and recognizing potential difficulties and the ways to overcome them. Furthermore, self-monitoring during the learning process offers greater control over the task at hand. It offers a "decrease reliance on external agents (e.g., teachers, parents, peers) for behavior change, thus facilitating generalization to untrained settings and maintenance of acquired skills"[5]. Teachers should, thus, limit their interference with students' self-monitoring to avoid undesirable passive learning outcomes, and only resort to offering guidance when needed. Self-assessment in language learning is the procedure learners go through to assess their own linguistics skills and knowledge[6]. It provides valuable feeback about the progress of first, second, and/or foreign language learning through the process of reflection[7]. In formal settings, allowing learners a measure of self-assessment may more or less reflect what they think of their level of academic achievement.

THE SECOND TOPIC: EXPECTANCY-VALUE THEORY

The expectancy value theory is a rather neglected, yet very important, aspect that manifests itself as an essential requirement for the sake of fostering autonomy. In the next section, the principles of the expectancy-value theory and its components are explained in details, as well as its the potential effect on the students' readiness for autonomy.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: THE PRINCIPLES OF EXPETANCY-VALUE THEORY

A definition of the expectancy-value theory and its four major aspects as explained by pioneers and authorities in research are mentioned in the section below. This encompasses the attainment, intrinsic-motivation, utility, and cost values.

Firstly: Defining the expectancy-value theory

1 - Expectancy-value theorists claim that the expectations and values of engaging in a task, be they educational, vocational, or related to other fields, have an effect on subsequent behaviours[8]. To further elucidate this model, they divided it into four major components: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost value.

a- The components of the expectancy-value theory: The attainment value is the personal sense of being a well-achiever in a given task. The choice and the attainment value of the task are increased if the individual has what it takes to complete the task and wants to assert their mastery of the task in hand[9]. This reinforces the argument of choice provision provided by Lee[10]; students are more likely to be actively engaged inside and outside the classroom if they are presented with a variety of educational choices, and are free to choose based on their interests. Eccles and Harold[9] provide a definition for the intrinsic value claiming that it is "best conceptualized as the immediate rewards, intrinsic or extrinsic, that participating in a given activity provides". That is, a task can be performed solely for the mere feeling of joy when doing it. Intrinsic motivation is determined by our own particular interests, which includes the activities that one enjoys, expanding the range of knowledge, tackling challenges, and the skills one seeks[11]. The importance of the task in terms of usefulness for future academic or vocational endeavours can be set under the definition of utility value[12,13] Both works supply a distinction between the intrinsic value, which takes place withing the performance of task, and utility value, which is concened with goals beyond the immediate result of the task performance. The last, but

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not the least, component is the cost value which is considered as the possible negative results of the performance of the task, with the account that the higher the cost, the less the likilihood of task engagement[14.] Although teachers are required to impress upon students the importance of each subject in the syllabus, most students appear to face difficulties in relating those learning goals to reality. Albeit subtle, the four different course values of each subject of the course differ, and can more or less affect students' level of autonomy.

Secondly: Students' Graduation Expectations

1- University students' graduation expectations encompass, at least, graduate-unemployment period, employability rates, salary, and labour market expectancies. Students choose to enrol in a given course based on its employability chances[15], and expect to be hired within reasonable periods of time after graduation. Course selection is also affected by salary and the labour market expectations. Students aspire to find well-paying occupations in the midst of the pressure of the considerable number of graduates competing for graduate-level positions, prospective students are more inclined to base their judgments on the graduate employment records of certain courses[16]. It is inevitable to examin gender association with these expectations. There remains a powerful correlation between graduates' gender and their occupational benefit/reward expectations[17]. However, it is worth noting that men are more likely to study engineering and business, while women are more likely to study social sciences and humanities[18]. The former academic majors are usually expected to have better entry-level incomes[19]. This study is expected to support these findings since the target population consists of social-sciences students.

a- The effect of expectancy value on students' autonomous learning: The general idea of the expectancy-value theory bears promising yet malicious prospects for learner autonomy. Depending on the context in which learning is taking place, the elements of task value may have different effects on autonomous-learning behaviours. For example, when the teacher provides his/her students with choices, it may have strong effect on the intrinsic value of the course, whereas utility and attainment values are more affected by the teacher's perspective-taking and support[20]. Self control, which can be defined as "the voluntary regulation of attentional, emotional, and behavioural impulses when immediate temptations conflict with more enduringly valued goals"[21], is a merit that is value-based, and correlates positively with rates of the intrinsic value[13]. Similarly, it is argued that the outcome of feeling autonomous and in control of one's own consequences is the increase of one's intrinsic motivation[22]. Therefore, there is no questionning that self-control is a needed quality in prompting both internal and external autonomous-learning behaviours since autonomy requires intrinsic motivation and self-regulation, as well as avoiding all possible distractions and deviations in the way of learning.

If the aggregation of the components of the expectancy-value theory is summed up in achievement-based motivation, success expectations, and the value of the results[23], then it would only be logical to assume that learner autonomy is reliant on some, if not all, of these values and expectations, and is practically infeasible unless these components are present.

Methodology:

Participants

This study targets undergraduate students of English at the newly-established department of English language and literature at Si-lhaoues University Centre as its population. The nature of the topic almost necessitated the selection of the sample; undergraduate students are encouraged to learn autonomously from the beginning of the course since (a) the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research impresses upon educators and students alike that self-directed

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learning is a requirement for the success of their academic career, and (b) long-term achievement expectations are more likely to be generated at the beginning or during the years of enrolment at the university. Students are required to complete a three-years course before graduating. After that they can apply to a masters' degree, which takes two years to complete. Via simple random sampling (SRS) 90 students out of 153 were able to respond to the instrument of the study (44.4% first year students, 36.7% second year students, and 18.9% third year students). The sample consists of 60 females (66.7%) and 30 males (33.3%).

The Instrument

A questionnaire was used to as the instrument of gathering data for the current study (see appendix). The questionnaire was adapted from the works of Karababa et al.[24] and Eccles and Wigfield[25,26]. The questionnaire was distributed to the aforementioned participants, and was split into three scales: students' autonomous-learning beliefs and practices, students' view of course-value, and graduation and success expectancies. All of the items were measured using a three-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 3= Strongly Agree), and were later encoded numerically in SPSS (v.26) software. A total of 31 survey items encompassed two items for students' gender and level, and 18 items for the autonomous-learning beliefs and practices for the purpose of measuring Flavell's three metacognitive skills: planning (6 items), self-monitoring (7 items), and self-assessment (5 items). The remainder of the items were designated for measuring the expectancy-value theory components following the paradigm of Eccles and Harold[9]: 8 items for course-value components (attainment, intrinsic, utility, and cost), together with 3 items for students' success expectations.

Procedure

The Study Ethics approval was administered before the beginning of the study. The researchers obtained the approval of the Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and the Head of the Department of English Language and Literature at Si-Lhaoues University Centre. In addition, electronic informed consents were distributed on the participants before they engaged in survey-filling. Being a faster manner to reach out to the sample and for the organization of the data, and because of the Covid-19 outbreak and distant learning procedures, the data was gathered in May 2021 using Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was delivered by one of the researchers via email to the delegates of each group in each level (first, second and third year) and was posted on the Departments' official closed Facebook group, which is dedicated only for students at the department of English. The policy of the group states that each student should indicate full name, level, and their respective student number. The normality of data distribution across the variables of the study was assessed to determine the type of statistical parametrical tests to be used in this study.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS (v.26) software, the reliability analysis was carried out through the application of Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient. Reliability tests were administered according to their respective subscales: autonomy, course-value, and graduation expectancies items. The normality test justifies the use of non-parametric statistical tests, which were used in all analyses. The effect of students' level (1st year, 2nd year, and 3rd year) on students' level of autonomy was tested using ANOVA, and the difference of perception of course-value and graduation expectancies between males and females was determined using independent samples t-tests. Finally, Spearman correlations and ordinal regressions were carried out to reveal the relationship of the variables and the assumptions of proportional odds across the variables of the study.

Results

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the variables of the study, including means, standard deviations, and normality tests (Skewness and Kurtosis), together with the reliability coefficients of each subscale of the study. The results show that students presented weak autonomous-learning engagement: Planning ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.99$), self-monitoring ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.04$), and self-assessment ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.23$). Slightly higher scores were gathered from the course value scale, with moderate score on the attainment ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.25$) and intrinsic value ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.25$), and low scores on the utility ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.03$) and cost value ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.04$). Students' graduation expectations were moderately low in terms of graduate unemployment expectations ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.24$), salary income satisfaction ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.21$), and job offers outside the public sector expectations ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.06$). The Skewness and Kurtosis tests show that the data across the participants' responses is moderately skewed and not normally distributed, which justifies the employment of non-parametric analyses. Finally, the scales of the study presented adequate internal consistency for the autonomous-learning scale (3 items, $\alpha = 0.77$), the course-value scale (4 items, $\alpha = 0.81$), and the students' graduation expectancies scale (3 items, $\alpha = 0.85$).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables and Reliability Analyses*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Autonomy	90	2.24	0.88	1.066	0.343	0.77
Course-value	90	2.43	0.92	0.986	0.161	0.81
Graduation Expectations	90	2.25	1.03	0.872	-0.348	0.85

Table 2 shows the results of the independent samples t-test. There is a significant difference between males and females across all the variables of the study. Females presented higher autonomy levels ($p = 0.02$), course-value perceptions ($p = 0.007$), and graduation expectations ($p = 0.003$).

Table 2. *Independent Samples t-test for Differences Across Variables in Terms of Gender*

Variables	Gender	Mean	SD	t-tests	
				t	p
Autonomy	Male	1.93	0.48	-2.378	0.02
	Female	2.39	0.99		
Course-value	Male	2.05	0.55	-2.786	0.007
	Female	2.61	1.01		
Graduation Expectations	Male	1.8	0.51	-3.825	0.003
	Female	2.4	1.15		

Table 3 summarises the results of the ANOVA test results to study the potential difference of autonomy, course-value, and graduation expectancies in terms of students' level. In the Algerian higher education system, students spend three years on an undergraduate English language and literature course. It is only logical to assume that students with more experience at the university would have stronger perceptions of autonomy, and clearer views of the course-

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value and graduation expectations. However, the results of the ANOVA test showed that students were not significantly different across the study variables.

Table 3. *ANOVA Test Results for Differences Across Variables in Terms of Level*

Variable	Level	Mean	SD	ANOVA	
				F	p
Autonomy	1st year	2.22	0.83		
	2nd year	2.25	0.95	0.008	0.992
	3rd year	2.22	0.86		
Course-value	1st year	2.21	0.87		
	2nd year	2.26	0.87	1.960	0.147
	3rd year	2.60	1.09		
Graduation Expectations	1st year	2.31	1.14		
	2nd year	2.20	1.01	0.129	0.879
	3rd year	2.18	0.77		

A Spearman *rho* correlation test was run to indicate the relationship between students' autonomy, course-value, and graduation expectations. The results presented a positive significant weak correlation between autonomy and course value $(r_s = .38, p < .001)$, and a positive significant moderate relationship between autonomy and graduation expectations $(r_s = .42, p < .001)$.

To further investigate the effect of the independent variables at hand, and because correlation analyses alone cannot express causality, ordinal regression analyses using SPSS were run to test the assumption of proportional odds of the extent to which course-values and graduation expectations affect students' autonomous learning. A Pearson chi-square goodness-of-fit test $[X^2(548, N = 90) = 455,945, p > .05]$, and deviance test $[X^2(548, N = 90) = 256.873, p > .05]$ showed that the model fits the data well. The Nagelkerke Pseudo R^2 shows that the model can account for 34% of the variance in Autonomy. The calculation of the ordinal regression odds ratio revealed that the odds of enhancing autonomous learning increases by a factor of 2.178 $(p = .003)$ for every one unit increase in course value, and by a factor of 1.334 $(p = .001)$ for every one unit increase in students' graduation expectancies.

Discussion

This study examines the effect of course values and graduation expectancies on students' level of autonomy. Higher scores of course-value and graduation expectations are associated with higher autonomous learning beliefs and practices. The results of this study showed that students' autonomous-learning beliefs and practices do not seem to indicate what the researchers would consider adequate to meet the needs of the concept of autonomous learning. The means of the responses of planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment lead the researchers to the inference that students are not yet ready for autonomy. The scores of the graduation expectations suggest that students carry such low graduation expectations of their English Language and Literature course. This might be justified with the fact that that the majority of the governmental labour market opportunities which the English Language and Literature course offers in Algeria is teaching at the middle school level for undergraduate degree holders, and at the high school level for Masters' degree holders. Any other related private sector occupation is expected to pay significantly less than the aforementioned occupations. This also justifies the low scores on the utility value, since the majority of course's subjects contain abundant information that are not

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perceived by students as useful for this career; teaching English in the middle and high school levels revolves around grammar rules, vocabulary use, and very little communicative competence. Students do not believe that the course would remotely provide them with decent job opportunities, nor do they believe that the designated job would secure decent financial and social outcomes should they get hired. They also do not believe that they are going to be hired within a reasonable period of time after graduation. It is safe to claim that the researchers failed to reject the null hypothesis; there is a significant positive correlation between autonomous learning beliefs and practices, course values, and success expectations.

There is evidence for the existence of a significant difference between males and females in the perception of course value and graduation expectations. Females were more autonomous, and they had more positive course-values and graduation expectations. This is supported by previous research[17-19]. The existence of such a significant difference interferes with the strength of the correlations found in this study given that females presented more positive views across the variables. Moreover, there is no significant difference between the level of students in terms of the study variables. More experienced students were not more autonomous than students with less experience at the university, and the perceptions of course value and graduation expectations were not different for the participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The existence of weak and moderate correlations between some aspects of autonomous language learning with the different elements of the expectancy-value theory hints to the effect of the former on the latter. Expectations and values of a certain action include assumptions on whether or not it can be carried out to a certain norm that determines a positive outcome[27]. For instance, a certain individual might restrain from engaging in certain tasks if they feel that the cost value is too high for them despite the high intrinsic-motivation, utility, or attainment value of that task. It all comes down to whether or not the positivity of the outcome exceeds its negativity to the individual' perception. In this study, despite the existence of moderate scores of the attainment and intrinsic values of the course, they were not enough compared to the serious lack of utility value, the high cost-value for the sample to consider engaging in self-directed learning, and their low graduation expectations even more odds of reducing their autonomy.

Teachers' role in clarifying students' expectations and course values should not, however, be neglected. This study recommends higher-education teachers to highlight the different goals and benefits of each subject, and their relevance to students' future academic and professional careers, for it is always a possibility that students might carry unrealistic expectations and/or unclear course values that might hinder their readiness to engage in autonomous learning. Moreover, the existence of counselling services at each department would be of great benefit to clarify the aspects of the course to potential course applicants and what to expect during the course and after graduation through either seminars or personal counselling.

One of the limitations of this study is the existence of a significant difference between males and females in terms of graduation expectations. While this strengthens the validity of the higher scores that females reported on autonomous learning, a stronger correlation might have appeared between the study variables without this difference. Little empirical evidence is provided in recent research about job and salary satisfaction differences between males and females because of the coexistence of contradictory results in difference countries and cultures.

Appendix

Questionnaire
Section One: Background information
1.   Level
First year ☐   Second year ☐   Third year ☐

2.   Gender
Male ☐   Female ☐

Section Two: Students' Autonomous Learning Beliefs and Practices

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Planning			
3. I had prior knowledge of the course's subjects before applying to the English Language department.	☐	☐	☐
4. I can choose my learning styles.	☐	☐	☐
5. I make further efforts when I believe I will achieve the target.	☐	☐	☐
6. While learning English, I model the learning styles of my classmates.	☐	☐	☐
7. Usually I plan my weekly work in advance.	☐	☐	☐
8. I know where I can use English after learning it.	☐	☐	☐
Self-Monitoring			
9. I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses while learning.	☐	☐	☐
10. I try to make connections about old and new subjects I've learned	☐	☐	☐
11. Revisions which I do myself facilitates my learning.	☐	☐	☐
12. I can maintain my studies independent from teacher	☐	☐	☐
13. I am responsible for my language learning, my improvement and my level by myself	☐	☐	☐
14. I like making progress in my English by myself.	☐	☐	☐
15. I can use some useful exercises which I used to learn other foreign languages.	☐	☐	☐
Self-assessment			
16. I take notes to track my language learning development.	☐	☐	☐
17. I like to talk about my progress in English to others.	☐	☐	☐

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18. When learning English, it makes me happy when someone observes me and tells me my mistakes.   □   □   □

19. I check my writing assignments at regular intervals to see my progress.   □   □   □

20. If I fail, I accept it and try to correct that.   □   □   □

Section Three: Course Value.

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Attainment			
21. It is important for me personally to be good at my studies.	□	□	□
22. Compared to other subjects, it is very important to me to be good at English.	□	□	□
Intrinsic			
23. I chose to study English language and literature because it is a personal interest of mine.	□	□	□
24. In general, I find working on assignments interesting	□	□	□
Utility			
25. I will need all the information that I am learning in my course	□	□	□
26. All of the subjects that I am being taught are important to my future academic goals.	□	□	□
Cost			
27. Getting good grades is exhausting for me.	□	□	□
28. Considering later economic and social outcomes, my degree is worth spending three years of my time.	□	□	□

Section Four: Students' Success Expectations

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
29. After finishing my degree, I expect to be hired within a reasonable period of time.	□	□	□
30. For me, English language teaching in the sector of the Ministry of Education (middle/high school) is financially rewarding.	□	□	□
31. I expect my undergraduate degree to offer jobs outside the public sector	□	□	□

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