

## **The Impact of Online Education During COVID 19 Pandemic on Foreign Language Learner Autonomy**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

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The present paper aims to investigate whether or not online education has promoted learning autonomy in Algerian University students. The hypothesis on which this paper is based is that students will develop characteristics of learning autonomy due to online learning imposed by COVID 19 pandemic consequences. To investigate this premise, a questionnaire is administered to a sample of second year students from the ENS of Constantine. The results obtained have disconfirmed this hypothesis; that is online education imposed due to the COVID 19 pandemic consequences has not promoted autonomous learning in Algerian University students. Major components of autonomous learning were missing in the students' behaviour during face-to-face teaching and the situation did not change during the pandemic.

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## **Introduction**

Successful learning is a complex process which requires learners to spend long hours working on their own progress inside and outside of classrooms, taking in charge what they learn and how they learn it without the intervention of teachers. The principle by which learners assume responsibility for their own learning is known as *learner autonomy*. Promotion of that construct in learners seems to have acquired much more importance in regard to the current situation affected by COVID 19 repercussions that have imposed new ways of learning by which learners take more responsibility for their own learning away from the teacher's control. Indeed, in the present situation where social distancing has imposed itself as a worldwide health measure and where online education has become current practice in most parts of the world, learner autonomy has become an obligation rather than a students' personal endeavour.

### **I. COVID 19 and Education**

By the end of 2019, the Coronavirus disease (COVID -19) was discovered in China, and soon afterwards, it spread throughout the whole world. On March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020, it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. The critical health situation brought about by the disease imposed a new-life style characterized by restrictive movement policies and social distancing, in order to control the propagation of the dangerous virus. By the same token, people around the world were strictly required to adopt public care strategies; namely, hand washing, wearing face masks, social distancing and keeping away from mass assemblies (Sinterma, 2020). Educational institutions including universities all around the world were no exception to the drastic measures imposed by governments in the form of massive lockdowns.

Never in human history have educational systems been disrupted as was the case due to the COVID 19 pandemic and up to 1.6 billion learners in over 200 countries have been dramatically affected by the consequences of this disease which spared no aspect of human life. Indeed, no less than 94% of student population worldwide has been exposed to the consequences of closure of educational institutions (Pokhrel & Chhtri, 2021). Therefore, in the spring of 2020, schools and higher education institutions in most countries of the world suspended face-to-face teaching and replaced it by alternative educational and assessment methods, namely online education (Bao, 2020) supported by several online platforms. Fortunately, technological advances which have had considerable influence on the field of teaching have made this reliance on technological teaching/learning means possible. (Boulmerka, 2015) claimed that

nowadays, there is worldwide awareness that new information and communication technologies play an important role in the field of education.

In the particular situation created by the repercussions of the pandemic, learner-centered education has to be pushed to extremes as students have to carry out most of their learning activities relying on themselves without the teachers' assistance and control. In such particular circumstances, promotion of learner autonomy in learners seems to have acquired much more importance than any time before.

## II. Language Learner Autonomy

Due to the movement from teacher-centred education that had characterised traditional approaches to learner-centred education which is a principle of Communicative Language Teaching, the term learner-autonomy found its way in the field of education and more particularly in the field of second and foreign language learning, (Foroutan, Nooreen, Gani, & Baki, 2013) and (Thanasoulas, 2000)

The most widely acknowledged definition of learner autonomy and the one that is most referred to in the literature is the one proposed by (Holec, 1981) and which he published in a major report. This definition states that an autonomous learner is the one who '...is capable of taking charge of his own learning' (p.3). To illustrate better his definition, he goes on to claim that taking charge of one's own learning means to hold responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, namely determining the objectives defining the contents and the progression, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981). In case learners can successfully take such decisions, they can thus autonomously establish a personal agenda for learning by which they can lay down directions in the planning, monitoring and evaluating of the learning process (Chan, 2003).

This standpoint was adopted by Fenner and Newby (Fenner & Newby, 2000), when they maintained that an educational environment that shows characteristics of autonomous learning is very likely to offer learners the freedom to select pedagogical materials to be employed in the classroom. When this is made possible, learners are incited 'to access and use resources in their contexts, to carry their learning and to develop strategies for taking greater responsibility for their learning' (White, 2003, p. 34). By the same token, (Little, 1991, p. 11), provides a definition of autonomy that states that autonomy is 'a *capacity*-for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' which clearly implies an amount of learner awareness. He adds that to be an autonomous

learner means to be able to take control over the management of one's own learning. This ability permits the learner to perform a number of actions, such as setting goals, defining content and creating ways for evaluating one's achievement and progress.

The concept of learner autonomy has been extended as a construct of attitudes and ability by which learners are empowered to assume more responsibility for their own learning (Vanijdee, 2003, cited in Lap, 2005) (Lap, 2005). Learner success and efficacy are very likely to increase when learners are given opportunities to be involved in their own learning process following their own pace and making use of their own learning strategies as they study independently from the teacher. This idea was strongly endorsed by (Littlejohn, 1985) who maintained that students who are involved in decision making in regard to their language learning “are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning” (p. 258), and this is a central part of learner autonomy. Within the same context, (Holec, 1981) confirmed that among the principle concepts underlying learner autonomy is that instead of passively responding to the teacher's instructions, learners assume responsibility for their own learning. Following the same idea, (Benson, 2000) argued that autonomous learners are those who rely on their personal direct experiences to construct knowledge rather than blindly following others' experiences or instructions. Therefore, the first step towards developing learner autonomy in learners is to promote it inside the classroom, then to extend it outside of it. The teachers' role in this respect is of great importance because as (Barfield, et al., 2001), put it ‘it is admitted that the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted’ ( p. 3).

Initially promoted by Holec then by a plethora of researchers in the field of language teaching, the construct of learner autonomy became a significant educational objective in many European contexts (Ivanovska, 2015). There were many strong reasons that accounted for the fact both teachers and researchers strived to promote autonomy in language learners. Such reasons were the fact that this is a human right (Benson, 2000), that it is more successful at leading learners to realizing effective results than other approaches (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978), and that it is not clear how learners are likely to benefit from the necessary resources offered to them especially outside of the classroom wall if they do not take in charge their own learning process. Equally important, some researchers, namely (Oxford, 1991), (Wenden, *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*, 1991), believe that learner autonomy can empower learners to use

learning strategies which are indispensable tools for language learners. Therefore, overt instruction in the use of learning strategies imposes itself in order to foster learning autonomy (Graham & Harris, 2000). Wenden (1998, p. 90) also claimed that ‘without developing such strategies, students will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviours and never be fully autonomous’.

Although autonomy seems to be an individual concept, researchers in the field of learner autonomy stress the importance of social construction which presupposes that learners also work together as a group and rely on one another to achieve autonomy. In this respect, (Benson, 2000), argues that control of the learning process, learning resources and language use will not take place if each individual learner acts separately according to their own preferences. The implication to be drawn here is that control over the learning process cannot be made on an individual basis, but should rather be decided by the whole group. (Little, 1991) also backed up this point of view when he argues that group work promotes learner autonomy and active involvement in the learning process especially in language learning classes which require interaction among a group of learners. He maintains that ‘learner autonomy theory requires teachers to create an interactive dynamic that allows their learners access to full range discourse roles in the target language’ (p. 29). This is true enough as it is widely accepted among researchers that real learner-learner communicative behaviour is an inescapable condition for the development of communicative proficiency.

Five levels of autonomous learning were identified by (Nunan, Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy, 1997) and these have been used by researchers who are interested in assessing teaching contents for autonomy. These levels are:

- **Learner awareness:** At this level, learners’ awareness about pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using is raised. This is achieved by making it possible for the learners to identify the strategies embedded in pedagogical activities they have to perform and their preferred styles and strategies.

- **Involvement:** At this level, learners are presented with a range of goals from which they are involved in the selection of those they suit them best.

- **Intervention:** At this level, learners actively take part in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning programme. While doing so, they also modify and adapt tasks.

- **Creation:** At this level, learners create their own goals and objectives and subsequently, their own learning tasks.

- **Transcendence:** At this level, learners go beyond the classroom and create links between the content learnt inside the classroom and the outside world, and while doing so, they perform roles of teachers and researchers.

After suggesting these five steps, (Nunan, 2003) proposed another procedure that consisted of nine steps ‘for moving learners along the continuum from dependence to autonomy’. These steps are in fact, not totally new ones but rather a detailed version of the five levels described above and they are also a synthesis of the criteria that constitute autonomous learning. They are:

- Make instruction goals clear to learners,
- Allow learners to create their own goals,
- Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom,
- Raise awareness of learning processes,
- Help learners identify their own preferred strategies,
- Encourage learner choice,
- Allow learners to generate their own tasks,
- Encourage learners to become teachers and
- Encourage learners to become researchers.

### III. The Field Work

In order to verify the research hypothesis that underlies the present paper, namely that university students will develop characteristics of learning autonomy due to online learning imposed by COVID 19 pandemic, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of students consisting of 60 second year students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Constantine. The methodology adopted is a comparison between the students’ learning behaviour prior to and during COVID 19 pandemic in order to find out whether online learning has brought about any progress towards learning autonomy or not. The students received and responded to the questionnaire online via Google Form. The items of the questionnaire were designed by relying on the review of the literature provided above in this paper about the major characteristics of autonomous learning. What follows presents the questions that the students had to answer and analysis of the results obtained.

**Table n° 01: Results obtained about students’ behaviour before and during online learning in regard to learner motivation**

	The questions	Before Covid 19					During Covid 19				
		Yes	%	No	%	Total	Yes	%	No	%	Total
1	Do you determine your learning objectives?	00	00%	60	100%	60	00	00%	60	100%	60

2	Are you aware of the goals/objectives you are supposed to achieve in learning your courses?	6	10%	54	90%	60	11	18.33%	49	81.66%	60
3	Do you decide on the learning content to be learnt?	00	00%	60	100%	60	00	00%	60	100%	60
4	Do you evaluate your learning progression?	3	5%	57	95%	60	7	11.66%	53	88.33%	60
5	Do you use English in your everyday life?	54	90%	6	10%	60	49	81.66%	11	18.33%	60
6	Do you evaluate what has been acquired?	02	3.33%	58	96.66%	60	02	3.33%	58	96.66%	60
7	Do you believe that you need to learn independently?	56	93.33%	04	6.66%	60	57	95%	03	05%	60
8	Do your teachers encourage you to learn independently of their control?	23	38.33%	37	61.66%	60	18	30%	42	70%	60
9	Have you received any overt instruction in the use of learning strategies?	00	00%	60	100%	60	00	00%	60	100%	60
10	What are the learning strategies you most frequently employ?	<b>No answers provided</b>									
11	Are you aware of your preferred strategies?	02	3.33%	58	96.66%	60	04	6.66%	56	93.33%	60
12	Do the activities you are required to perform allow you to use your preferred learning styles?	05	8.33%	55	91.66%	60	07	11.66%	53	88.33%	60
13	Do you have opportunities to work with classmates as a group?	54	90%	06	10%	60	03	05%	57	95%	60
14	Do you engage in group interaction with classmates?	55	91.66%	05	8.33%	60	02	3.33%	58	96.66%	60

15	Do you make research?	49	81.66 %	11	18.33 %	60	53	88.33 %	07	11.66 %	60
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16. How satisfied are you with learning?

<b>Before Covid 19</b>	Strongly satisfied	Satisfied	neither satisfied nor satisfied	dissatisfied	strongly dissatisfied
<b>Results</b>	34	23	00	03	00
<b>After Covid19</b>	Strongly satisfied	Satisfied	neither satisfied nor satisfied	dissatisfied	strongly dissatisfied
<b>Results</b>	31	17	00	9	00

#### IV. Discussion of the Results

##### 1. Do you determine your learning objectives?

All students have provided negative responses to this question, which means that they are never involved in decisions about leaning objectives neither before COVID 19 pandemic nor during it. This is likely to hamper any attempt on their part to assume a minimum amount of autonomy for learning.

##### 2. Are you aware of the goals/objectives you are supposed to achieve in learning your courses?

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (90% before the pandemic and 81.66% during online teaching) have declared that they are not aware of the goals or objectives they are supposed to achieve in their courses. The results obtained for this question correlate with those obtained for the previous one which have indicated that students are not involved in determining their own objectives.

##### 3. Do you decide on the learning content to be learnt?

The students' answers to this question show that they are not involved in decisions concerning selection of content as all of them have answered it negatively. Content is therefore imposed by the curriculum designers or teachers.

##### 4. Do you evaluate your learning progression?

The majority of the respondents (95%) do not evaluate their learning progression. The situation did not significantly change during online learning, since the rate of students who evaluate their learning progression has very slightly increased during online teaching (from 5% to 11.66%). It seems then that evaluation is the responsibility of the teacher only. However, it is worth mentioning that 6.66% of the students have felt the necessity to evaluate their own progression during the lockdown.

##### 5. Do you use English in your everyday life?

The majority of the respondents (90%) have declared that they use English in their daily life prior to the Covid 19 pandemic and (81.66%) during it. The percentage is high but it has slightly decreased during the lockdown probably



because of the decrease of opportunities and interlocutors with whom to use it. Nevertheless, most of the students seem to have a disposition to learn autonomously, but they need assistance and direction to learn how to do that properly.

**6. Do you evaluate what has been acquired?**

The results obtained in this question join those obtained from question 4. The majority of the students do not evaluate what has been acquired neither before nor during online learning. Involving the students in evaluating what has been learned and their own capacity to grasp it largely contributes to fostering their autonomy, but depriving them from doing so will significantly hamper their self-reliance.

**7. Do you believe that you need to learn independently?**

93.33% of the students who have answered this question have declared that they do feel that they need to learn independently before the pandemic. This percentage has slightly increased during the lockdown (95%) which might imply that some students have felt the need to learn independently from the teacher in this particular situation. Indeed, researchers in the field have argued that learner autonomy is a human right and as such learners need to be empowered with the necessary skills to learn autonomously.

**8. Do your teachers encourage you to learn independently of their control?**

The majority of the students (61.66%) have confirmed that before Covid 19, their teachers did not encourage them to learn independently from their control, while 38.33% claimed that their teachers did so. During the pandemic and online teaching, however, figures have changed but not in favour of learner autonomy. The rate of students whose teachers encourage them to learn independently has decreased to 30%. This might be explained by lack of direct contact between teachers and students during online teaching. But in regard to the results obtained in the former answers, teachers encouraging their students to learn autonomously seems to be done only as far as learning lessons and solving activities are concerned since the respondents to the questionnaire are not involved in decisions about objectives nor content, do not evaluate their learning procedure and are not aware of the objectives/goals they are supposed to achieve.

**9. Have you received any overt instruction in the use of learning strategies?**

All the respondents to the questionnaire have provided negative responses to this question. The students have received no overt instruction in the use of learning strategies, neither before nor during Covid 19 pandemic. It needs to be

noted that students' certainly receive instruction in the use of learning strategies, but for better results in regard to learning autonomy this instruction must be overt, embedded in the learning process and on the long run. Therefore, students may know learning strategies and use them appropriately but the fact that they do not know what they are and what their importance for their learning can reduce their positive effect on learning autonomy.

**10. What are the learning strategies you most frequently employ?**

Strangely enough, all the students left the space provided for the answer to this question empty for both before and during Covid 19. The possible explanation for this is that students do not know what the word strategy refers to since they do not receive any overt training in the use of learning strategies as revealed by their answers to the previous question. This does not mean that they do not use any strategies, but they are rather not aware of the ones that they are using and they are not enabled to learn using the most effective ones and this does not contribute to the promotion of autonomy.

**11. Are you aware of your preferred strategies?**

The answers to this question logically follow those obtained for the previous two questions. The majority of the students (96.66%) have negatively answered this question concerning their learning before the pandemic and 93.33% during COVID 19 and online learning. The 3% of the students who have developed awareness of their preferred strategies during that period have probably done so as the result of personal effort. Students lack awareness of strategy use since they do not receive overt instruction about them and consequently they are unable to name the strategies they most frequently use.

**12. Do the activities you are required to perform allow you to use your preferred learning styles?**

The majority of the students have negatively answered this question and the results do not show any significant difference between the period before (91.66%) and after COVID 19 (88.33%). The explanation that might be provided is that the teachers' selection of the tasks to be realised by the students does not take into account differing learners' styles. It is also possible to claim that students are not aware of their learning styles and that there is no overt instruction about them to raise such awareness.

**13. Do you have opportunities to work with classmates as a group?**

The majority of the students have positively answered this question in the rubric under before COVID 19 (90%) and negatively after it (5%). Researchers in the field of learner autonomy have stressed the importance of group work and

learner-learner interaction in the promotion of learner autonomy and active involvement in the learning process. The conclusion to be drawn from the students' answer to this question is that social distancing caused by the pandemic hampers a central factor in the promotion of autonomy in learners.

**14. Do you engage in group interaction with classmates?**

The results obtained from this question confirm and follow those obtained from the previous one. As there are no opportunities for learners to work together as a group when they study online during Covid 19 lockdown, there are also no opportunities for them to engage in group discussions. Obviously, learner autonomy lacks an important element in this situation.

Research in the field has demonstrated that learner autonomy stresses the importance of social construction, in that learners need to work together as a group to achieve autonomy. In addition, autonomous learners are active participants in the social processes of classroom learning. Results of this question and the previous one show that the majority of students had opportunities to work together as a group and engaged in group interaction with classmates during face-to-face learning, but not during Covid 19 pandemic.

**15. Do you make research?**

Most of the students' answers to this question are positive both before (81.66%) and during Covid 19 pandemic (88.33%). An important aspect of learner autonomy is respected in this context given that university students make much research as part of the contents of many courses, followed with classroom presentations. During the Covid 19 lockdown, however, presentations are cancelled and students only send their research works to their teachers via email or the educational platform called Moodle.

**16. How satisfied are you with learning?**

A Likert scale was used with this question to find out the students' satisfaction with learning. Despite the fact that the answers to the previous questions have shown that the students concerned with the study do not enjoy much autonomy in their learning, the majority (95%) shows that they are either strongly satisfied (34 students) or satisfied (23 students) with learning before Covid 19 through their answer to this question. However, the attitude of nine students has changed from satisfaction or strong satisfaction before Covid 19 to dissatisfaction during it. This might be explained by difficulty of access to online resources during the pandemic for many Algerian students, which makes learning in such conditions a difficult act.

## V. Discussion of the Results

The results obtained from the analysis of the respondents' answers to the questionnaire have disconfirmed the hypothesis that underlies the present research work; that is online education imposed due to the COVID 19 pandemic consequences has not promoted autonomous learning in Algerian University students.

Major components of autonomous learning as identified by research in the field, (synthesised by Nunan (2003) as raising learners' awareness about instruction objectives, giving them the chance to create their own objectives, providing them with opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom, helping them identify their own preferred learning strategies, and encouraging them to become teachers and researchers) were missing in the students' behaviour during face-to-face teaching and the situation did not change in any positive way during online teaching caused by COVID 19 pandemic. It is worthwhile to note that despite this situation, almost all of them believe that they need to learn independently and are enthusiastic towards learning.

So the students are not involved in decisions about learning objectives neither before nor during the pandemic and the majority of them are not aware of their learning goals/objectives. They are also not involved in the selection of the content to be taught. Such criteria have been deemed of major

Enabling learners to identify the strategies involved in pedagogical activities is central in raising their awareness about pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using and their own preferred strategies and styles. However, the results obtained have shown that the students have not received any overt training in the use of learning strategies neither before the pandemic nor during it and they are not even aware of their preferred learning strategies or styles. Therefore, even if they can make use of certain learning strategies, they are not aware of them and of how to use them appropriately. This is detrimental to the development of learner autonomy because without appropriate training in the use of learning strategies, learning will not be fully autonomous.

Another result that further disconfirms the research hypothesis is the absence of social construction -which is an important aspect of learner autonomy- during Covid 19 pandemic, though involvement in group work and learner-learner interaction were massively present in classes prior to it. Students' difficulty to access to the internet during that period or teachers' difficulty to group students together to carry out activities online must have been the reason for that absence.

This has contributed to hampering the establishment of learner autonomy during the lockdown.

An important aspect of learner autonomy highlighted by the literature on the topic is that autonomous learners should be encouraged and enabled to become researchers. The questionnaire results show that this aspect is present both before and during the lockdown. This is certainly due to the importance of research in the career of any higher education student. However, autonomy requires panoply of conditions to be fostered in learners and research alone cannot lead to that.

### **Conclusion**

It seems then that the promotion of autonomy in learners cannot be instilled without preparation. It is rather a process that needs to be inculcated in the long run and that requires firm conviction on the part of teachers, curriculum designers and educational decision makers to make it part of educational practices at all levels. It is also not possible to expect learners to become autonomous when they learn on their own like is the case during the lockdown if this autonomy has not been established first in the classroom. Therefore, the first step towards developing learner autonomy is to promote it inside the classroom, then to extend it outside of it.

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