From Learner Autonomy to Teacher Autonomy: Pedagogical Practices that Reflect Teacher Autonomy in Higher Education

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Abstract:
Unlike learner autonomy, teacher autonomy has long been marginalized in Algerian higher education. This research aims to investigate the pedagogical practices that embody teacher autonomy in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. It provides a model for teacher autonomy that highlights the pedagogical areas that require teacher autonomy. A qualitative case study design was adopted based on participant observation of autonomy-related practices among 68 EFL teachers at the Department of English, University of 8 May 1945, Guelma. Results revealed eight pedagogical practices that demonstrate teacher autonomy. A model was designed to specify the main pedagogical areas that require autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy; Autonomy-related Practices; Learner Autonomy; Teacher Autonomy; Pedagogical Practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy is a central concept in Teaching English as a Foreign Language; however, it has long been marginalized in contrast to learner autonomy, particularly in Algerian higher education. Research has continuously focused on fostering Algerian learners' autonomy (Fedj & Benaissi, 2018; Baraka, 2021; Belmekki & Baghzou, 2022; Lalaoua & Saihi, 2022; Tebib & Labed, 2023; Arab, 2023), while only two studies have investigated teacher autonomy in Algerian foreign language education (Missoum, 2014; Lakehal & Benaissi, 2021).

Without teacher autonomy, learner autonomy remains a theoretical reality. The two concepts are deeply interrelated, when teachers have the necessary professional freedom, they can guide learners towards independence and detachment from the teacher. This research aims to specify the pedagogical practices that reflect teacher autonomy and direct it towards effective instruction of foreign languages. It provides a model for teacher autonomy which highlights the pedagogical areas that require teacher autonomy. To sum up, this research addresses the following two questions:

- What pedagogical practices reflect teacher autonomy in higher education?
- What pedagogical areas require teacher autonomy in Teaching English as a Foreign Language?

2. Literature Review:

2.1. From Learner Autonomy to Teacher Autonomy

For decades, learner autonomy has been a central focus of educational research. Higgs defined learner autonomy as "a process in which the learner works on a learning task or activity and is largely independent of the teacher who acts as manager of the learning program and as resource person" (1988, p. 41). Little indicated that "learner autonomy is essentially a matter of learning without a teacher" (1999, p. 78). In other words, learner autonomy indicates total independence and detachment from the teacher. To promote learner autonomy, teacher autonomy should also be recognized as an essential condition. Teacher autonomy is defined as "a continual

process of inquiry into how teaching can best promote autonomous learning for learners" (Barfield et al., 2002, p.3). In contrast, Usma Wilches argued that teacher autonomy should not be merely viewed as "the promotion of student autonomy as has been frequently suggested in applied linguistics" (2007, p. 270). He further explained that teacher autonomy does not mean opposing colleagues and policy makers, it actually "entails interdependence, responsibility, mutual support, professional discretion, and commitment to the educational community" (Usma Wilches, 2007, p. 269). So, autonomy is more about cooperation and dedication to the educational community.

Teacher autonomy is approached from three perspectives: (1) "pedagogical freedom and absence of control" (2) "the will and capacity for self-governance", and (3) "local responsibility" (Mausethagen & Mølstadt, 2015, pp. 37-38). In this respect, Mausethagen and Mølstadt (2015) used the term *local responsibility* in contrast to *national responsibility* in relation to modifications in curriculum control. Local responsibility implies that curriculum control is at the institution level, while national responsibility indicates that curriculum control is at the government or ministry level.

2.2. Teacher Autonomy: Types, Characteristics, and Domains

Similar to learner autonomy, two types of teacher autonomy are distinguished: *individual autonomy* and *collaborative autonomy*. In this context, Dam argued that autonomy is "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person" (1995). Furthermore, Mausethagen and Mølstadt specified two types of teacher autonomy: *individual autonomy* and *collective autonomy* (2015). In the first type, the teacher is responsible for his/her own actions, while in the second type the teacher is controlled by the institution.

Moreover, teacher autonomy is often associated with the term *empowerment* that implies power, control, and self-decision (Lawson, 2004). It is also related to *self-reflection* which is a central component in teachers' enhancement of their professional career (Lamb, 2008). Teachers should have both self-control and responsibility over their pedagogical actions.

The main domains of teacher autonomy include teaching and

assessment, curriculum development, and professional development (Usma Wilches, 2007). In this respect, Missoum (2014) maintained that teachers are responsible for their own professional development. He added that teacher autonomy can be strengthened by preparation, collaboration between colleagues, and positive attitudes towards teachers' engagement in continuing professional development (2014). Consequently, promoting teachers' autonomy and raising their awareness of its importance is highly recommended. Eventually, learner autonomy cannot be achieved without teacher autonomy (Lakehal & Benaissi, 2021).

3. Research Methodology

The current research adopts *a qualitative case study design* based on *participant observation* of teachers' autonomy-related practices at the Department of English, University of 8 May 1945, Guelma. This observational technique is an effective strategy used in case studies to gather data in a natural way (Zieman, 2012). This method was selected as it provides deep insights into autonomy-related behaviors. The Department of English comprises 68 teachers across different specialties: Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Language Sciences, Literature, Civilization, and Translation.

Teacher autonomy at the Department of English is manifested through different pedagogical practices. Through participant observation of these practices, this study sought to establish a descriptive model which highlights the main pedagogical areas that require teacher autonomy and self-direction.

4. Results and Discussion

Eight pedagogical practices were identified from participant observation of EFL teachers at the Department of English, University of 8 May 1945, Guelma. Data were analyzed following thematic analysis and systematic transcription of fieldnotes. Pattern identification was followed to identify the pedagogical practices that reflect teacher autonomy. Results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. A Conceptual Framework of Pedagogical Practices that reflect EFL Teachers' Autonomy at the University of 8 May 1945, Guelma

Pedagogical Practices	**Description**
The design of new Master's/PhD programs	Teachers from different specialties have participated in designing new Master's and PhD programs
Modifications in Master's programs	Teachers from different specialties have taken part in suggesting valuable modifications to the existing Master's program entitled 'Language and Culture', new modules and syllabi were specified.
Syllabus update	Teachers are continuously proposing modifications for the existing syllabi either in the License or Master's Level
Lesson planning	Since no textbooks are currently available, teachers are planning their own lessons following the syllabus.
Implementation of new methods of instruction	During the Covid-19 era, teachers have implemented new ways of teaching such as *Online Learning* and *Distance Learning.* After the Covid-19 era, the university kept its new policy of teaching distantly through *Blended Learning*.
Implementation of new assessment methods	During the Covid-19 era, EFL teachers implemented new assessment techniques, for example assessment through the Moodle Platform.
ESP syllabus design	During their academic journey, teachers have taught the ESP module for PhD students in different departments (Computer Science, Economics, History....). Meanwhile, they have designed ESP syllabi according to the learners' needs in each department.
Teacher Training in English-Medium Instruction	The majority of teachers in the Department of English have trained teachers of other specialties during the academic year 2022-2023

As shown in Table 1, eight pedagogical practices reflect teacher autonomy at the Department of English as follows:

- **The Design of New Master's/PhD Programs**

Teachers from different specialties have always participated in designing new programs, for example, the PhD program in three specialties: *Didactics and Applied Linguistics*, *Literature*, and *Civilization* (2024-2025), the Master's program in *Didactics and Applied Linguistics* (2025-2026), and the Master's program in *Literature and Civilization* (2025-2026). The majority of teachers contributed to curriculum design through both face-to-face and online workshops, which demonstrates their adaptability and collaborative spirit. Curriculum design reflects teachers' independence and emphasizes their active role in shaping the department's new programs. Accordingly, teachers show autonomy when the curriculum is decentralized, this was confirmed by some studies which indicated that teachers' lack of autonomy in curriculum design is due to the centralized curriculum (Al-Kathiri, 2016; Yorulmaz & Çolak , 2023). Eventually, the more freedom teachers are given, the more creativity is demonstrated.

- **Modifications in Master's Programs**

By the end of the academic year 2024-2025, teachers from different specialties have contributed to suggesting valuable modifications to the already implemented Master's program entitled 'Language and Culture' by specifying new modules and syllabi according to students' needs. These adjustments are the result of the program's continuous evaluation of its effectiveness in meeting students' needs and curriculum objectives. Within this scope, the reform process is encouraged by many scholars who believe that changing the curriculum is based on teachers' self-decision (Kennedy, 1996; Klein, 1999).

- **Syllabus Update**

Teachers are continuously proposing modifications to the existing syllabi either in the License or Master's Level. Through face-to-face and online meetings, they have suggested some modifications based on their own professional experiences and individual pedagogical decisions.

Therefore, teacher autonomy is related to professionalism and the culture of individualism (Lin & Gao, 2023). Individualism here denotes proposing personal suggestions based on one's own perspective and specific results. Grounded in unique experiences, these suggestions are shared and discussed with colleagues. Thus, individualism does not imply a lack of collaboration with colleagues.

- **Lesson Planning**

Due to the absence of ministerial textbooks, teachers are planning their own lessons following the syllabus, which reflects their self-reliance and autonomy in instructional design. In this respect, Narayanan et al. (2024) conducted a survey to examine the relationship between teacher autonomy and lesson planning. Findings indicated that teachers who make their own lessons are highly autonomous.

- **Implementation of New Methods of Instruction**

Teachers are continuously updating their teaching methods and strategies, especially during the COVID-19 era when they implemented innovative methods of teaching such as *Online Learning* and *Blended Learning* through the Moodle Platform by using *Google Meet™ for Moodle* and *BigBlueButton*. In the post-COVID era, the university maintained its new policy of offering some transversal modules via Distance Learning. It is observed that digital platforms and resources have increased teacher autonomy. In this respect, teachers have independently learned how to use online platforms in teaching, which coincides with the findings of Akmalxon qizi (2024). Consequently, autonomy and technology are reciprocally interrelated, the use of Information and Communication Technologies reflect teachers' autonomy and their readiness for technology integration in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Kelkoula and Belhamel (2024) stressed the fact that online education contributes highly to teachers' professional development. Thus, the use of technology is a strong indicator of teacher autonomy (Serin & Bozdağ, 2020).

- **Implementation of New Assessment Methods**

During the Covid-19 era, EFL teachers moved beyond traditional

assessment towards more dynamic and interactive assessment by using the Moodle Platform. However, only a limited number of teachers at the department of English used online assessment due to their limited tech-literacy, negative attitudes towards this type of assessment, academic misconduct, and technical problems. These findings align with the results of other researchers (Beleulmi, 2022; Zeroulia & Arar, 2023).

- **ESP Syllabus Design**

An ESP teacher is expected to be "a course designer and material provider" (Acharya, 2024, p. 485). Many teachers taught the ESP module to PhD students in different departments (Computer Science, Economics, History....). Meanwhile, they have designed ESP syllabi according to the learners' needs in each department. In this respect, syllabus design is a strong indicator of teacher autonomy as indicated by Haramboure (1996).

- **Teacher Training in English-Medium Instruction**

The majority of teachers in the Department of English participated in teacher training for teachers of other specialties during the academic year '2022-2023' within the ministry's new direction towards the implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI). Although teachers of English showed resistance at the beginning due to their heavy workload, they ultimately contributed to the training. Teachers demonstrated a high level of autonomy during EMI training; they cooperatively designed a common syllabus of General English that was suitable for all the specialties. In addition, they either adapted existing syllabi and textbooks or designed their own syllabi in domains where no ESP textbooks exist. The following quotation outlines the qualities and roles of the teacher trainer:

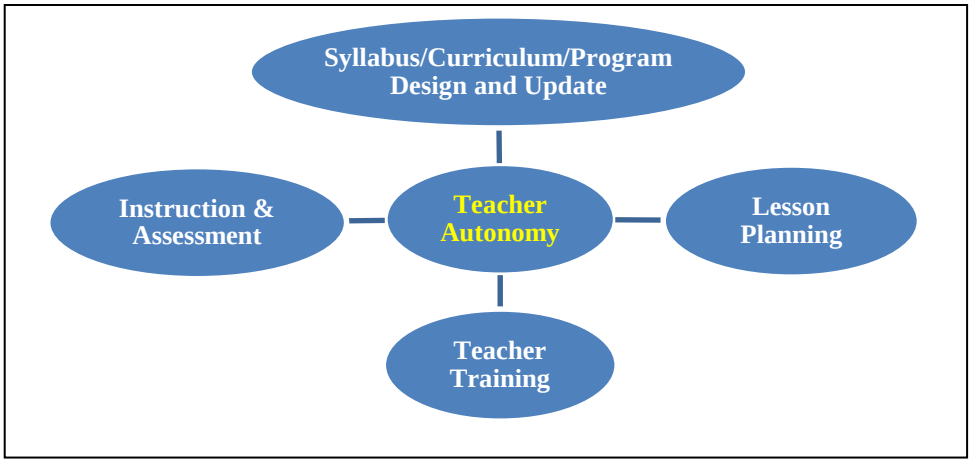
> Conducts training in familiar or predictable situations largely based on the trainer's own teaching experience. Deals with predictable individual needs using basic strategies. Demonstrates basic sensitivity to diversity when planning and conducting training. Conducts training for diverse groups in a variety of situations based on their own and others' teaching experience. Plans in advance to deal with individual needs and attempts to deal with emergent needs using a range of strategies. Demonstrates a diversity-oriented approach to planning and conducting training.

(*Cambridge English Language Assessment*, 2016)

As explained in the aforementioned quote, training is a preplanned process based on the trainees' needs and guided by the trainer's prior professional experience. This highlights the multi-dimensional role of the trainer to keep training responsive and productive.

Based on the results of the present research, the following descriptive model was designed to specify the pedagogical areas that require teacher autonomy in TEFL:

Fig 1.1 A Model of Pedagogical Areas that Require Teacher Autonomy



4. CONCLUSION

This research focused on the pedagogical practices that reflect teacher autonomy in foreign language learning. Eight pedagogical practices were identified and discussed. Accordingly, a model of teacher autonomy was designed to specify the main pedagogical areas that necessitate teacher autonomy. It is highly recommended that the topic of teacher autonomy should be investigated in Algerian Higher Education to identify effective strategies for its enhancement. Future research can provide valuable insights on how teacher autonomy fosters learner autonomy through effective syllabus and curriculum design, lesson planning, efficient instruction and effective assessment.

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