



Exploring Algerian EFL Students' Readiness for Autonomous Learning

دراسة جاهزية طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية للتعلم الذاتي في الجزائر

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Received: 01/10/2024 Accepted: 11/12/2024 published: 20/12/2024

تاريخ الاستلام: 2024/10/01 تاريخ القبول: 2024/12/11 تاريخ النشر: 2024/12/20

Abstract:

For more than three decades, great attention was given to the promotion of autonomy in the field of language learning. It is argued that the educational and cultural contexts affect the realization of learner autonomy. Accordingly, it is important to examine students' readiness to take control of their learning before attempting to foster their autonomy. This study investigates the extent to which EFL students at the Department of English, Batna 2 University are ready to learn autonomously. To this end, the study adopted a survey method. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. These data were then analyzed using the statistical software SPSS. The results indicated that students were ready to be autonomous. They were quite motivated, demonstrating a high level of metacognitive strategy use, a high sense of responsibility towards learning, and high engagement in activities outside the class.

Key words: EFL students; learner autonomy; readiness; survey method.

الملخص

لأكثر من ثلاث عقود، أولي اهتمام كبير لتعزيز الاستقلال الذاتي في مجال تعلم اللغات الأجنبية. ويُقال إن للسياقات التعليمية والثقافية دور في تحقيق استقلالية المتعلم. وبناءً على ذلك، من المهم فحص مدى جاهزية الطلاب لتحمل مسؤولية تعلمهم قبل محاولة تعزيز استقلاليتهم. تبحث هذه الدراسة في مدى استعداد طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة باتنة 2 للتعلم بشكل مستقل. تبنت الدراسة منهج المسح، حيث تم جمع البيانات بواسطة استبيان، ثم تم تحليلها باستخدام البرنامج الإحصائي SPSS. أشارت النتائج إلى أن الطلاب كانوا مستعدين ليكونوا مستقلين. اظهروا مستويات عالية فيما يخص دافعتهم للتعلم الذاتي، واستخدامهم لاستراتيجيات التعلم ما وراء المعرفة، وتحملهم مسؤولية تعلمهم، ومشاركتهم في أنشطة التعلم الذاتي.

كلمات مفتاحية: طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، استقلالية المتعلم، جاهزية، منهج المسح.



Introduction

The increasing interest in preparing learners who can pursue lifelong learning beyond the borders of the classroom has given rise to the concept of “learner autonomy”. For more than three decades, the term has received great attention from scholars across the globe. This is manifested in their books and articles, wherein they have provided several definitions and descriptions to the term (Cotterall, 1995; Little, 1991).

Learner autonomy, as defined by Holec (1981, as cited in Little, 1991), refers to the learner’s capability to assume control of their own learning. In other words, they are responsible for making decisions regarding every aspect of the learning process. In this respect, Dam et al. (1990) introduced the social aspect, maintaining that autonomy involves not only the ability and willingness to act independently but also the readiness to cooperate as a socially responsible individual.

It is a commonly held view that learner autonomy is essential for successful language learning as it assists learners to cultivate critical thinking skills and shoulder more responsibility (Benson, 2011). In many countries, there was a significant emphasis on fostering learner autonomy among foreign language learners. Certainly, numerous institutions have designed innovative programs to meet this goal (Benson & Lor, 1998).

However, while the concept might appear ideal in theory, it can encounter difficulties when put into practice. Much of the literature suggests that the idea of learner autonomy can be perceived and practiced in varied ways depending on cultural and educational settings (Holliday, 2003; Littlewood, 1999). It is argued that the notion has limited applicability to non-Western contexts (Pennycook, 1997, cited in Chan et al., 2002). Accordingly, before attempting to foster learner autonomy, it is important to examine how prepared students are to assume such responsibility (Cotterall, 1999; Koçak, 2003; Ming & Alias, 2007; Yıldırım, 2008).

For this, the current research aims at investigating the extent to which EFL students are ready for autonomous learning in the Algerian higher education context. Thus, the questions that guided data collection were:

1. To what extent are the students motivated to learn English?
2. To what extent do they use metacognitive strategies?
3. How do students perceive their responsibilities and those of their teachers in learning English?
4. What out-of-class practices do they engage in to foster autonomous learning?

1. Literature Review

1.1 Factors Influencing the Promotion of Autonomous Learning

Learner autonomy is a crucial element in effective language learning. It is worth stressing that the attainment of learner autonomy is shaped by certain conditions that determine how ready EFL students are to take charge of their learning.

The first fundamental factor is the level of motivation. Most scholars seem to agree that learner autonomy is closely related to motivation. Indeed, autonomy fosters motivation, resulting in greater success in language learning (Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Furthermore, Chan et al.



(2002) explored another relationship, concluding that motivation plays an influential role in determining how ready students are for learner autonomy.

Another factor that demonstrates learners' readiness for autonomous learning is metacognitive strategies. According to Wenden (1991), these strategies involve the planning of the student's learning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. Possessing metacognitive strategies is crucial for language learners as it will assist them to develop autonomy and take control of their learning process (Oxford, 1990).

Thirdly, autonomy is strongly linked to responsibility. Certainly, responsible learners believe that their efforts are crucial for their progress in learning and act accordingly. They demonstrate willingness to collaborate with their teacher and peers. Moreover, they monitor their progress and make use of any available opportunities (Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

Lastly, engaging in voluntary learning activities that take place outside the regular classroom is mainly associated with the principles of autonomous learning. In support of this, Chan (2001) stated clearly that learners who frequently participate in various out-of-class activities are autonomous.

1.2 Students' Readiness for Autonomous Learning

One of the pioneering investigations into students' readiness to be autonomous was carried out by Cotterall (1999) in New Zealand. Using a 90-item questionnaire, the study investigated the beliefs of 131 learners of English regarding six factors. These latter involved the teacher's role, the feedback's role, learners' sense of self-efficacy, essential strategies, dimensions of strategies-related behavior, and the nature of language learning. The findings indicated that students' beliefs strongly impact their learner autonomy behavior.

Another study was conducted by Chan (2001) in Hong Kong, which explored the perceptions of 20 students through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. Her research focused on learners' perceptions with regard to four main dimensions: aims and motivation of learning English, learners and teacher's role in the learning process, learning styles and preferences, and perceptions of learner autonomy. She concluded that learner autonomy can be implemented within tertiary education. Indeed, the results demonstrated students' great awareness of their own and teachers' roles. Additionally, they were reasonably autonomous in several ways. However, these results were somewhat unexpected since the students had traditional and authoritative backgrounds.

In a different study, Koçak (2003) investigated, via a questionnaire, the readiness of 186 Turkish students to learn autonomously across four areas. These latter included learners' motivation levels in English learning, application of metacognitive strategies, perspectives on their own and teacher's roles, and practices outside the classroom. The findings indicated that students demonstrated motivation and tended to employ some metacognitive strategies, yet they perceived the teacher to be responsible for most of the tasks. Additionally, the students, to a small extent, engaged in out-of-class activities to enhance their English. Regarding how the four areas relate to learners' gender, proficiency, and major, it was apparent that females and students with an elementary level showed greater motivation to learn English. Females seemed to employ a greater number of metacognitive strategies. Moreover, there was no significant difference in students' perception of responsibility with regard to gender, proficiency, and major. Finally, intermediate-level learners were more engaged in out-of-class activities.

Attempting to examine how ready EFL students are to take control of their learning in the Arab context, Alrabai (2017) investigated 319 Saudi learners' views of their responsibilities, decision-

making activities, motivation, engagement in activities related to autonomy, and ability to behave autonomously. For data collection, the author used a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. He concluded that the students had a low level of readiness for learner autonomy. They demonstrated a low level of responsibility and moderate levels of ability and motivation. Additionally, the students were rarely involved in self-directed activities, and were highly dependent on the teacher.

The aforementioned studies have indicated that learners from different cultures show different levels of readiness for learner autonomy. Thus, before attempting to develop learner autonomy in a particular culture, learners' readiness for such responsibility should be considered. However, it is noteworthy that all these contributions have been made in foreign countries. Only a few studies have tackled EFL students' readiness to assume control of their learning within the Algerian context. For this, the current study attempts to bridge this gap.

2. Methodology

2.1 Method

This study investigates EFL students' level of readiness for autonomous learning. To get a clear picture of students' perceptions in terms of their motivation level, use of metacognitive strategies, responsibilities towards learning, and involvement in autonomous learning behaviors, the researcher employed the survey method.

2.2 Population and Sample

The target population for this study includes first-year master's students specializing in Didactics of Foreign Languages at the Department of English, Batna 2 University. These participants have been selected since they are future teachers of English. Thus, they are more concerned with pedagogical and educational issues. Our population consisted of one hundred (100) students during the academic year (2022-2023). However, due to some students being unavailable or unwilling to participate in the survey, the author used convenience sampling to select 56 participants.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

For data collection, a structured questionnaire was distributed to our sample. The questionnaire was used since it saves time and effort. It contains 37 items that are measured on a 2-point Likert scale. It consists of four sections adapted from Alrabai (2017), Koçak (2003), and Spratt et al. (2002):

- Section One aims at assessing students' motivation level. It comprises eight items.
- Section Two has eight items focusing on students' use of metacognitive strategies.
- Section Three has ten items on students' perceptions of responsibilities toward learning.
- Section Four contains eleven items exploring the out-of-class activities students participated in to develop their autonomy.

To test the reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated for each section: **(.701) Section One**, **(.604) Section Two**, **(.610) Section Three**, and **(.769) Section Four**. The results indicate an acceptable level of internal consistency.

2.4 Data Analysis



Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were conducted to analyze the collected data from the questionnaire using the statistical software SPSS.

3. Results

3.1 Students' Level of Motivation

This section aims at gauging levels of students' motivation. The following table illustrates the ranking used to classify the motivation level of students.

Table 1: Ranking of Students' Motivation Level

Ranking	Percentage
Highly Motivated	80% - 100%
Quite Motivated	60% - 80%
Moderately Motivated	40% - 60%
Poorly Motivated	20% - 40%
Not at all Motivated	Below 20%

Details of the results obtained are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' Level of Motivation

Motivation Level		Yes		No	
		N	%	N	%
1	I enjoy learning English.	53	94,64%	3	5,36%
2	When I learn English, I do not give up easily on tasks that are hard.	38	67,85%	18	32,15%
3	I want to keep studying English for a long time.	46	82,14%	10	17,86%
4	I feel satisfied during my classes.	34	60,71%	22	39,29%
5	Even if it is not mandatory to attend English classes, I'd still attend regularly.	42	75%	14	25%
6	If I improve my English skills, I will be able to secure a higher-paying job.	38	67,85%	18	32,15%
7	I learn English to immigrate to other countries.	34	60,71%	22	39,29%
8	I learn English to get good grades.	37	66,07%	19	33,93%
Total %		71,87%		28,13%	
Evaluation		Yes			

Table 2 shows that the vast majority (71,87%) of the answers concerning students' level of motivation reflected "Yes". This suggests that learners are quite motivated.

It is clearly seen from Table 2 that every item was rated highly. Item 1, I enjoy learning English, was rated the highest (94,64%), followed by item 3, I want to keep studying English for a long time (82,14%), and then item 5, Even if it is not mandatory to attend English classes, I'd still attend regularly (75%). Moreover, more than half of the students (67,85%, 66,07%, and 60,71%) believed that learning English would help them secure a higher-paying job, get good grades, and immigrate to other countries. It can be argued that students were motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In other words, they were interested not only in learning English for communicative purposes, to get a well-paid job, or to earn good grades, but also in learning it for its own sake.

3.2 Students' use of Metacognitive Strategies

Table 3 displays the results concerning the metacognitive strategies that students employed in their English learning process.

Table 3: Students' use of Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive Strategies use		Yes		No	
		N	%	N	%
9	When learning a new grammar rule, I consider how it relates to the previously learned rules.	43	76,78%	13	23,22%
10	When preparing for my English course, I pick out key points and create diagrams or tables for better understanding.	37	66,07%	19	33,93%
11	I try to grasp the meaning of a word by breaking it down into parts that are understandable to me.	37	66,07%	19	33,93%
12	I incorporate new English words into sentences so I can remember them easily.	50	89,28%	6	10,72%
13	I set my own learning goals.	48	85,71%	8	14,29%
14	I learn English effectively when I reflect on why I make mistakes.	50	89,28%	6	10,72%
15	I consistently try to assess my progress when learning English.	44	78,57%	12	21,43%
16	When I study for my English exam, I try to identify any structures and terms I do not fully grasp.	48	85,71%	8	14,29%
Total %		71,42%		28,13%	
Evaluation		Yes			

As it is shown in Table 3, students tended, to a large extent, to employ metacognitive strategies when learning English (71,42% = Yes). Indeed, out of the eight suggested metacognitive strategies, the ones that had the highest percentages were:

- I incorporate new English words into sentences so I can remember them easily (89,28%)
- I learn English effectively when I reflect on why I make mistakes (89,28%)
- I set my own learning goals (85,71%)
- When I study for my English exam, I try to identify any structures and terms I do not fully grasp (85,71%)
- I consistently try to assess my progress when learning English (78,57%)

In other words, the majority of students are aware of the importance of using strategies such as planning their learning, self-evaluation, and self-monitoring in the language learning process. Moreover, the remaining three activities which were related to the planning of their learning (items 9, 10, and 11) attained scores of 76,78%, 66,07%, and 66,07% respectively.

3.3 Students' Views of their own and Teachers' Responsibilities in Learning English

The items in this section focus on how learners viewed both their own responsibilities and those of their teachers in various aspects of learning. Table 4 presents the students' answers.

Table 4: Students' Views of Responsibilities towards Learning

In your class, whose RESPONSIBILITY should it be to:		Student's responsibility		Teacher's responsibility	
		N	%	N	%
17	Make decisions about the objectives of your English course	17	30,35%	39	69,65%
18	Make decisions about what should be learned next in your English lessons.	12	21,42%	44	78,58%
19	Select the materials or activities in your English classes.	15	26,78%	41	73,22%
20	Plan the time to be spent on each task	17	30,35%	39	69,65%
21	Motivate you to learn English.	45	80,35%	11	19,65%
22	Ensure you are progressing during lessons.	32	57,14%	24	42,86%
23	Push you to work harder.	37	66,07%	19	33,93%
24	Make decisions about what should be learned outside the class.	54	96,42%	2	3,58%
25	Recognize your areas of weakness in English.	38	67,85%	18	32,15%
26	Evaluate your learning.	20	35,71%	36	64,29%
Total %		51,24 %		48,76%	
Evaluation		Student's Responsibility			

From Table 4, it is apparent that (51,24%) of the students tended to take responsibility for their English learning. Certainly, the items for which participants reported a high degree of responsibility included:

- Motivate yourself to learn English (80,35%).
- Push yourself to work harder (66,07%).
- Make decisions about what should be learned outside the class (96,42%).
- Recognize your areas of weakness in English (67,85%).
- Ensure you are progressing during lessons (57,14%).

However, with regard to methodological areas which were primarily related to decision-making activities and evaluation, the teacher appeared to have the greatest responsibility. To put it another way, teacher's responsibility for (item 17, 18, 19, 20, and 26) attained the highest percentages (69,65%, 78,58%, 73,22%, 69,65%, and 64,29%) respectively.

3.4 Students' Out-of-class Practices to Learn English Autonomously

Section Four of the questionnaire explores the out-of-class activities learners engaged in. These activities are voluntary and intended to enhance students' learning experiences. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Students' Out-of-class Practices to Learn Autonomously

Students' Participation in Out-of-class Activities		Yes		No	
		N	%	N	%
27	I read grammar books on my own.	27	48,21%	29	51,79%
28	I do assignments that are not mandatory.	23	41,07%	33	58,93%
29	I note down any new words or meanings.	43	76,78%	13	23,22
30	I read books, magazines or articles in English.	43	76,78%	13	23,22
31	I watch TV programs, movies, or series in English	54	96,42%	2	3,58%
32	I listen to English radio, songs, or podcasts.	50	89,28%	6	10,72%
33	I speak with foreigners in English.	29	51,78%	27	48,22%
34	I practice English with my friends.	33	58,92%	23	41,08%
35	I participate in group self-study to learn English.	30	53,57%	26	46,43%
36	I do journaling in English.	35	62,5%	21	37,5%
37	I do revisions not required by the teacher.	47	83,92%	9	16,08%
Total %		67,20%		32,8%	
Evaluation		Yes			

As demonstrated in Table 5, the majority (67,20%) of the answers corresponded to "Yes". This means that most learners took part in activities outside the classroom to learn English.

Closer inspection of the table shows that out of the 11 out-of-class activities, learners appeared to carry out nine. These include:

- I note down any new words or meanings (76,78%)
- I read books, magazines or articles in English (76,78%)
- I watch TV programs, movies, or series in English (96,42%)
- I listen to English radio, songs, or podcasts (89,28%)
- I speak with foreigners in English (51,78%)
- I practice English with my friends (58,92%)
- I participate in group self-study to learn English (53,57%)
- I do journaling in English (62,5%)
- I do revisions not required by the teacher (83,92%)

On the other hand, the least practiced activities were:

- I read grammar books on my own (48,21%)
- I do assignments that are not mandatory (41,07%)

In short, it can be said that the students showed a tendency to carry out both traditional and technology-based activities. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that these activities were related to



improving the four skills. However, learners did not show a willingness to read grammar books on their own or to complete non-mandatory assignments.

4. Discussion

The first question of this research seeks to examine the extent to which learners are motivated to learn English. The findings show that, overall, students were quite motivated. They were not solely motivated extrinsically. In fact, they demonstrated intrinsic motivation by expressing their determination to continue learning English in the long term. Additionally, they appeared to be satisfied and to voluntarily attend their classes. These results represent a direct demonstration of learners' high level of readiness to be autonomous. Certainly, motivation serves as a key factor influencing the extent to which students are ready to be autonomous (Spratt et al., 2002). Therefore, having motivated learners provides EFL teachers at the Department of English, Batna 2, with an opportunity to promote learner autonomy in their classes. Our results are in line with the findings of Sönmez (2016).

With respect to the second question on the extent to which students employ metacognitive strategies, it is found that they, to a large extent, tended to engage in strategies such as planning of their learning, self-evaluation, and self-monitoring. In effect, the students showed an awareness of setting their own goals and the steps necessary to achieve them. Moreover, the frequent use of self-evaluation and self-monitoring strategies demonstrates their ability to assess their progress and make necessary adjustments. This is a clear indicator of the students' ability to take control of their learning. Our results are supported by Oxford's (2011) claim that students who plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning processes are more likely to become independent, lifelong learners.

The purpose of the third question is to investigate learners' views as to who has the responsibility in different aspects of learning. Overall, the results indicate that students viewed themselves as responsible for half of the areas of learning. These include working hard, deciding on out-of-class activities, motivating themselves, recognizing their weaknesses, and monitoring their learning. This implies that they want to be involved in and contribute to their learning process. However, they put the whole responsibility on the teacher with regard to methodological areas. It seems possible that learners' reliance on their teachers in these areas is attributed to the teacher-centered approach. Indeed, EFL teachers at the Department of English, Batna 2, did not allow their students to be involved in decisions regarding the objectives, learning materials, or assessments of their learning (Hamadache & Mariko, 2022). It is noteworthy, however, that promoting learner autonomy requires students to assume responsibility for every aspect of their learning. This includes making decisions about the contents, objectives, monitoring, and evaluating the acquired knowledge and skills (Holec, 1981, as cited in Little, 1991). Our findings align with previous research (Yıldırım, 2008).

The final question aims to explore the voluntary out-of-class activities learners engaged in to improve their English skills. The findings show that the students demonstrated signs of autonomous learning behaviors. Indeed, they seemed to use technology to carry out activities, such as listening to songs and podcasts, watching movies, series, and TV programs, or speaking with foreigners in English. It is interesting that, although these Generation "Z" students were born in the age of technology, they still engage in traditional activities to improve their reading and writing skills. Our results support

Victori and Lockhart's (1995) study, where students recognized the significance of extensive language use across all four skills outside the classroom. Moreover, it is of utmost importance for EFL teachers who seek to promote learner autonomy to build upon the out-of-class activities students are engaging in, rather than pushing for a major shift in their behaviors.

Conclusion

The main objective of the current research is to examine the extent to which EFL students at the Department of English, Batna 2 University, are ready for autonomous learning. The results confirm students' high level of readiness to learn autonomously. Certainly, they were quite motivated, demonstrating a high level of metacognitive strategy use, a high sense of responsibility towards learning, and high involvement in out-of-class activities. Despite the limited sample size in the present study, the insights gained may be helpful to educators and curriculum designers who seek to foster learner autonomy across diverse educational and cultural contexts. However, our results cannot be generalized to all Algerian universities. Therefore, further research using a larger sample and a mixed-methods approach in the Algerian context is essential to establish firmer conclusions regarding the readiness of EFL students for learner autonomy.

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