

TOWARDS A BETTER EFL LEARNERS' MANAGEMENT OF THEIR INDEPENDENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a research work that has sought to investigate the characteristics of students' management of their English language learning and has attempted to correlate it with effective, independent, autonomous learning. It stresses the importance of improving students 'learning how to learn skills' through implementing an instructional programme based on autonomy fostering. It is undeniable that the ultimate objective of Education is targeting quality assurance and enhancement for facing twenty first century education challenges. Therefore, the primary goal of higher education is to prepare learners to function independently and appropriately into this world in constant motion. It is our role as teachers to equip them with the necessary tools and skills so that they manage both content and the way to learn it and use it for future employability objectives. Major researches in the area of learner autonomy in language learning will be reviewed drawing the characteristics of the autonomous learning behaviour as well as the main variables influencing its practice. The research adhered to a descriptive interpretative type of research, where we have attempted to investigate whether students were able to manage, monitor and self-regulate their learning and make it more self-directed and more successful. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected thanks to a triangulation of research tools used before and after the instruction in learning skills and competencies. Some of the results revealed that while for the majority of learners, autonomy fostering was welcomed and gave significant results, not all students were ready to function independently from a teacher for their language learning.

Key words: Autonomy fostering- language learning-higher education.

1. Introduction

Among the key concepts and key issues in language education today is Autonomy, or what we often refer to as the capacity to take charge of, and be responsible for one's own learning. Autonomy is, indeed, a goal to reach in today's instruction, especially at higher-level ones. More than a new tendency and orientation in today's pedagogy, it is a necessary instructional component the teacher has to foster in his learners.

It is often the case that students reach university with different backgrounds and different levels. Most of the time, they show very little disposition for independent learning that they are supposed to have acquired before and which is a prerequisite for undertaking university studies.

In this paper, we address the idea that empowering learners with the essential means to manage their own learning, to make appropriate choices and options and reach quality in view of reaching national and international stakes should be on top of the priorities of university teaching today. One of the key roles higher education has to efficiently fulfil at present time is to enhance students 'learning management skills and foster their ability to function independently and appropriately in this increasingly and inevitably global world. If education has concentrated so far on imparting knowledge, it is essential today that it provides

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the means to manage it and use it for study purposes but, also and so much, for adapting to new and future challenges.

As far as the English language is concerned, it has achieved a legitimate place in different educational stages in Algeria because of its international status. As it is strategic to consider that the access to knowledge requires the mastery of languages, full priority has been given for the learning of foreign languages and English is still at the top of the list. In addition, Learner autonomy is a concept that finds its place appropriately in the LMD (Licence, Master and Doctorate) context and is one of its objectives. Today the LMD system has been generalised throughout all universities in Algeria, in different fields and among them English language learning. According to the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research (March, 2010), the system has been adopted in the frame of the global reform of Higher Education as a way to participate into the development and modernisation of the Algerian University. By adopting the LMD system at tertiary education, the objective was to integrate the new international trends and tendencies into higher education by giving the Algerian university the pedagogical, scientific and human means that would make it possible to respond to societal demands of the twenty first century challenges.

From this perception of things, we have undertaken a research work trying to examine some of the issues, which characterise autonomy and independent language learning with an attempt to promote it and foster it in our language classrooms. The investigation has focused on the exploration of the nature of students' management (if any) of their learning. It has stressed students' perceptions and conceptions of their English language learning and has studied the possibility of independent learning fostering in language teaching at University level.

The motivation behind undertaking such a research work sprang out of several years of the researcher's personal experience as a practicing teacher trying to answer the question of: What type of learning management could make language learners become more effective and proficient learners who are able to function independently even after they leave university? Therefore, the aim of the research was to determine the extent to which students were showing any kind of Autonomy. The research also strived to find the best way to foster some kind of Autonomy within learners and see if this had a significant correlation with good and poor language learning behaviour or not. We have then, hypothesised that the answer possibly lied on encouraging learners to take their learning in charge in a better way, by being responsible for it and by managing it in a way to achieve more effective and successful results. We have also hypothesised that developing increased awareness of independent learning and its benefits, will enhance student's capacity to learn independently and that fostering students' autonomous learning through a program would contribute to a higher achievement and motivation in English language learning.

2. Theoretical framework

LA (Learner Autonomy) is a concept used in different fields of education. In 1979, Holec -considered as the father of the concept of autonomy- makes a clear cut with previous teacher- centered methodologies in language learning by stressing the necessity of fostering autonomy within language learners to have results that are more effective in this field. He describes it as **“the ability to take charge of one's own learning”** (1981, p. 103). Many researchers explored the concept in relation to two directions of research:

First, some researchers (mainly in Europe) concentrated on the development of learner autonomy by means of a training in school and independently from it. We can mention the most influential researches of Benson (1997-2001), Dickinson (1987) and Holec (1979-80-81).

The second direction of research focused on identifying the characteristics of “good language learners”, focusing on learners' strategies and strategy training: Wenden & Rubin (1987), O'Mallet & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990-2000-2003), Cohen & Macaro (2007). These researches have indeed been the logical consequence of shifts in educational philosophy, including new variables in language education theories. To these factors we can add wider access to education in relation to international relationship development within the framework of globalisation that increased the need for commercialisation of language provision and easier availability of educational technology (Dafei, 2007).

Autonomy is often referred to as a multi-dimensional construct. It is therefore, difficult to be defined and to be distinguished from the other concepts related to it. In this study, we have associated the term autonomy to the one of independent learning as we think learners need to be shown how to be autonomous in their way of becoming independent. Since the 1970's, the pedagogical field research interest in EFL has shifted from teacher-centred methodologies to a greater focus on students' learning. Increasing numbers of studies have been undertaken from the students' perspective, and teachers and researchers started to recognise the importance of the role students can play in their learning of a language. For language researchers and teachers, language learners are becoming the main source of information for classroom activities. The concept of LA became then, an area that has moved the ideas of teaching and learning professionals into more responsibility sharing on the part of the learner with the educational team. Therefore, the focus today is on learners being able to assume a more active and participatory role than is usual in traditional language teaching approaches. Students are more and more being given practice in decision-making, and thus accepting responsibility for their own learning and gaining experience in managing and self-assessing their progress.

The concept was later on, largely promoted by researchers in the field especially in the context of language education in Europe, and since then, has become largely researched and taken as a goal of instruction in many parts of the world. From a capacity that learners can develop, to a process to be acquired or an individual characteristic, researchers agree that an autonomous learner shows a positive attitude towards learning, is equipped with effective learning strategies, reflects upon his own learning, interacts continuously with others and manages his learning behaviour in a more personal way. For Benson (2001:02): **"Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity to take control over ones' own learning."** He makes, in fact, the distinction between the construct of control and the one of taking in charge or the one of responsibility, as control seems to be more open to investigation according to him. He sees the concept not as a method but as an attribute to the learners' approach to the learning process. For him, Autonomy is a legitimate goal of language instruction as it is the individuals' right to possess the means for learning which is supposed to be a life-long need. For other researchers, it seems that independent learners make use of a 'learning contract' Knowles (1975), with themselves and it includes setting goals for learning, using different learning resources and strategies, and need to have evidence of accomplishment. Showing an autonomous behaviour involves, therefore, to be more responsible for one's learning, increasing self-esteem and continually questioning one's learning, checking progress and identifying causes of failure.

It must be noted, however, that although LA has benefitted from the contribution from several expert authors 'researches, it has been the subject of many conflicting views. In fact, researchers did not agree on the concepts of LA and self-direction for example. Let us take as an illustration, Dickinson's (1987) distinction between autonomy that the individual manifests as an attitude of responsibility in a particular situation, and between self-direction as being the attitude of responsibility. This can be contrasted to Holec's (1979) early definition that referred to LA as the learner's ability to be responsible for his own learning, and later, in (1981) he spoke of an attitude of responsibility. At the same time, the concept of 'self-direction' meant for Holec, the learning situation where the learner displays his Autonomy. In addition, while Little (1996) assumes LA is a matter of maturity so that it is often achieved by older learners, Dam (1995) demonstrated that there was no age-related barriers to LA through her classroom experiments with younger learners.

Rivers (2001, In Oxford, 2003) has referred to LA as being a request of change of the content and structure of the course on the part of the learner. We would therefore, define it as a characteristic of the individual displaying intentional behaviour in his everyday learning. In addition, according to Little (2000), the principle of reflectivity that involves learners to reflect on their own learning processes is already implied by the principle of learner empowerment. If learners are given the opportunity and ability to do so, this would indeed, better involve them in learning. He also stresses the fact that reflection in the autonomous language classroom, begins as a collaborative activity in which teacher and learners seek to make explicit their joint understanding of the process they are engaged in. For him, reflection is necessary and must be pursued as a routine that expands learners' responsibility. This is likely to be made possible through making students word out their own reflections about their learning. Therefore, autonomy involves being independent from a teacher but also involves getting the means to be so and this can be well given by a teacher. Independent learners are, thus, engaged in self-regulation strategies and are characterised

by being reflective learners. They know how to manage, plan and monitor their learning, and establish objectives specific to their own needs. They evaluate their own learning and constantly check their understanding and seek to correct their errors.

It is essential to note, here, that what makes the autonomy approach much discussed and debatable among teachers is its practical implementation, especially when it comes to the cultural side of the teaching situation. Several studies have revealed that self-directedness in learning is a form of socio-cultural awareness (Sert, 2006). Many investigated the question of autonomy and its relationship with one's own culture and studied how the two interact in different learning contexts. Thus, they have argued that the idea of LA is a Western invention, inappropriate to other culturally different educational contexts. In some socio-cultural contexts, the learner may experience a restricted individual freedom, depending on the way teaching and learning are defined by the means available, learner awareness and willingness, the teacher's awareness, willingness and autonomy, the institution's goals, the curriculum planners, decision makers and the social norms concerning learning. The concept may have a different meaning in diverse contexts of a particular culture and may not always be an appropriate educational goal across cultures.

3. Autonomy and its Influence on Language Learning

Several authors claim the positive correlation of LA and effective language learning. Benson (2001) suggests that Autonomy can be a combination of directly and indirectly observable behaviours where learners show control over an aspect of their learning process. He claims that this control can be on the management of learning or control over the content of their learning, which is leading to achievement. Several studies among them the one undertaken by (Dafei, 2007) indicate that students' language proficiency is very often influenced and is positively and significantly related to learner autonomy. It is important to note, however, that not all learners may have such a naturally developed level of autonomy.

Researchers in the field have used the term autonomisation. Little (1991-2000) to refer to the process of helping learners become more autonomous. This is influenced by Neo-Vygotskian psychology where learning is seen as a process requiring support from the teacher. Therefore, the teacher has an important role, providing learners with a classroom environment supportive of an effective learning. However, as stressed by Little (2003) sometimes all forms of autonomisation threaten the power structures of educational culture. For example, "learning how to learn" skills appear inseparable from a teaching content. Consequently, there is an important distinction to be made here as for the difference between the process of autonomisation that is undertaken by the teacher inside the classroom in order to foster autonomy within learners and autonomous learning that is displayed by the individual learner himself.

Although no evidence -and evidence is often hard to obtain here- has been obtained in the field, a number of researchers claim and assert that autonomy is unquestionably and necessarily related to successful language learning. Little (1994, p. 341) in Benson (2007:740) claims that "**all genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous**". Language learners often show a kind of control or what may be referred to as management of their learning processes as well as over the content presented to them. Nevertheless, and however logical this claim may be, it does not make the task of fostering autonomy in learners a guarantee of successful language learning. Indeed, it is difficult to implement it and to evaluate its success and effectiveness. However, it remains essential for life-long learning.

The different concepts put forward by research although sometimes, different have all one common feature: they all describe an independent, responsible learner who takes his learning in charge so as to manage it in his own way, according to his own pace and progression, in the objective to fulfill his pre-established language learning aims.

3. Research context and methods

The present investigation takes the form of a descriptive, interpretative type of research as it involves the description and systematic collection and analysis of data in a learning practice context with its interpretation. It is also a case study research type as it involved the study of first-year LMD students at the department of English at Djilali Liabes University, Sidi-bel-Abbes, Algeria. It must be noted that a triangulation of the research tools has been used all along the data collection phases in order to cross

check the results and validate them. We have used questionnaires, interviews, a learning how to learn skills instruction, proficiency tests, and classroom observation through impressionistic notes taking. We have tried to maximize our evaluation of the autonomous learning behaviour -as it is difficult to be tested- as objectively as possible-. Evidence of learners' autonomous behaviour is often difficult to establish based on students' performance data. Indeed, given the abstractness of the concept, it was felt necessary to gather and consider a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources of data.

The research work, as mentioned earlier, has sought to investigate the extent to which learners showed any kind of independent learning and whether this had any significant correlation with their effective language learning. Therefore, the investigation has focused on the evaluation of students' ability to set objectives for their learning, to identify their needs and their difficulties, their individual learning potential, their ability to reflect on their learning and self-assess their strengths and weaknesses along with their language aptitude assessment.

The data was gathered all along the academic year, and then was compiled at the end of it. However structured it may be, data collection and its results should be regarded as preliminary rather than hard evidence of specific findings. The learning how to learn skills training was undertaken during fifteen weeks between semester one and semester two. It may constitute a particular challenge when promoting independent language learning because those skills are more likely to be areas where learners are likely to need most support. However, before this step was undertaken, students' way of organising their language learning was investigated through the evaluation of the way they control their learning and the extent to which they are responsible for its management.

Four phases made up the data collection methodology: First, a diagnostic phase with the setting of learning goals and learning management ability evaluation, the language proficiency test, the questionnaire to teachers, and the questionnaire to students. This phase aimed at diagnosing students' ability to set goals for their learning, determine their needs and difficulties as well as evaluate their language proficiency and learning management potential. The second phase included the training in some learning how to learn skills, the classroom observation as well as students' self-report comments. The third phase consisted in testing students' proficiency gains after the training and awareness raising about learning management skills. It included a post-training test that aimed also at testing students' linguistic development after the training and a post-training interview. The last phase consisted in analysing the results obtained and their interpretation in relation to the research questions and hypotheses.

The researcher has first focused on students' setting of goals, as they are an indicator of students' perceptions of learning and achievement. In fact, achievement goals have been defined, as reasons or purposes individuals perceive for achievement in learning (Ames, 1992; Urdan & Mestas, 2006) in (Mansfield, 2009). Goals are generally defined as the mental representations of desired outcomes that initiate and direct behaviour. In addition, Senko and Harackiewicz (2005) -in the same source- argue that individuals may either intensify or switch goals depending on feedback and evaluation of goals. The researcher also strived to determine whether students were able to manage their learning through planning their study time, managing their learning tasks and selecting appropriate material and content.

Questionnaires and interviews were used to investigate learners and teachers' perceptions of independent learning. The questionnaire to teachers aimed at collecting significant data on learners' autonomous learning behaviour -if any- from teachers' viewpoint. It also aimed at measuring teachers' awareness of this aspect and the space they devoted to fostering it in their teaching.

As far as the Questionnaire to Students is concerned, data was first collected by means of a two-part questionnaire. The statements of questionnaire one have sought to establish whether learners reaching university knew how to determine their immediate objectives and needs. Its objective was to determine whether students were able to identify and look for learning resources and assess their learning progress. It was administered in the first week of the training course. Part two of the questionnaire to students aimed at determining the extent to which students showed any kind of autonomous behaviour or a readiness to develop it. The open response questions that asked students to justify their yes/no answers encouraged students to give additional information on their perception of learning.

The researcher has also used an interview in order to crosscheck and verify the questionnaire and the proficiency tests results. It also aimed at seeking explanations to some students' responses on learning behaviour as well as on their motivation.

On the one hand, we have used the language skills proficiency tests to identify the participants' English language proficiency as well as their areas of difficulty. The first test was used in the beginning of the course, before students received any kind of training. It aimed at testing and evaluating students English language proficiency as well as their ability to deal with some Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, and Written Expression skills essential for academic language learning development.

On the other hand, during the fifteen weeks of the instruction, students were observed at different times. An impressionistic, unstructured classroom observation was used during the course with note taking about any of students' reaction, learning behaviour, motivation or de-motivation related to the programme taught. Regular observation yielded very useful information about students' learning behaviours and all the changes observed in students' dealing with leaning management. Some of students' self-report accounts were recorded too.

Another test (a post-training test) was administered to students at the end of the training. It was used in order to measure students' proficiency gains after the training. It aimed at testing students' ability to use the skills taught to them and eventually determine any progress in English language proficiency. Indeed, it would be difficult to foresee any progress and achievement in language as being the result of one factor only. Nevertheless, it was significantly important to assess students' linguistic progress as compared to the beginning of the course.

The learning how to learn instruction has focused on the teaching of some fundamental learning management skills in different language learning areas, essential for students' language development along with a skilled learning management. The training started with making students establish learning goals in the form of short-term and long-term objectives. Then, students were asked to identify their needs and describe their difficulties. Introspective reflection was indirectly promoted.

The training has concentrated on developing the following learning Skills through constant and systematic practice. Examples of such skills are general cognitive skills such as thinking skills involving data gathering skills that would require students to learn to acquire information by observation, locate information from a variety of sources, compile, organize, evaluate and interpret information. Intellectual skills involving learners to compare between aspects, ideas, events and situations based on similarities and differences and draw conclusions or inferences from evidence. Interpersonal skills that make learners see things from the point of view of others, give and receive constructive criticism to work effectively with others as a group member.

The training programme has also included the practice of comprehension skills, which enable students to understand written and oral languages along with literary skills and thinking and expression skills practice. Furthermore, the training included developing vocabulary activities, reading skills and strategies practice, making an oral presentation, preparing for tests and examinations, and using reference and internet resources.

4. Main Findings

The results obtained out of the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis suggest first, that some teachers' decisions as for their teaching methodology seem to be based on content rather than on learners' needs and characteristics. Teachers still believed students' motivation can only come from them and that it is not a priority. They seem to be aware of autonomous learning aspects and do even correlate it with a good language proficiency, as all of them said that autonomy was essential to language learning. Although teachers make use of very limited pedagogic means to foster autonomy and self-directed learning, they all agreed on the fact that autonomy fostering should be included in all the modules.

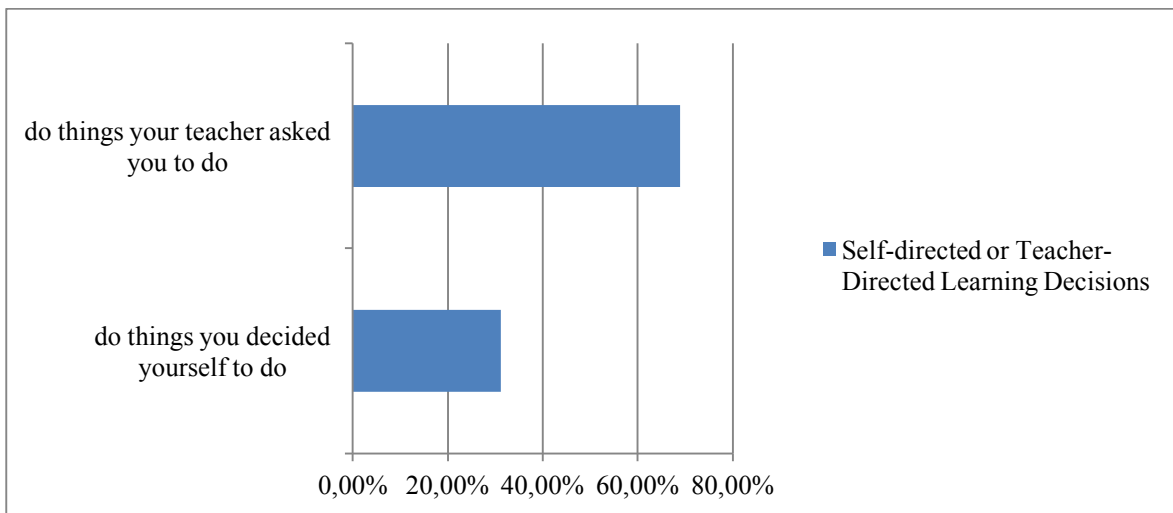
Before the training and awareness raising about LA, we have found that most of students identified their needs as being linguistic only. Most of them were not aware of their 'learning how to learn' needs, of

their roles as learners and of their ability to set long-term and short-term objectives. Many students still over-relied on the teacher's input and help.

Table 1. Students' Perception of their Role as Learners.

Q: How do you see your role as a learner?
A- Perception of students' role reflecting their independence
-my role is more important than the teacher's
-work continuously
-do research
-develop my level with research
-my role is better and more important than before
-not to rely on the teacher
-make efforts-work hard
-succeed in studies and social life
-be more responsible
-read a lot and develop what the teacher gives us
-listening and taking notes
-try to do my best
-take everything seriously
-rely on myself and get knowledge from different sources.
B- Perception of students' role reflecting dependence on the teacher
-doing few things compared to the teacher
-follow teachers
-listen to teachers and understand
-have a good behaviour in class
-take information and knowledge from the teacher
-accept all that the teacher says

Another finding was that students lacked appropriate study skills to manage their learning and make it more effective. Students' identification of their needs showed that they were realistic about their poor linguistic level, but not all of them regarded 'Learning how to learn' skills as immediate needs. Teachers seem to be the only reliable source of knowledge of some students who seem to stick to an old habit of relying solely on the teacher to learn. For them, autonomy was not felt as a need, as they saw their role as still very subordinate to their teachers' one. Overall, students found answering the questionnaire very helpful for them too as they reported being more able to articulate and word their impressions, opinions, learning modes, etc. The following graph illustrates the percentage of students relying more on the teacher or on themselves to learn and describes the extent to which students show some kind of autonomy or not.

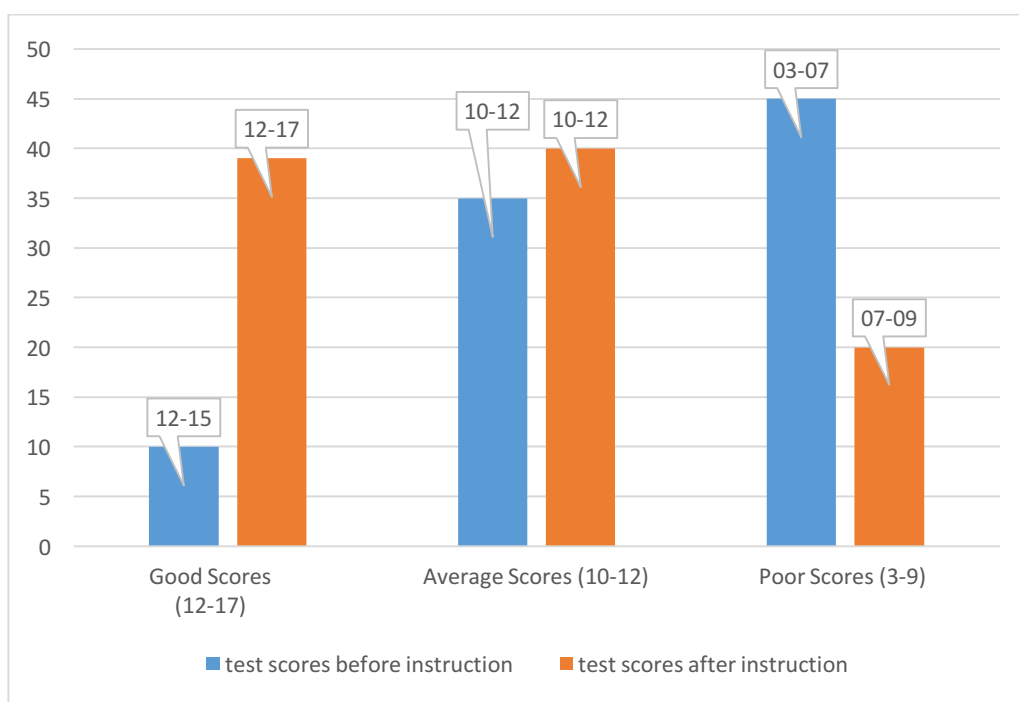


Graph1: Students' Self-directed or teacher-directed learning decisions

Therefore, not all learners displayed autonomous learning nor the learning management abilities for fulfilling it. Moreover, and although few learners showed some aspects of autonomy, they needed more learning skills to be more independent. Another significant finding was that some others still preferred to be guided by a teacher.

One of the key findings was that the majority of students enjoyed being given the means to function independently, and learner training in the use of learning how to learn skills proved having been valuable and beneficial to them. Students reported being satisfied with what they learned in the module that they conceived as important learning gains. They reported having discovered the usefulness of being shown how to learn. Students' motivation and confidence in their study ability were raised as the perceived value of the instruction was a key aspect in the motivation expressed about the 'learning how to learn skills'.

Students' scores at the post-training test appeared to relate to their proficiency level. Overall, the students who obtained good scores in the first proficiency test similarly did in the post-training test. The students showing more autonomy still obtained good scores in the post-training test as shown on the graph below:



Graph 2: Students' scores in the proficiency and the post-training test.

Moreover, the students who obtained poor scores still got bad marks but did slightly better than in the first proficiency test. This may be due to the gains in their proficiency in English language. Indeed, their linguistic level was much better as compared to the beginning. This was also felt through the classroom observation and the self-report comments. However, as some displayed a weak level and a low motivation, they still had difficulties. Although they reported being better able to learn using the learning skills, they still had difficulties with the language and with some modules.

The majority of students performed much better in the post-training test and no autonomous behaviour observed was accompanied -in the majority of the case study- by a low proficiency in the English Language.

Although students reported being very helped by the instruction and by self-assessing their learning and reflecting about it, it remains unclear whether their linguistic progress and learning gains were due to autonomy fostering or not. Little(1991:05) points out at the fact that autonomy is likely to be hard won and its permanence cannot be guaranteed and that the learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may be non-autonomous in another. In addition, Benson (2001:54) stresses the idea that autonomy calls for a fundamental reconceptualization of the learner's role in the learning process. In addition, the description of specific levels of control over learning is a far easier task than the description or measurement of autonomy in general.

5. Pedagogical Implications

In general, the findings in the present study, suggest that learner autonomy fostering in LMD English classes should progressively become an essential syllabus component. The theory is much corresponding to the university students showing more ability, willingness and degree of self-direction in learning. However, sometimes, students are ill prepared for autonomy implementation in their classroom or are simply reluctant to the concept. Teachers are often not ready to leave their role of supremacy over the classroom. However, believing in the necessity of learner autonomy development instead of encouraging their over-dependence on them would indeed bring a change inside the classroom that would be beneficial for both teachers and learners.

The teacher's role then is to support learners and supervise them. This type of support can be seen as a control over learning in initial stages of instruction that allows for more autonomy in later stages. It also requires a change in attitudes, whereby learners and teachers abandon their traditional roles, accept the greater level of responsibility put upon the learner and encourages students to commit themselves to take active part in their learning and in the quality development of their 'learning how to learn' skills.

Most of the time, it is the task of the teacher to adjust the atmosphere of his classroom to his learners' needs, expectations and preferences in the attempt to raise their motivation and help them acquire effective learning habits. For example, teachers may opt for some assignments involving setting goals activities, reading motivation activities, self-assessment activities and self-monitoring activities.

6. Limitations of the Study and Encountered Problems

It must be noted that the practicability of undertaking the present investigation has sometimes been subjected to constraints of time, lack of motivation on the part of learners, lack of objectivity in students' responses and difficulty to identify the variables influencing the learning of the language and the acquisition of a 'learning how to learn' skills. Nevertheless, the researcher has tried to diversify the research tools to obtain the maximum of data to be analysed. In fact, autonomy being difficult to quantify, the research methodology needed to use many and varied means to obtain some results. Because of the slippery nature of the concept and because learning events were difficult to observe, obtaining evidence out of data collection was difficult. It was difficult to distinguish between what constituted causes and what could be considered as an effect of a learning event. It was difficult to get students' motivation for a process that may appear abstract for them.

7. Conclusions

We have tried to present through the investigation described in this paper, an interpretation of autonomy in language learning that translates our own vision of the concept. This broad approach to the learning process, once determined, identified and explored, would undoubtedly, contribute to teachers' better management of language learning programmes designed to be more likely suitable to learners' performances and needs as far as language learning is concerned.

In our everyday practice, we constantly wonder about the reasons behind the students' lack of systematicity and effectiveness in learning. However, we rarely succeed to fulfill the objective of making students able to encode the content presented to them, in their own way and be able to link it to other contexts, allowing them to avoid knowledge fragmentation and misconceptions. We need, undoubtedly to help students reflect on their own processes of learning by developing their thinking skills essential to life-long learning, creativity, skepticism and imagination. Autonomy is to take initiatives, to be curious, develop abilities and creativity, widen one's knowledge, be curious, discover, and learn to express oneself and one's own ideas, to exchange and share with others. All this makes one grow more responsible and independent and more able to take his own learning in charge.

Investigating LA helps in understanding learners' characteristics and the specificities of the learning context. Furthermore, we have to recognise that we may evaluate students' ability to take control but we need to evaluate whether the learning context allows this control.

It is clear that only if teachers as well as learners are fully involved, open to challenge and change, autonomy fostering can be implemented. Indeed, Autonomy fostering depends on the teacher's will and awareness of the process, on the learning situation conditions, but also on the learners' will and ability to become autonomous.

Therefore, autonomy is rather something we nurture. It is not something we get on the spot and we need to get the means for its practice. It takes time to develop progressively and depends on a complementary teacher autonomy. While students' limited linguistic ability keeps being a major obstacle, independent learning remains a factor contributing to life-long and effective learning.

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