

University Students' autonomy beyond the Classroom during COVID-19 Hybrid Learning Era



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Summary:

The outbreak of COVID-19 has changed education by imposing a sudden shift in the mode of teaching and roles of its agents. This situation calls the attention to the students' responsibility beyond the classroom. Hence, this study examines whether the Algerian university students' advance their autonomy beyond the classroom. As research instruments, a questionnaire and journal prompts are selected. The sample is comprised of 177 Master 1 and 2 students at the University of Ibn Khaldoun, Algeria. The findings suggest that autonomy beyond the classroom is still an underdeveloped area with great potential in need of teacher support and training in self-regulation and transferable skills.

Keywords: Autonomy beyond the classroom; Learner autonomy; COVID-19; Journal prompts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last two years have witnessed the disruption of COVID-19 pandemic across the globe. This crisis has led to recurrent lockdowns and university closures. In this prospect, a new trend emerged, which is the shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to using online platforms and outlets such as Google Classroom, Zoom, Moodle platform, and Teams platform in order to cover the remaining syllabi of the academic year. This emerging educational movement has affected the quality of teacher-student interaction time and feedback since the syllabi of modules and the allotted time for online sessions were reduced.

When the number of people testing positive for COVID-19 started to fall in Algeria, the Algerian universities decided to resume face-to-face

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teaching and kept online sessions as well. This new normal hybrid teaching and learning culture has brought with it new opportunities and challenges. Hence, the COVID-19 health crisis brings into light a concern about changing roles in the process of teaching, learning and assessment respectively. The current situation calls into attention the significance of the student autonomy in an era where teaching is no longer about imparting knowledge in a given field, but about equipping learners with the appropriate skills to prepare them for citizenship and to help them navigate their lives in time of emergencies and world challenges.

The COVID-19 disruption contributes to constant reflections about hybrid education; particularly about the students' roles in a situation where learner autonomy is of a paramount importance in addressing the requirements of a reduced classroom interaction with teachers and limited access to feedback. As a matter of fact, questioning the students' autonomy beyond the classroom is a valid quest in an age where the internet provides a doorstep into discovery and learning across disciplines. Accordingly, the research questions focuses on exploring the Algerian university students' attitudes towards autonomy and identifying its aspects beyond the classroom setting. The first main hypothesis is that university students have positive attitudes towards autonomy as an attribute to active learning, and they are ready for taking steps towards autonomous learning.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Definition of Learner Autonomy

Autonomy is a contested concept in the educational realm since it is demanding to identify all its components. Therefore, discussions about autonomy revolves around *"individuals' or groups' ability and capacity to self-rule, and the governance and/or constraints, which limit such a capacity"* (Wermke and Salokangas, 2015, 1). Hence, there is a tendency to consider it from the lens of various representations of the learner autonomy in both, empirical studies and classroom/ beyond classroom practice (Benson, 2006).

In Holec's (1981) groundbreaking work, autonomy is defined as the learners' endeavour to take control over their learning. In the same prospect, Little (1991) provides a psychological perspective that identifies the characteristics of autonomous learners. Thus, he combines his definition with Holec's (1981)

Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (Little, 1991); autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes (Holec, 1981, 4)

Autonomy, in this respect, is considerably regarded as a progressive process that incorporates what it takes to be an autonomous learner. This process involves the learner's ability to set his own learning goals, select the appropriate

materials and skills to fulfill his needs, and ultimately engages in a cycle of self-assessment and reflection on the self by the self.

In this research study, learner autonomy is not considered as the 'detachment of learners from their teachers', however; it is initiated in the language classroom through "*the pedagogical dialogue*" between teachers and their students (Little, 1995, as cited in Benson, 2006, 22). That means that teachers are in position to empower their students to have their own path of autonomous lifelong learning by training them in self-regulations skills, study skills and transferable skills.

In this regard, Palfreyman and Benson (2019, 3) argue that the twenty-first century autonomous students should be "*less as individuals who are responsive to instruction and more as individuals who are capable of instructing and training themselves- and as potential ...citizens who are capable of developing and adapting to new demands.*" Fundamentally, this viewpoint captures the essence of autonomy in this age of rapid changes in the educational systems and the requirements of a globalised world. Therefore, the students are not merely marginalized, but are rather free active participants in constructing their own learning experiences and in building a repertoire of skills and strategies. Furthermore, a prominent quality of autonomous learners transcends knowledge reception to a shift towards constant knowledge construction and problem-solving skills that are unique to every situation that they may encounter in real life.

Learner autonomy is still in vogue, mainly in the last two years of the twenty-first century due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, autonomy should be addressed as a key goal in an era of an abrupt shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online or / and hybrid delivery. According to Zhao and Watterston (2021), there are modifications to be brought to education, particularly to the roles of teachers. Teachers should assume the responsibility of coaches, organizers and managers of the students' learning through the encouragement of student-centredness endeavor and inquiry-based approach. Furthermore, learner autonomy beyond the classroom is an imperative for the successful of distant learning (Chimi and Kemtong, 2020).

2.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Overlooking Learner Autonomy

The outbreak of COVID-19 has tremendously affected all the aspects of human life across the globe, and education has not been an exception with the closure of the institutions of higher education. In the Algerian context, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research made the decision to close all the universities and colleges across Algeria and teachers were required to shift to online teaching through Moodle platform. Thus, online distant teaching has become the norm throughout eight-month period of partial lockdown.

The research studies undertaken during lockdown chiefly focused on addressing the requirement of such a sudden move to online teaching and the

role of technological devices and platforms in ensuring the continuity of instruction during the pandemic. These studies examined profoundly the challenges that Algerian university teachers encountered to fulfill their students' needs distantly. For example, Sahli (2021) highlights the significance of the pandemic in igniting the teachers' opportunities for self-development at the professional and the academic level. In a recent study, Arabeche and Soudani (2021) explore the innovative methods that the teachers opted for in order to keep connectivity with their students.

Although these studies provided an insightful account of the measures that have been taken to address the requirements of online teaching, this fact leaves largely unrecognized the roles of university students in a cycle that should have consisted of teachers, their students and the online teaching medium. In this respect, it is of a paramount importance to foster the students' exercise of autonomy beyond the classroom during hybrid learning. The endeavour to raise such an issue stems from the reduced time of face-to-face interaction between teachers and their students. Besides, it aims at empowering university students to seek autonomy

3. Data Collection Methods and Procedures

A case study was held to examine the state of university students' autonomy beyond the classroom during hybrid learning at the University of Ibn Khaldoun of Tiaret, Algeria.

3.1 Research Design

According to Brown and Rodgers (2014), triangulation can maximize the credibility of the obtained data and the findings since it provides the scrutiny of the data from two or three viewpoints. For the sake of understanding the case at hand, we opted for methodological triangulation, through the combination of two data collection methods namely; an attitudinal questionnaire and journal prompts.

The questionnaire aimed at identifying the students' readiness for autonomy. It was administered to 57 students at the Section of English; therefore, it involved two (2) sections. The first one dealt with the students' personal details. The second one addresses the students' attitudes and experiences of exhibiting any autonomous behaviour in their learning process.

To see whether the students developed any kind of autonomy beyond the classroom, two (2) types of journal prompts were used throughout the study. Journal prompts were employed to help the students' monitor their learning and "*to see one's progress or goals clearly*" (Mynard, 2021, 54). In this case, journal prompts contribute to the students' reflection –on-action and instigate self-regulation learning.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 177 Master 1 and Master 2 students at the Section of English at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. Their age

ranged between 22 and 28 years old. It is noteworthy to mention that 75.40% were females and 24.60% were males. The sampling was purposive since both levels were at an advanced level of the mastery of language and skills. In addition, both levels were preparing for their graduation theses. This phase, in particular, requires self-access learning and self-regulation.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Results and Interpretation of the Questionnaire Data

To begin with, the first question aims at identifying the students' conception about the notion of autonomy, majorly at their advanced level. Figure 1 indicates that 72.14% of the participants identify the term *autonomy* as a level of independence and control over one's own learning process (33.33%), individual learning (43.85%), self-learning (10.52%), free-learning (7.04%), self-teaching (5.26%) while 21.65% state that learner autonomy is a far-reaching process and it is demanding to implement in real-life learning situations. Moreover, 6.3% admit their unfamiliarity with this concept in education.

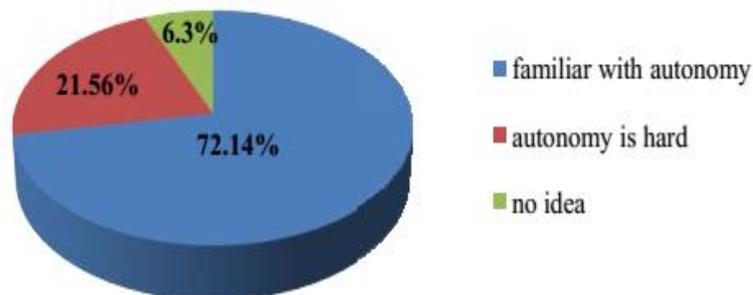


Figure 1. Students' familiarity with the concept of autonomy

Second, as long as the impact of learner autonomy on the students' performance in exams is concerned, the results demonstrate that 81% of the respondents link their success to independent learning beyond the classroom. Whereas 15.80% of the students admit that if they were supported to go beyond what they have learned in the classroom setting, they would have positive results in the final exams.

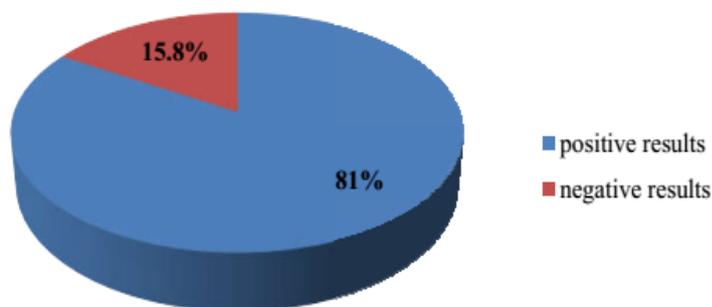


Figure 2. The impact of learner autonomy on overall results

Based on the previous question, it is crucial at this stage to explore the students’ reflection on the key factors that hinder any attempt to pursue autonomy. Figure 3 clearly shows that the students highlight a combination of all the following negative factors (50.87%). The major reason for not developing any personal approach towards autonomy is the teachers’ methods (14.03%) since some teachers still rely on traditional methods such as teacher-centred instruction coupled with a lack of motivation to develop one’s knowledge and competencies (10.56%). Time management outside university is another issue in developing a sense of autonomous behaviour (8.77%). Though the students may try to extend their learning beyond the classroom, they encounter a lack of materials and resources (7.03%). Besides, some students admit that undermining autonomy as a major reason for success is another impediment (5.26%). Finally, society can affect the students’ decision to develop their autonomy (3.50%) since autonomy is a social norm.

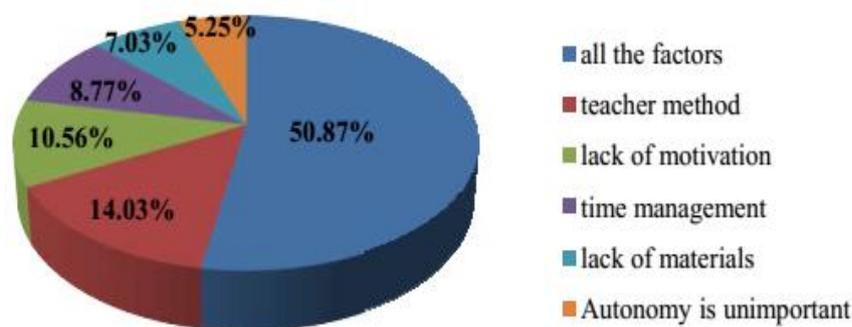


Figure 3. Key factors hindering learner autonomy

Question four probes whether the students are motivated to develop their autonomy. The result highlight the fact that autonomy serves short-term goals; even at an advanced level because the students put forward that being autonomous contribute to improving their English (31.57%) and to get good grades (19.29%. However, other students link autonomy to lifelong learning

(17.78%), improving self –regulation (12.28%), and to serving them in their lives outside the classroom setting (21.06%).

Training the students how to learn by themselves is a milestone in initiating learner autonomy. Therefore, it is of a paramount importance to explore whether this pattern is practised at university. Findings in Table 1 clearly show that the majority of the students do not receive any kind of support from their teachers to seek their own journey of independent learning.

Table1: Level of training in autonomous skills

Options	Number of participants	Percentage
Yes	08	14%
No	86	86%

Question six aims at examining whether the students make any initiative to inquire about the syllabus of their modules. Fortunately, 63.20% contacted their teachers to supply them with the contents of the modules that they would tackle throughout the semesters. While 36.80% of the students showed no interest in asking their instructors for any information about what they were expecting to learn.

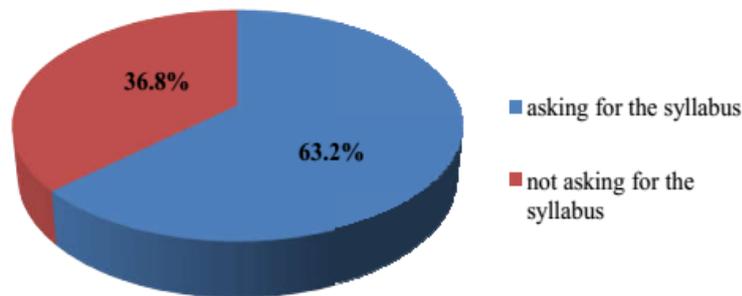


Figure 4. Inquiry about the modules' syllabi

Arguably, teachers can be a source of support and assistance throughout the students' academic career; they can also inspire them to start a lifetime learning journey. The high percentage of 61.40% stresses the fact that the students are well-aware of the importance of seeking help from their teachers or peers to fulfil their needs across the modules. However, 38.60% report that they do not bother approaching their teachers for further explanations of assistance at all even when they need it.

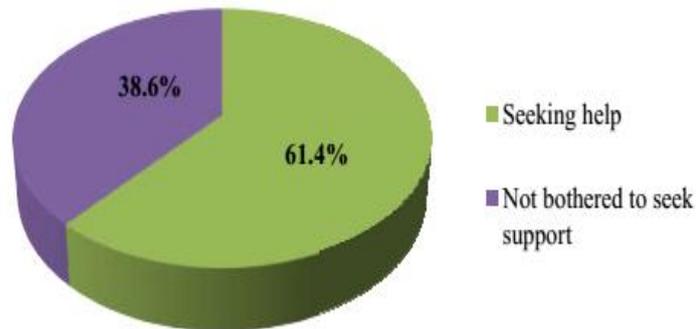


Figure 5. Seeking support and assistance

The objective of question eight is to identify the students' decision-making in their learning process before arriving at class. 80.70% of the students clearly reveal that they do prepare some notes since taking notes from miscellaneous academic resources can boost focus and attention to details. In addition, note-taking technique is the spine of keeping track with teachers' explanation, comprehension and retention as well. Only very few students (19.30%) see no reasons for taking notes since it is the teachers' responsibility to make the lesson plan and provide them with the appropriate knowledge.

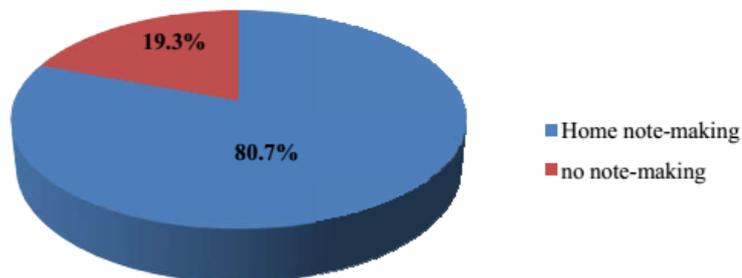


Figure 6. Home note-taking and -making

Since teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge, it is crucial to underscore the students' decision-making in relation to the selection of academic resources. Hence, the findings in Figure 7 suggest that the majority of the respondents (60%) look for appropriate references and materials to invest in their learning process; whereas 40% of the respondents rely only on the handouts that are provided by their teachers.

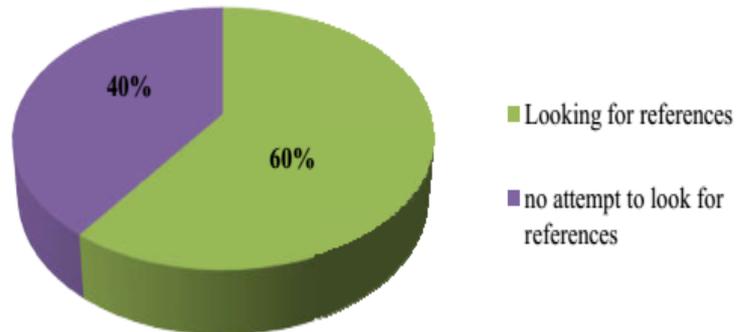


Figure 7. Deliberate selection of references

This question emphasises the role of the teachers' encouragement of the students who contribute to class discussion or make constructive intervention. In this vein, nearly 72% approve that they receive recognition and appreciation from their teachers when they share new pieces of information, or/ and a skill during class time. This supportive behaviour can empower the students to take control over their learning. However, 28.10% express their denial of getting any encouragement from their teachers when they try to intervene or bring a new dimension to the class discussion.

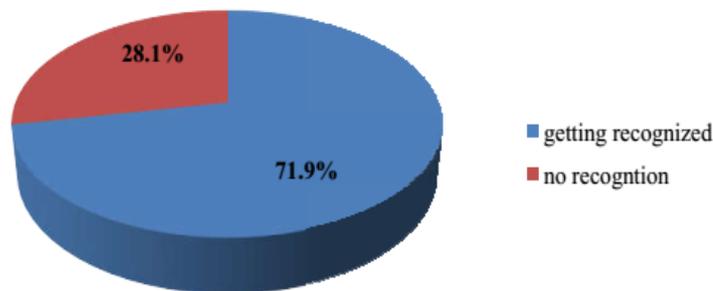


Figure 8. Praise for students' contributions

The last question probes the suitability of the learning environment in fostering learner autonomy. 71.40% of the students refer to the fact that the surrounding learning environment does not lead to production, let alone developing an autonomous behaviour. On the contrary, 28.60% admit that the environment has nothing to do with a student willingness to develop their autonomy.

Generally speaking, university students are well-aware of the nature of autonomy as a quality characteristic of the 21st century student that is manifested in linking classroom instruction content and recognizing how autonomy can be approached. For the students, autonomy intentionally incorporates "the self". The notion of the self is significant in seeking improvement and change in one's

attitudes and practice. Within this idea, approaches to autonomy can take several aspects that range from tailored individual learning preferences to reaching a level of entire detachment from teachers and engagement in the process of designing their own learning process.

There is a troubling result when we consider the relationship between autonomy and active learning. Autonomy beyond the classroom occurs as an extension to classroom learning and summative assessment. Though the students are intrinsically motivated to share responsibility in their own learning; by searching for learning materials and resources, autonomy is not channeled to fulfill lifelong learning goals. In addition, autonomy is considered as an option to serve test grades and accountability purposes. That means that there is not a system of effective learning in which autonomy functions as a consistent renewing element in the learning process throughout the academic year. Autonomy is exclusively perceived through contemporary lens.

Autonomy beyond the classroom is moderately supported by the teachers. This support is primarily represented in praise or positive feedback during class or discussions. It is possible that these results reflect the dominance of teacher-centered methods since autonomy is an attribute of learner-centered approach or teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the roles of the students in the teaching learning process. In the same line, this finding can be interpreted in light of the marginalization of training the students in how to learn strategies and techniques. Autonomy, in this case, cannot take place without equipping the students with the appropriate assets such as formulating learning goals, training them in measuring quality performance criteria, internalizing feedback and using feedforward to adjust their final performance. In the same vein, autonomy requires training in a range of study skills that would accompany the students throughout the phases of their academic career and be transferable across modules.

3.3.2 The Analysis of the Journal Prompts

As far as the students' journal prompts are concerned, the content analysis of 120 Master 1 and Master 2 journal prompts underscores the fact that learner autonomy, at the university level, needs revisiting and intensive care. The journal prompts are analysed using content analysis to reveal whether the students are ready for autonomy and self-access learning during hybrid learning. Three themes are highlighted throughout the study: discrepancy between positive attitudes towards learner autonomy and real practice beyond the classroom, total reliance on teachers to make decisions, and lack of motivation and self-regulation for independent learning.

First of all, though the students approve the positive impact of autonomy on their performance in tests and official examinations, their schedule and materials of study beyond the classroom do not reflect consistent attempts to develop free autonomous learning behaviours. That is to say the effort made is closely related to assigned activities, homework or research related to their Master theses. This

fact emphasizes their incapability of acting beyond what their teachers require them to do as chores. Besides, the students do not govern their own learning or even share responsibility for nearly all the decisions about learning at home.

Moreover, teacher-centredness is still dominant in higher education since most of the students regard their teachers as the decision-makers vis-a-vis their learning. At this advanced level, the students cannot go beyond basic skills such as reading materials and writing techniques (Eg, summarizing, paraphrasing and quoting). Even at the level of material selection, the students fail to exhibit the characteristics of the 21st century digital learners since they rely fundamentally on websites and pdf books. This study skill behaviour leaves several opportunities unveiled.

This is a rather disappointing interpretation because it highlights the students' lack of strategic writing skills. The journal to-do-list rubric and the skill rubric show that the students' major goal is to submit assignment or to meet deadlines, without further efforts to probe new undiscovered areas of learning. Besides, they have not included components of the writing process, which is the backbone of written assignments. The writing process consists of mentally-complex operations and techniques such as brainstorming, clustering, ordering, basic outlining and editing. The whole process triggers recurrent corrections, omissions and additions, which contributes to continuous self-assessment and adjustments. These two characteristics build learner self-regulation.

4. CONCLUSION

The crisis of COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the urgent need to revisit existing practices and notions in education. In this regard, learner autonomy beyond the classroom should be a milestone in the shift from face-to-face teaching to hybrid learning era. Therefore, this research study raised questions about the students' perceptions of autonomous learning and whether autonomy beyond the classroom had been a pattern of their study routine at home. Despite the fact that the students had positive attitudes towards autonomy and its advantages on their learning process, it was considered in a narrow account. Autonomy was regarded in terms of improving grades in summative assessment .Hence; it is high time the students needed to be trained in study skills and self-regulation skills to develop their autonomy as an asset for a lifelong learning journey.

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7. Appendices

