Understanding and Characterising a Context-based EFL Learner Autonomy in Algerian Higher Education

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Abstract
The study explores the beliefs and practices that Algerian EFL students and teachers attribute to autonomous learning. Moreover, it attempts to identify then investigate the underlying factors behind those beliefs and practices. Factors that influence students` beliefs, practices and primarily their understanding of the concept LA are traced in the literature to be; personal, institutional, socio-cultural and socio-economic (Hamad, 2018; Kemala, 2017; Palfreyman and Smith, 2003; Jiang, 2008). Whereas those which affect teachers understanding of this concept can be referred to; experience, professional development, classroom practices and contextual factors (Szőcs, 2017; Borg, 2015). The main aim of the research is to construct contextualised understanding/s of EFL learner autonomy based on students` and teachers` beliefs towards this notion, their practices and the factors laying behind them. The significance of this study is derived from investigating a contradictory situation in Algeria. After implementing a new higher education system (LMD) that in its essence is built upon the idea of autonomy of learners, claims of having dependent EFL students with low or non-autonomous attitudes started to rise (Ghout-khenoune, 2015). This research challenges those claims and favours the idea that different existing *varieties of learner autonomy* reflect contexts where they are used and often "missed by educators especially those looking with western eyes" (Smith, Kuchah & Lamb, 2018, p.18).

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Students`/Teachers` beliefs and practices, LMD system

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Introduction

Algeria is one of the Maghrib countries that embraced a European higher education system known as LMD, which in its essence is based on the notion of autonomy in learning. This was an attempt for the country to meet the demands of a new globalised world, to increase students` mobility and to upgrade their learning skills. In this respect Hanifi (2018) mentioned that LMD system`s aim was "to offer students a more free space of autonomous learning under new pedagogical management" (p. 31). The newly adopted HE system was heavily criticised since the day of its implementation, issues about its inappropriateness and ineffectiveness were raised, However, it is noticed that this discourse started to have less pessimistic views about the LMD system. in Sarnou, Koç, Houcine & Bouhadiba (2012) it was concluded that "despite some negative aspects of the LMD system related to its novelty, this reform is perceived to be more beneficial and valuable for both EFL students and teachers compared to the classical system applied previously" (190) also Idri (2012) declared that it is normal for a new system still in its embryonic stages to face difficulties before it starts to reach its drawn objectives which include to promote for autonomous learning. Nevertheless, discourse about EFL learner autonomy remained unchanged, it still contains doubts about whether or not LMD is really promoting for students` responsibility and freedom in learning. Over the last decade, most research about learner autonomy in Algerian context raised the issue about having students with low or non-autonomous attitudes (Ghout-Khenoune, 2015; Hadi, 2018). On the other hand, students seem to be succeeding in a learner autonomy demanding HE system (LMD), they are doing their study presentations, they are finishing their senior year dissertations and finally getting their degrees. In the given contradictory educational situation, this study will not employ any pre-determined understandings of what LA is. Instead, it will aim to conduct a bottom-up approach to figure out how learner autonomy is understood in Algerian context. This decision was taken based on the literature about LA which refers to it as a socially and culturally biased construct (Ushioda & Smith, 2009). More illustrations about the theoretical background of this study will be provided in the coming section, while a description of the research design and methods of analysis will come later. Finally, the paper will end by providing some expected outcomes and a summary of conclusions that was reached so far as data of this project are yet to be collected.

Literature Review

1.   Defining learner autonomy
When talking about autonomy in language learning one must mention Holec, the most influential figure in this field and his most cited definition of learner autonomy "the ability to take charge of one`s own learning" (as cited in Palfreyman and Smith 2003). This definition paved the way for researchers to add more meaning and clarification to the concept. What Holec presents seems to make a big part of what we currently know about learner autonomy. However, from a pedagogical point of view, his definition addressed adult learners with self-management skills as prerequisites. Unfortunately, it is difficult to generalise this understanding to cover young learners who do not possess such type of skills. Besides that, Holec`s definition sounds too idealistic to be realised in an institutional learning environment. Reviewing the definition of Dam (1990) as cited in Smith (2008) "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person" (p.

396) gives emphasis on the importance of the social aspect which was ignored by Holec. This definition has corrected a lot of misconceptions by indicating that autonomous learning does not necessarily mean that learners are completely on their own, instead they are "inter-dependent", meaning that they are encouraged to learn from other people and ask for help when assistance is needed.

Another significant definition in the area of learner autonomy is by Little (1991) he mentions that LA is "the capacity for detachment [from the teacher], critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (p. 3-4) Little believes that autonomy is part of human beings' nature, to have your own space, think and make up your mind then take action about certain things including learning. Little (1991) emphasizes on cognitive abilities which he thinks are critical for autonomous learning. Hence, to Little (1991) autonomy is not mainly about organizing learning but also the cognitive capacities that make learning achievable (Benson, 2013). In (Little, 2004) another definition of autonomy was provided which is "learning how to learn intentionally" (p. 105). This time a great deal of self-awareness is conveyed in this definition. Being aware about strategies, motivation, also strengths and weaknesses is of a great importance in Little`s definition.

In a response to Holec`s dilemma about the difficulty of applying autonomy within educational institutions, Littlewood (1999) in his definition proposes two categories of autonomy. Proactive or better say absolute autonomy which involves learner taking charge of all aspect of his learning. This category seems to be far to be achieved in educational institutions which are governed by rules and regulations. The other type of autonomy is reactive autonomy, it involves learners manging their learning resources and achieving their goals but only when a direction is already created by a teacher, a tutor or a supervisor. When following the time line of leaner autonomy definitions in language learning we would reach to the one of Benson (2013) who successfully gave a succinct yet overarching definition to this notion, stating that it is "taking control over learning at different levels: learning management, cognitive management and learning content" (p. 63). Benson acknowledges the importance of learning management by Holec and the vital psychological aspect by Little, but also pushes the span of learner autonomy a little bit further to a political dimension to include the freedom of choice and negotiating not only how to learn but also what to learn.

The chronological evolution of learner autonomy definitions presented above, gives an overall view of how it has changed from being labelled an ability in Holec`s definition to a capacity in nowadays discourse. The assembly of definitions can help spotting the attempts of reconceptualization autonomy to be practiced with educational institutions.

2.   Students/teachers beliefs and practices in relation to learner autonomy

Investigating beliefs about learner autonomy seems necessary before attempts to find pedagogies to promote for it or understand how it is interpreted. Despite of the growing interest in learner autonomy beliefs in the last years, research about this issue is very limited in Algerian context comparing to other places. Nevertheless, it was reported in some works like (Bensalem, 2018; Hadi, 2018; Houha, 2016) that Algerian EFL students` beliefs about LA are very diverse. In a story shared in Hadi (2018) a teacher asked his students help to prepare the lesson and involve in

classroom discussions as an attempt to share learning responsibilities hence promoting for autonomy. Some students ironically said, "as if he wanted us to do his job" (Hadi, 2018, p. 135). Although this situation cannot be generalised; it explains a lot about how teachers` limit their understanding of LA with classroom practices. It also shows that teachers and students sometimes might not see LA from the same lens. This confirms Benson`s (2008) view of this issue when he says that "My argument is that, from the teachers` perspective, autonomy is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula" (p. 15). Great deal of our practices depends on what we believe in. For this reason, wrong, inappropriate or unsuitable beliefs of learner autonomy will lead to innocently disfigured practices. In a situation where teachers` and students` beliefs about autonomous learning do not match, I tend to prioritise learners` views. In this respect Beson (2008) argues that autonomy needs to be viewed from the learner`s perspective rather that from the teachers` this is to understand the conditions which learners` think are helpful to its realization. To do this, a bottom-up research is encouraged to take place to report about the environment and actions that learners think to take place for them to become autonomous language learners. This seems as the perfect response to the story that Hadi (2018) previously shared with us in her work. I believe that trying to find signs of autonomy which resemble what is found in literature in western contexts is the main reason for assuming that Algerian EFL students are not autonomous or lack autonomy. Students may appear to have different beliefs and standpoint about LA if this concept was investigated without pre-determined ideas or previous convictions.

3.   Factors that influence understanding learner autonomy
a.   Students:
Student-centred learning approaches prioritise students in all aspects of the learning-teaching process. Hence pedagogies are built upon what suit students and fulfil their educational needs. The first factor that can be identified to have an influence on how learner autonomy is understood by students is the personal/individual factor. This seems almost a generic factor since the notion of autonomy itself is something personal before it outreaches the social aspect. Besides motivation, agency and even confidence, Jiang (2008) found that "personality and previous experience appeared to be the most salient aspects as revealed by the present study that affected students' learner autonomy and associated behaviours." (p. 306).

The second factor is "Institutional". This factor is very tricky to deal with as it indicates the dilemma about how autonomy can exist in educational institutions, which most of the time are strictly regulated. On the one hand, the concept of autonomy in learning is first and foremost about freedom in what and how to learn. On the other hand, one should ask is how can this freedom exist in an environment governed by rules, teaching methods and syllabi to follow? Most of the time educational institutions are regarded as a hindrance to students' autonomy (Nasri, et al, 2015) In other words, institutional environment in one way or another does have an impact on how students understand learning whether it is exams-related and bound by teachers or there is a chance to learn without any pressure and still get the knowledge in a more effective way. Although it is not a very common opinion, but I believe that the influence of the institutional factor can be positive as much as it can be negative as previously indicated. This can be very apparent when talking about innovation within new academic educational systems which seems to support learner

autonomy in various aspects. Taking Algeria as an example since data of this project will be collected there. Algerian universities were adopting a teacher-centred approach for many years since the country`s independence. When the LMD system was implemented in 2004/2005, new pedagogical managements were undertaken. These managements introduced different parties of the Algerian universities particularly teachers and students to different roles which involve more space for freedom for students to learn and for teachers to be innovative in their teaching practices hence promoting for autonomy.

Many academics acknowledge the fact that both society and culture in general have a major effect on how the concept of learner autonomy is understood in different contexts. (Smith & Ushioda, 2009; Nguyen, 2011) Therefore, the sociocultural factor is identified as one of the integral variables that this research is taking into consideration. When discussing the notion of society, culture and learning, one must mention the theorist Vygotsky who believes that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. Based on his ideas, the same goes for the concept learner autonomy. In Kemala (2017) it was mentioned that "Parents, brother, sisters, relatives, friends, and teachers are some examples of social aspects. They greatly influence the autonomous learners" (p. 13) this gives the impression that we know what we know about learner autonomy not only from personal experiences but also from our surroundings which can have an influence on our perception and comprehension of things. To be more specific on how the socio-cultural factor influence understandings of LA. One should consult one of the most significant books that deals about this matter *learner autonomy across cultures* by Palfreyman and smith (2003) where the importance of learner autonomy was stressed, its universal appropriateness but in a more culture specific manner. In this vein Smith (2003) mentioned that learner autonomy is "not one-size-fits-all" (p. 256). in the same book, culture was referred to as a hindrance when trying to implement learner autonomy. However, In (Nasri et al., 2015) it was mentioned that culture can also facilitate the implementation of learner autonomy. For example, learner autonomy at first was associated only with its individual dimension. However, having the social dimension of autonomy pointed out opened a new aspect in which those known as collective societies can practice. In this sense, the socio-cultural context shapes what individuals know about learner autonomy. If it is perceived as an individual or collective practice or if it is a favourable notion to support in the first place.

Although it may not seem as influential as the other variables, the socio-economic factor can have a significant impact on how learner autonomy is understood by language learners. The fact that developed areas tend to have infrastructural resources including teaching facilities, technological equipment and evolved and carefully chosen pedagogical practices, gives advantage for students in that learning environment. However, this process does not work as smoothly as imagined because learner autonomy is not a matter of having an abundance of learning resources. It would be also logical to presume that low socio-economic background can work as a constrain for language learners. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. There have been many proofs of learners from a very low or at least average social and economic background, still they were able to achieve a respectful degree in autonomy in their learning. In Lamb (2012) it was indicated that students living in provincial areas strong instrumental goals, he explained this students' desire to move to metropolitan areas to access further education (2012), in other words the socio-economic

background in both cases high or low it has an impact on individual`s autonomy as persons and learners, and the impact reaches to the way this notion is understood and enacted.

a.   Teachers:
Teachers are no different than their students in having personal and educational beliefs about what is meant by learner autonomy. As it was mentioned before, unless students` and their teachers beliefs match, promoting LA will remain a far aim to reach. Although that learners` view of the notion learner autonomy makes an integral part of this research, teachers` view is also worth of consideration. Having mentioned what is meant by teachers` beliefs and their practices, it is high time to discuss the factors that affect how teachers understand the notion learner autonomy, these factors may appear to lay behind what teachers` believe in regard LA and the practices they do consciously or unconsciously to promote for this notion.

Teachers` life experiences have a great influence on how they perceive the notion learner autonomy. These experiences vary from them being learners till the beginning of their teaching career. In Szőcs (2017) it was mentioned that "Teachers' attitudes towards autonomy seem to be strongly connected to their own experiences as language learners and influenced their practices concerning autonomy support" (p. 142). Having different reactions about learner autonomy appreciation and implementation entails that there could be different perceptions and understandings of this notion, these understandings seem to be primarily formed by teachers` own experiences. It would not sound strange if one says that a teacher who practiced learner autonomy as a learner would not have a difficulty preaching for LA. However, the type or the variety of autonomy he/she was accustomed to during his/her days of learning might be different from what 21st century students understanding of what freedom in learning is. This raises the problem between the old generation of teachers which sometimes have different views and pedagogical orientations comparing to novice teachers who might lack experience but seems to know more about 21st century students. The differences between old generation of teachers and novice teachers are always treated with what is called professional development. However, when relating professional development to this research it is considered as one of the factors that shape both generations of teachers` understanding of what is meant by learner autonomy (Borg, 2015). Although that professional development classes are specialised training classes but having them not contextualised may lead to preaching to a variety of learner autonomy that is different than what students already possess and currently practicing. In Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva, and Fernandes (2008) about professional development it is mentioned that "to articulate teacher and learner development into a common framework towards an ideal view of education as liberation and empowerment is meant to be transformative rather than reproductive" (p. 210) for this reason. Unless professional development is contextualised to fit within the beliefs and support the practices of students. It will be regarded as overwriting ideas and practices upon the ones of students which are considered genuine.

Teachers understanding of a phenomenon which is what they know, think of and believe in can be referred to the unobservable *teacher cognition* in Borg` work (2003). Borg attempted to unravel the complexities between teachers` cognition and classroom practices, he concluded that they work in an interactive way. Although,

Borg (2003) does not specify what parts of teacher cognition he talks about, his work is positive to be adopted in the research in hands in a derivative and referral way. In other words, teachers` understanding of learner autonomy can be one aspect of what Borg (2003) discussed in his talk about teacher cognition. In this line of thoughts one can say that teachers` understanding of the notion LA can also be affected by their classroom practices and vice versa. This would inform my research to explore how and in what ways Algerian EFL teachers' practices shape their understanding. Both Borg (2003) and Wang (2016) explore the wider educational contextual factor and how it influences teachers` cognition. Therefore, the educational environment of teachers seems worthy of exploring before any attempt to generate a contextualised understanding of the notion LA.

4. Learner autonomy in LMD Higher Education system
LMD is an educational system of tertiary level that was designed and initiated by a group of European countries in a series of meetings called *Bologna process.* It primarily aims to standardise the European educational system at the level of university, to facilitate students` mobility and improve higher education quality. LMD system was designed to offer students a flexible programme of studying, help them assume more autonomy in their educational and vocational life (Hanifi, 2018), grant them facilities and tool to create chances for mobility within institutions, across the country or internationally. This educational system is characterised by its endorsement of learner autonomy as one of its main pedagogical objectives. In fact, the term autonomy and LMD system meet at various levels that it is almost impossible to talk about the LMD system without to mention autonomy.

Algeria as a Mediterranean country that shares many diplomatic and economic activities with European countries, it aimed to establish further relations with leading powers in the world in the sector of higher education. For the country to meet the new changes that globalisation imposed on the world, LMD as a new higher education reform was implemented in Algerian higher education institutions. The reform was put into practice as a pilot process during the academic year 2004 - 2005 before being generalised at the national level in the following years. The system, its structure and organisation stress the importance of the notion learner autonomy, it is read in the LMD guide (2011) that learner autonomy should be encouraged, and adequate success conditions should be provided for the learners to assume more responsibility in their learning. Despite of how idealistic the LMD system might look, its adoption has faced some heavy criticism about its efficiency and appropriateness to the Algerian context which at that time was known to be greatly accustomed with teacher-centred approaches. Moreover, investigations about whether LMD system is really promoting or LA or not started to raise. For instance, Idri (2012) argued that regardless of the LMD`s firm structure which seems to support autonomy in every possible aspect, there is little evidence that it promotes for autonomous learning.
After over a decade of the implementation of the LMD system, and through reviewing academic articles about LMD system one can notice a significant change in views to be less pessimistic about the reform`s inappropriateness and effectiveness. However, the discourse about EFL learner autonomy has always and still contain doubts about whether or not LMD is really promoting for students` responsibility and freedom in learning. The research between hands investigates the contradictory situation with a strong idea in mind which is that as long as there are EFL learners managing to successfully complete their studies in a LA demanding HE system, there must be

autonomy in learning somewhere. And just because autonomy is not spotted by academic research which are most of the time using non-contextualised tools, it does not mean that LA is not there.

Research questions

1.   What beliefs and practices do Algerian EFL students and teachers attribute to autonomous learning?
2.   How and what factors shape Algerian EFL students` understandings and practices of learner autonomy?
3.   What does LA mean to EFL students and teachers in Algerian HE context?

Methodological design

A bottom-up approach is used to investigate the notion of learner autonomy in this study, for this reason the research is identified as a comparative mixed method case study. The mixed method approached used in the study entails using questionnaires and interviews.

Location

The research will be conducted in two different universities in Algeria. The first university (Ahmed zabana) is situated in to some extent a rural city (Relizane) and the department of English and staff there are relatively new. The second university (Mohamed Ben Ahmed University) is situated in a coastal are where it receives a growing number of foreign and local tourists each year. The department of English there is equipped with staff that include professors and doctors. Moreover, the sociocultural structure of the society where this university is situated is less conservative than many of the areas in Algeria. Concerning economy, the city of Oran is an economic power with an increasing number of local and foreign companies in all domains. On top of this equation, the Mohamed Ben Ahmed University receives more than twofold the number of students that the university of Relizane does. The two universities were purposefully chosen for the differences they have which will be investigated to highlight how "institutional, socio-cultural and socio-economic factors" can influence students understanding of the concept learner autonomy.

Sample

For questionnaires, the study aims to cover all first year EFL master's students (160), and EFL teachers within each university (35). While the number of students and teachers interviewees will be based on the suggestion of Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) when they state that "a sample of six interviews may [be] sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (p.78). However, more interviews will take place till saturation occurs.

Procedures

First questionnaires will be administrated to first year masters EFL students and EFL teachers, the questionnaires will aim to uncover the beliefs and practices that both parties of this research have in relation to the notion of learner autonomy.

Questionnaires will also serve as a guideline for the qualitative research tool which is the interviews. This is in a sense that new factors that might have an effect on the notion of LA might emerge after the analysis of questionnaires, and this will be furthermore discussed in the semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires and interviews will be in English language however, translated copies of questionnaires and interviews questions can be provided. Student interviewees will be selected if they are identified as students of one of the universities where the research will be conducted. Resident of one of those cities and depending on their socio-economic status which one part of the questionnaire will help identifying.

Data Analysis

Data will be analysed consecutively using two different research methods. First, quantitative data will be dealt with. While relatively straightforward questions will be easy to calculate their proportion, open-ended questions will be reviewed, categorised then coded. After that those codes will be analysed statistically using Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) where a numerical value will be given to each answer in the questionnaires in order to calculate percentages and frequencies. Concerning the quantitative part of the research, the research favoured the thematic analysis by Baurn and Clarke (2008) which indicate that it is most suitable to seeks theorising the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions of subjects in the study. the in this respect this type of data analysis seems to perfectly serve the objectives of the research that tackles learner autonomy with context-related issues.

Expected Outcomes

Although the work is still in its beginnings, there are some conclusions that can be drawn at this early stage. Reviewing the literature on learner autonomy and some research undertaken in Algerian context, one can tell that students in Algerian universities do not practice learner autonomy the same way it is described in learner autonomy models like the one of Nunan (1999) and Scharle and Szabo (2000). Nevertheless, students` success in the LMD system that is LA demanding HE system, is an indicator or certain practices that students do but haven't been given much attention in research about this notion in Algeria.

The research will be purposely conducted in two different universities situated in two different cities as indicated before. This is to highlight the sociocultural and socioeconomic impact if existed. However, in case data in both universities resemble or are not with significant difference, which probably be caused by globalization. the findings of the research would be compared to different contexts on a global level.

Finally, based on the literature reviewed, it is expected in this research that students would have more personal autonomy than the one practiced in learning at university, while teachers` understanding of learner autonomy is expected to be confined within the boundaries of academic learning.

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