Autonomous versus monotonous learning: A case of first-year master students of didactics

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Abstract

The Algerian educational system has seen various efforts to reform its structure, with a focus on promoting autonomy within the university setting. However, these attempts often result in a narrow approach to learning. This study, grounded in constructivist learning theory, addresses the persistent issue of the "Either… or" educational dilemma, where either the teacher or the learners dominate the classroom dynamic. This research aims to explore the need for balancing teacher-led presentations with opportunities for learners' independent thinking, fostering a reciprocal teaching/learning relationship. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. A questionnaire was administered to 150 first-year Master's students in Didactics at the Department of English, University of Ibn Khaldoun/Tiaret, followed by an interview with the instructor of the Didactics module to obtain more reliable insights. The findings reveal a significant imbalance between the teacher's presentation and students' opportunities for independent thinking. Based on these results, the study offers recommendations to enhance the classroom environment and promote a more balanced, interactive learning process.

Keywords: Amendment; didactic axis; educational setting; teachers' presentation; learners' free thinking; balance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The field of Higher Education has been the subject of various research attempts aiming at rendering the teaching/learning process more efficient. The case concerns most teaching a foreign language as far as English is concerned. As a consequence, the current investigation process is concerned with exploring the different variables standing the disequilibrium between teachers' presentations and learners' free-thinking.

The former is about teachers' authoritative character dominance causing the classroom environment to be monotonous. The latter concerns learners' struggle for survival as active participants in the classroom environment. The point is that a teacher is meant to act as an agent of change by introducing innovation in his classroom and performances (Magwa & Mohangi 2022; Abdala, 2024). The act implies giving room for learners to exercise their autonomy by holding control over their learning process.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Definition of teacher's authority

The current step is devoted to depicting teachers' authority as part of monotonous teaching/learning. So, Authority is: *"the power to influence others based on recognized knowledge or expertise." Concise Oxford English Dictionary, (Eleventh Edition).* Authority in teaching can be classified into two main kinds:

1.1.1.1. Authoritative teachers

This aspect of teaching was highlighted by Paulo (1972)*"Education is suffering from narration sickness".* The phenomenon is manifested in a set of domineering roles performed by the teacher as the only knowing person. Consequently, his teaching method is for storing knowledge. By possessing such intellectual *"capital knowledge"*, the teacher becomes equipped with the power to manage his class as the boss. Then, learners' exclusion takes place. Teachers of this kind become the only axis around which the teaching/learning process rotates. So, Teachers are subjected to the designed syllabus and time to implement it. They are a de-motivating factor against innovation.

1.1.1.2. Teacher's authoritarian character

Teachers-learners' interactions do count to determine how much involvement learners can exhibit in the classroom environment (Yan et al., 2024; Kang & Chen 2024). There is somehow a stimulus and response effect, as learners may respond according to the way the teacher treats them i.e. an action and a reaction process (Trawick-Smith et al., 2023). This aspect of authority is called *"personality capital"*, it is a kind of emotional bank account, (Covey 2020). Sometimes the teacher becomes a discipline keeper and not a learning promoter. So, learners' reticence will be a consequence of developing a negative attitude towards their teacher. This can cause a critical impression for (F.L.L.) as being hard to learn due to de-motivation and loss of interest. The point is asserted by Harmer*, (2001) in: "Calls for the presentation of unpleasant or harmful stimuli or the withdrawal of reinforce".* Teacher's closeness to learners can play a crucial role in their involvement in the classroom environment as stated in the statement: One can deduce that teachers keeping their distance from students shows a sign of authority, which leads to minimizing teacher-student interactions. Then, audibility is also important in highlighting teachers' authority. The volume of the voice determines how close the teacher close to learners.

1.1.1.3. Learners' passiveness as the embodiment of monotonous Learning

Teacher's roles influence learners who are neglected and made passive, which is manifested in digesting what is dictated by their teacher without discussion as stated in: *"the more students work at storing the deposits …. the less they develop the critical consciousness … they accept the passive role imposed on them"* (Paulo, 1972). Then, deactivating individual manifestations of the "what can do" as learners are made silent leads them to become dependent on their teacher's spoon-feeding with no creativity because of a teacher-

property classroom atmosphere. In a teacher-centered classroom, a learner is a salutary ignorant welcoming what a teacher provides him with.

1.1.2. Definition of autonomy

Learner's autonomy as defined by Holec (1988) *"the ability to take charge of one's learning".* Being in charge of the learning process implies exercising responsibility over all the decisive aspects of autonomy. This item means the presence of a cocktail of required ingredients.

1.1.2.1. Learners-centered classrooms as the embodiment of autonomy.

In the deep core of this learning system, learners are meant to fulfill different roles from those they inhabited before. So, Learners are actively involved in monitoring learning. Learners-centered classrooms imply the domineering roles of learners as the axis of the classroom environment. This happens when teachers act as guides, or interposers to facilitate learning as clarified in what follows:

As a teacher, I see my role as being twofold. One is yes, I am teaching but I feel my other very important role … assist the learners for the management of their learning … we have to prepare them so that their learning continues outside the length course "(Nunan,1991).

One can say that when autonomy is introduced in the learning process, the teacher is no longer the resourceful one controlling knowledge delivery. But he is supposed to foster his learners' autonomy with positive attitudes, by giving up some of his authority in favor of his learners' involvement in classroom management. The idea is that there should be a change for the partnership to rise by rejecting spoon-feeding, and at the same time making use of the pre-requisite information of learners as stated in: "*stop teaching let them learn".* The reason is that the main target of learning is to equip learners with the adequate abilities to act effectively as problem-solvers responding appropriately to real language use contexts. This implies a need for a language system control and mastery of immediate communicative use.

1.1.3. Symptoms of autonomy learning

In autonomous learning, "Island learning" is swept away. As a result, the learning process becomes a social phenomenon and it is made by the socio-cultural conventions under investigation. Holec (1988) succeeded greatly in highlighting the notion of autonomy. Nevertheless, he excluded what Benson (2013) came out with as*: "The nature of the cognitive capacities underlying effective self-management of learning".*

So, meta-cognitive monitoring is a key component of autonomous learning as stated: "*…autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts."* (Little et al., 2003). So, autonomy calls for connection in the educational setting. The process implies the qualifications of manifesting the learned items and sharing them with other members or colleagues. Apart from that, when assimilating knowledge construction with learning, students are curiously independent by controlling their learning process as in: *"All genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous".* (Benson 2013).

To further investigate the aforementioned concern, the following research questions are posed:

A. How do teachers perceive and support learners' autonomy?

- Do teachers provide opportunities for learners to exercise autonomy?
- Are learners genuinely autonomous?

Possible responses to these questions may be formulated as the following hypotheses:

- B. Teachers hold negative attitudes toward learners' autonomy.
- Teachers tend to discourage or avoid fostering learners' autonomy.
- Learners exhibit avoidance behaviors that hinder their autonomy.

2.   METHOD AND MATERIALS

The investigation concerns teachers/learners' interactional autonomous learning at the university. So, a case study seems to the adequate research calling for an analytic descriptive method. Henceforth, we set two investigation tools namely; a questionnaire, which was designed for learners, and an interview with teachers.

2.1. Participants

The population for this research comprises: 14 First Year Master's students of didactics at the Department of English with different ages and genders, who are required to fill out the questionnaire. Then, an interview is conducted.

2.2. Data collection tools

As previously stated, the current research makes use of an interview with an EFL teacher and a questionnaire to learners to elicit their perception of autonomy. First, -the questionnaire consists of Close-ended questions formulated for informants to choose one answer among the stated choices. Then, there are mixed questions for students to tick one of the suggested responses and provide justifications for their choice. Next, there are open-ended questions for the respondents to express their opinions. The second one concerns teachers at the Department of English with whom a semi-structured interview is conducted

3. RESULTS

The following step is dedicated to the discussion of the research findings in terms of implications and reasons behind any related occurrence of the phenomenon under investigation.
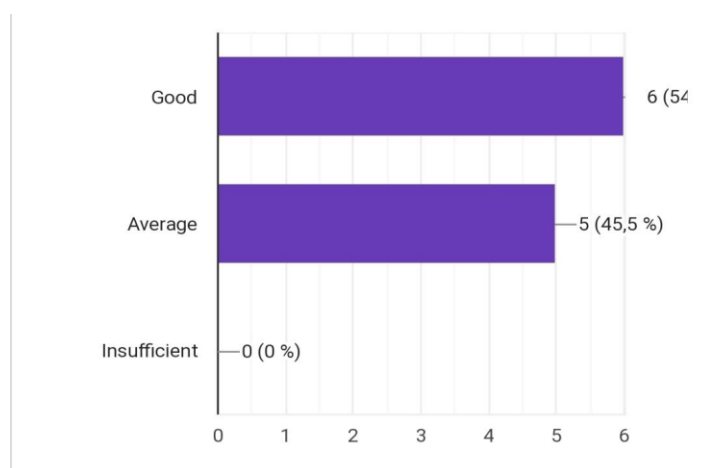
3.1. Questionnaire analysis

The questionnaire includes a group of questions that target measuring the extent to which learners can be autonomous.

3.1.1.   Students' level of English item one:

Item 1: How would you grade your English level?
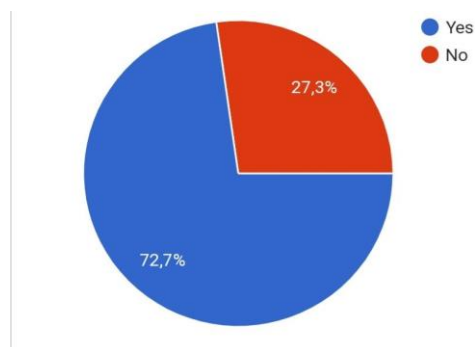
Figure 1
Students' level of English

The above bar graph shows that more than half of the respondents (54.5%) acknowledged their good level of English, while others (45.5%) seem to average (figure 1).

### 3.1.2. Item 2: are you familiar with the notion of" learner autonomy"?

Figure 2
Student's familiarity with "learner autonomy"

The pie chart indicates that (72.7%) of the students are acquainted with "learner autonomy" and embrace it as holding responsibility for their learning. While (27.3%) of the respondents showed no familiarity with the concept. The results confirm the very majority of students' awareness of autonomy as a learning component at the University (figure 2).

### 3.1.3. Item 3: In your opinion, who holds the primary responsibility for the learning process?

Figure 3
Students' attitudes toward who should be responsible for learning
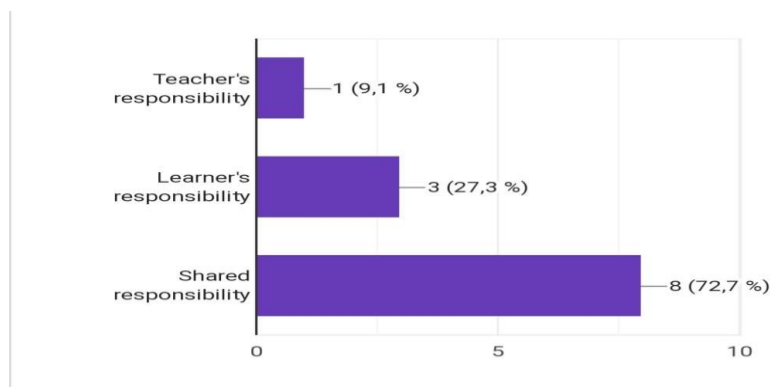
The above graph shows that (72.7%) of respondents consider the learning process as a partnership based on the collaboration of teachers and students. Only one-third emphasize learners' sole responsibility for their learning. Only (9.1%) reckoned the teacher's responsibility for a better ongoing learning process (figure 3).

### 3.1.4. Item 4: Are you a self-directed learner

Figure 4
Students as self-directed learners
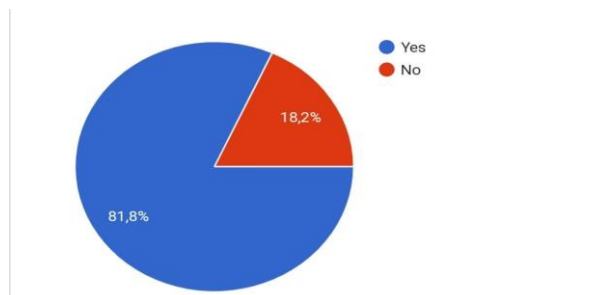
According to the pie chart, the majority of students stated their self-directed learning aspect. Only (18.2%) rejected the previous criterion; which implies learners' total dependence on their teachers (figure 4).

### 3.1.5. Item 5: How would you define independent learning?

Figure 5
Definition of independent learning
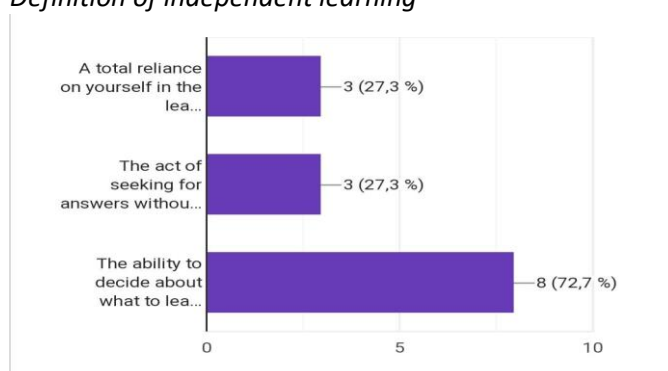
The majority (72.7%) see independent learning as a dependence on themselves like learner's self-responsibility as fully involved in learning. Whereas, (27.3%) have chosen the act of figuring out answers depending on the teacher. Only (27.3%) could define independent learning as making their own decisions about the learning material, as learners' preference of reliance on themselves (figure 5).

### 3.1.6. Item 6: How much dependent are you on your teacher?

Figure 6
 Student's dependence on the teacher
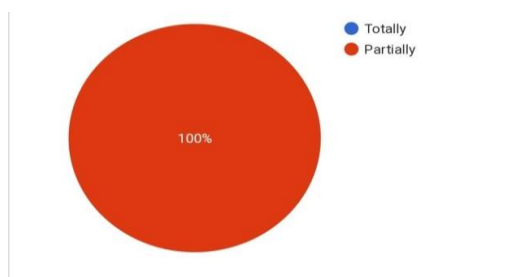
The above pie chart (figure 6) shows that some of the students depend on the teacher as they rely on themselves, or their classmates. This is a sign of learners' self-reliance.

### 3.1.7. Item 7: Which role of the following do you perform in the classroom?

Figure 7
Learners' roles in the classroom
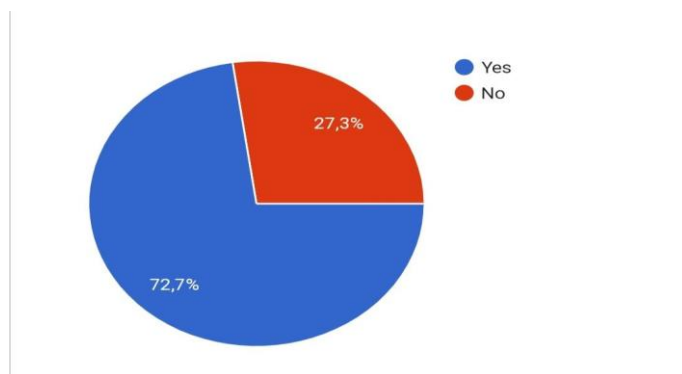
Findings in the pie chart (figure 7) indicate that the majority (72.7%) of students acknowledge that their teachers offer them room for involvement in the teaching/learning process. (27.3%) are deprived of opportunities to be autonomous as a sign of teachers' doubt about learners' maturity.

3.1.8. *Item 8: Does your teacher share responsibilities with you in the class?*

Figure 8
Reasons behind sharing responsibilities with students
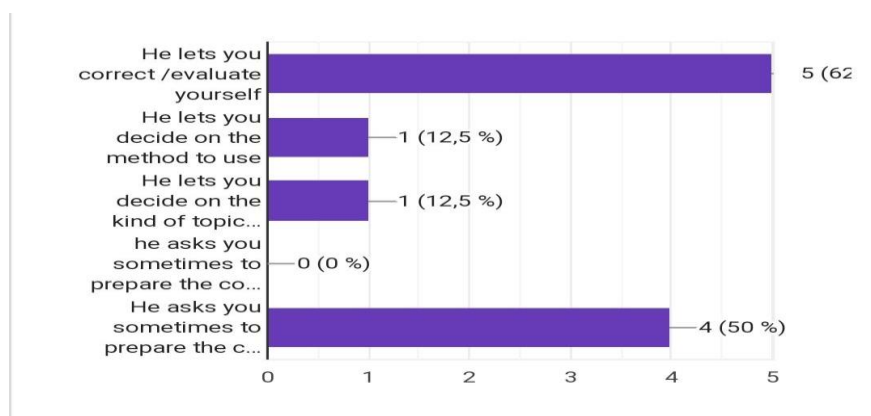
According to the pie chart, (40%) of students acknowledge teachers do not allow learners' self-evaluation (figure 8). Only (16%) of them admit that teachers share governance over the course design and deliverance. Only (12.5%) said that the teacher discusses the method with them. Fortunately, (12.5%) of them acknowledged their teacher's consult about topics and activities.

3.1.9. *Item 9: Tick roles do you perform in the classroom*

Figure 9
 Learners' role in the classroom
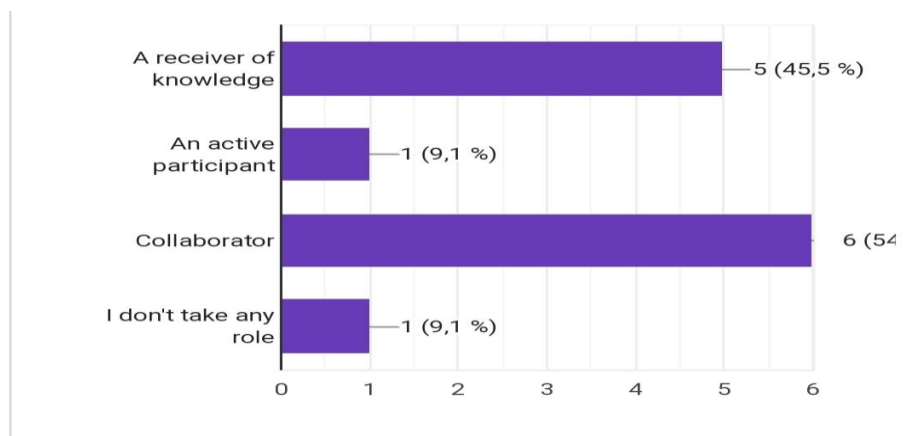
The above bar graph indicates that (54.4%) of learners considered their roles as collaborators, (45.5%) said admitted their roles as passive recipients (and 9.1%) of the respondents reckoned not performing any role. Only (9.1%) considered themselves as active participants.
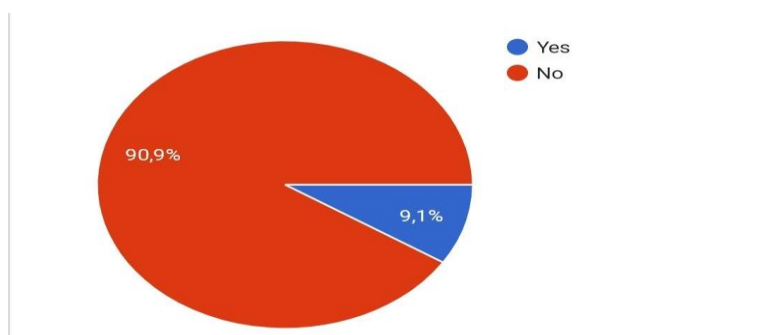
3.1.10. Item 10: Are you dependent on only the teacher's information in the classroom?

Figure 10
Student's dependence on the information given in class

As highlighted in the pie chart, the majority (90.9%) of respondents rejected their dependence on information given in the class. They justified their answer by stating that they surf on the web and do research, or discuss with their mates. However, (9.11%) of them stated that they rely on teachers.

3.2. Analysis of the interview findings

3.2.1. Item 01: What do you know about learner autonomy?

According to the interviewee's responses, he considers autonomy as an approach that fosters learners' if not their full, partial responsibility and promotes their control over the learning process. He stated that the matter concerns both how and what they are expected to learn.

3.2.2. Item 02: Is learner autonomy important in learning English at University? Justify.

The interviewee emphasized the need for learner autonomy as a vital ingredient not only at the university but for all levels of the Algerian educational system. The reason is that autonomous learners are meant to be

highly motivated than others. The process implies autonomy as a conducive to more effective learning. The interviewee stated that autonomy helps learners be competent and self-confident. Moreover, it offers more chances for learners to exercise their control over their learning. It also gives room for introducing innovation by providing motives to do so. Another advantage is that autonomy raises students' awareness of what they can do and how to do things.

3.2.3. Item 03: Can EFL Students be Autonomous?

According to the interviewee, learners at the Department of English are less autonomous than they should be. However, excellent students show great aptitude to be autonomous in the form of performing self–study tasks and voluntary work as an initiative. This situation is due to the main reason that students still hold the old belief in their teacher as the only competent authority that holds control over all classroom procedures and items and so for knowledge delivery. Consequently, learners are meant to be subjected to their teachers' will as the most knowledgeable person.

3.2.4. Item 04: How do EFL students appreciate learners' autonomy?

At this stage, the respondent stated that learners' achievements are determined by participants in the shaping of the national educational system. For example; for students, being autonomous is strongly dependent on teachers and their readiness to give room for learners' initiative to take place in the classroom environment through motivation and guidance. The process happens in the form of stimulus and response teachers by offering opportunities for students to exhibit their self-study skills as learning styles are taken into consideration.

3.2.5. Item 5: Can project work promote learner autonomy? If not, why?

As far as the interviewee is concerned, the project work can contribute greatly to enhancing learners' autonomy, because it represents a "real world task "and a more effective strategy for education as it bridges the gap between knowing and doing. The idea is that project works enhance learners' active engagement. The implication is that learners are expected to make more personal efforts in their preparation.

3.2.6. Item 6: How can students be encouraged to become autonomous?

When asked about the effective procedures for learners to be autonomous the interviewee revealed that the departure for autonomy implementation begins at home. He emphasized that the family can play a crucial role by encouraging children to do things by themselves as a seed to grow with their future practices in the social setting and so for their educational environment. Consequently, learners' awareness about the necessity for their responsibility over their actions is raised and their willingness is maintained. Concerning this perspective, parents are meant to act as agents of change for their children's actions by reinforcing the sense of readiness and ability to do things with less guidance from their family as a sign of the beginning of an independent social behavior that extends to their learning process over time. For this belief to be realized, a set of procedures is highly recommended namely; encouraging cooperative learning whether virtually or in their daily practices. Some suggested teacher's responses are as follows; doing projects and motivating learners to join groups and work on engaging contexts and topics of their interest.

3.2.7. Item07: Is the teaching/learning environment for or against autonomy implementation?

The teacher's response confirmed the point that the teaching/learning environment acts as a constraint against autonomy implementation. The implication is that both teachers still have the traditional belief that learners are inept to be autonomous for many reasons; First learners cannot decide about their learning needs and objectives due to their short-term vision of the future. Second, learners are meant to be subjected to

teachers' will. Teachers are seen as the only authority entitled with the power to shape the ongoing teaching/learning process and its requirements.

Consequently, some recommendations are set by EFL instructors as: Defining learning needs and setting objectives, selecting the teaching materials, using effective teaching methods and learning techniques, and evaluating the learning outcomes to address them.

4. DISCUSSION

Participants' responses to the questionnaire indicate learners' fair independence from their teacher. This emphasizes their response to question 6. The point is that the total number of respondents are self-reliant learners. Moreover, they confirm the quality of being self-directed learners. Apart from that, the majority of respondents consider the learning process a sort of partnership. According to them, cooperation is a necessary ingredient for more effective learning to take place. Therefore, innovation in learners' classroom performances is inevitable. The idea is that few of them are focused and are reliant on their teacher while others are acting as active participants in the ongoing learning process.

As a Semi-Structured interview, its flexibility gives room for any unexpected events or practices in the classroom. Furthermore, it allows the interviewee to state his opinions clearly, and at the same time justify them. For more reliable data about the interviewee's understanding of learner autonomy, open-ended questions are set as the most effective tenets to gather qualitative information about attitudes and perspectives.

The teacher was requested to answer seven questions, (see Appendix 3). The first four dealt with teacher's attitudes toward learners' autonomy implementation at the university. The next question was about the interviewee's view of project work, and its role in fostering autonomy in learning English. Question number six meant collecting information about students' independence from the teacher. Question number seven explored the readiness of the Algerian university environment for embracing the quality of autonomy in English language classrooms.

5. CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that autonomy is regarded as the most recent learning ingredient within the Algerian educational context. Thus, both partners (teachers and learners) are expected to be offered psychological and informational recycling opportunities concerning this learning quality. Furthermore, The Algerian educational system does not take into account autonomy and its necessity in the teaching/learning process. Automatically, this attitude impedes autonomy implementation rather than fostering it. The current educational situation emphasizes teacher-centered classrooms with the subjection of learners to teachers' authority over all that is related to the learning process. As a consequence, learners are facing challenges in making their diversity in learning styles a daily practice rather than just knowledge. The main factor behind this situation is the habitual spoon-feeding teaching process that is deep-rooted in the university setting. These symptoms have made exhibit an urgent need for autonomy to be introduced into the learning process. At this stage, the main concern is making all the teaching/learning items and procedures in the hands of EFL students, like teachers to make autonomy part of their daily performances. One should not deny the need for the immense efforts of all participants in the educational system to engage in this project. To do so, teachers are expected to change their authoritative practices over what is going on in the classrooms, which leads to the exclusion of learners.

It is worth stating that autonomy is a vital characteristic of learners' current daily performances. Consequently, other ingredients seem to exhibit a strong correlation with the previous notion as far as motivation is concerned. It is obvious that the more learners are motivated, the more initiative is taken to become autonomous. That is to say; teachers are highly recommended for their diverse motivational techniques for learners as a basic. The focal point is that teachers are expected to direct their efforts towards exploring learners' maturity to be autonomous and how to electrify students' willingness into an initiative that

will encourage them to embrace the quality of autonomy and then, gradually develop it as an unavoidable important learning ingredient.

Finally, one can state that the findings of the research confirmed the marginalization of autonomy as a need for learners' development and involvement in the teaching/learning process. The situation has resulted in the fact that the very majority of Master students of English exhibit a repel for the ingredient of autonomy because of several reasons namely: First, teachers' attitude by depriving learners of the initiative to exercise control over their learning process. Second, absence of motivating tasks for encouraging students to be autonomous. Then, the university setting neglects autonomous learning and the lack of psychological factors as motives to embrace autonomy.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Learners' Questionnaire

This questionnaire targets collecting data about learners' perception of their learning, and their readiness to be autonomous learners. You are kindly requested to answer the following questions.

1- How is your level in English?

    Good ⬜   Average ⬜   Bad ⬜

2- Have you heard about" learning autonomy"?

    Yes   ⬜   No   ⬜

If "yes", what can you say about it?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

3- Do you think that learning progress is?

- Teacher's responsibility ⬜
- Learner's responsibility ⬜
- Shared responsibility ⬜

4- Are you a self-directed learner (who relies on himself in learning)?

    Yes ⬜   No ⬜

5- What do you that independent learning is:

- A total reliance on yourself in the learning ⬜
- The act of seeking answers without the teacher ⬜

- The ability to decide what to learn ▯

6- To what extent are you dependent on your teacher?

    Totally ▯   Partially ▯

7- Does your teacher offer you some responsibilities inside the class?

    Yes ▯   No ▯

If "yes" it is because

- He lets you evaluate yourself ▯
- He lets you decide on the method to use ▯
- He lets you decide on the kind of topics/activities to use ▯
- He sometimes asks you to prepare the course and present it ▯
- Others: ………………………………………………………………

8- Which role do you take during the sessions?

- A receiver of knowledge ▯
- An active participant ▯
- Collaborator ▯

9- Do you depend on only the classroom information?

    Yes ▯   No ▯

If "no", what other sources do you use?

………………………………………………………………………

Thank you for your collaboration

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview

1. What does learner autonomy mean for you?
2. Is learner autonomy important to learning English at University? Why? Why not?
3. Are EFL students autonomous?
4. How do you see EFL students' attitude towards learning English independently inside/outside the classroom?
5. Do project works help EFL students to be autonomous? If not, why not?
6. How should students be encouraged to become autonomous in and outside the classroom?
7. Does the teaching/learning environment help or hinder autonomy? In what ways?