

# LEARNER AUTONOMY FOR LEARNER DEVELOPMENT

(REFLECTIONS ON THE MOROCCAN UNIVERSITY EFL CONTEXT)

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**Abstract**—This paper attempts to shed light on the situation of learner autonomy in the Moroccan University EFL context and argues for the need for promoting more autonomy among university students of English.

**Key Terms:** learner autonomy, learner training, metacognitive strategies, planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation.

## INTRODUCTION

Before talking about learner autonomy in the Moroccan university EFL context, it may be more appropriate to begin with some historical background that led to the promotion of learner autonomy. The teaching and learning of English as a foreign language has been approached from different perspectives. Some educators and researchers have been reflecting on methods to be implemented in the classroom. Others have been concerned with textbook design and the type of material that would fit language learners, etc. For a long time, focus was on teaching as a process and the teacher was at the centre of most if not all language teaching operations. However, in the twentieth century, and particularly with the contribution of some constructivists such as Vygotsky (1978), attention was shifted towards language learning and the learner. According to these constructivists, learners can develop some linguistic competence through involvement and social interaction. Interest in promoting learner autonomy may be motivated by this involvement of the learner in this learning process and his/her interaction with the social environment. For such learner-centred approaches, the learner is no longer considered as a recipient, but an active participant in the learning process and the teacher as a facilitator of this process. If teachers can facilitate learning for students by helping them how to learn and creating opportunities for learning, such students will no longer be limited to digest what teachers 'prescribe' for them, but will try to complement what these teachers do in the classroom with independent learning activities of their choice. Such detachments from teachers will allow them to benefit from a variety of opportunities; and therefore can become more fluent users of English, compared with teacher-directed students.

If the ultimate goal of the educational system in Morocco is to prepare people for life, then it is important for this educational system to help students develop as active and autonomous learners. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the situation of learner autonomy in the Moroccan university EFL context; and at the same time it argues for the need for promoting more autonomy among university students of English. To achieve these aims, chapter one will provide some definitions of key terms related to learner autonomy. The second chapter will attempt to justify some of the needs for more autonomous learning among university EFL students. The third chapter will discuss training for autonomous learning. The fourth and last one will suggest how tutors at the Moroccan university can help students of English develop strategies for learner autonomy.

## I. DEFINING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Before examining learner autonomy in the Moroccan university EFL situation, it would be preferable to start with defining autonomous learning. Through the review of literature, one may come across a number of definitions, but in most cases will not escape Holec's (1981) definition which describes learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning", p. 3. To take charge of one's learning, students need to assume responsibility for their own learning. So that students can assume responsibility for their own affairs, including learning, they need two things. First, they need to be aware of what learner autonomy is and the benefits they can gain from becoming autonomous. Second, they need to develop some skills or strategies for independent learning. In this article, autonomous learners are not people who work alone outside school, but can collaborate with the teacher and peers with the purpose of gaining more freedom and control over the learning process. Such detachments from teachers will allow them to practise more English through different media, at different situations and times convenient to them.

## II. THE NEED FOR PROMOTING MORE LEARNER AUTONOMY

University students are to some extent autonomous, but there is a need for developing in this continuum; assuming that learner autonomy is a gradual continuum. If some Moroccan students of English still rely on tutors and supervisors, this may be due to the culture of dependence these students have developed at home. This culture of dependence may be explained by the way these students were brought up once they were children. It is normal if students exert some dependence on parents at home, but the problem is that some parents do not encourage children to take the initiative to do things by themselves, to take risks and assume responsibility for their own affairs including school assignments.

There may be a lot of arguments for fostering more autonomy among Moroccan university EFL students, but for time constraints, two will be provided. The first argument may be related to teachers and the way some teachers teach at primary and secondary schools, but the second argument may be linked to easy access to internet technology. Some Moroccan university students can take charge of their own learning, to some extent. However, others still need to develop in this continuum. This need for developing more autonomy may be justified by the fact that some teachers do not seem to prepare students for this mode of learning. This argument may be supported by some empirical evidence collected from research. An example of this empirical evidence in the Moroccan EFL context was provided by Ouakrime (2002) who pointed to the difficulty of taking charge of learning at university and stated that some cases of failure at the Moroccan university were due to the secondary school students' inability to adapt to a more autonomous mode of learning once they got to university. This inability to develop as autonomous students may be related to teachers' attitudes or to the traditional teacher-centred approach they experimented once they were students at primary or secondary school. Some students find it difficult to move from dependence to independence just because they were used to spoon-feeding and rote-learning at the expense of reflection and critical thinking. As a consequence, students would rely on the teacher for everything and think that the teacher can provide them with all knowledge and skills they need for life. Perhaps, such students are not to blame if they continue relying on their tutors. I think that the promotion of autonomous learning is a culture that can be cultivated at school from an early age. However, teachers who are not aware or not trained in promoting autonomous learning may not be able to develop such mode of learning in their students. There is some interconnection between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. Dam (2000), among others, stresses teacher support for promoting learner autonomy and writes:

*The teachers have to learn when and how [...] best to support their learners in their learning. The learners on their part have to learn where and how 'to take hold' and to be aware of why and how they learn. (p. 49)*

Following the quote above, for teachers to foster autonomous learning, they need first to rethink the way they teach and the way their learners learn. Their role is not to teach students, but rather to help them take some control over the learning process. Tutor support is important because if teachers are not autonomous or do not know how to promote autonomous learning, then they may not be able to promote this autonomy in their students.

The second argument for promoting more autonomy among students of English at the Moroccan university may be related to the easy access to knowledge in libraries and in the internet. Nowadays, the internet seems to be nearer to students and offers a wide range of services and communication platforms. Some students are using internet technology as a means of entertainment and communication; but it can also help them in language acquisition/learning. If the language classroom cannot always offer authentic environments for learners to practise their English, internet technology offers such opportunities by bridging the distance between students and native speakers. Through independent interaction with this technology, university students may develop some linguistic competence as well as some awareness of the foreign culture even in a non-native environment. Internet technology can be used to supplement what students do in the classroom; but at the same time it can open windows for independent learning. The promotion of autonomous learning may also be supported as such mode of learning may cater for the different needs and interests of students. In other words, if tutors can help students develop autonomy, such students would be able to learn and use English in different situations and at times they think appropriate to them.

## III. LEARNER DEVELOPMENT FOR LEARNER AUTONOMY

Developing autonomous learning is not something that begins at university, it is a continuous process that starts earlier at home and kindergarten. However, some learners may be given freedom, but may not be able to develop in this continuum if they are not subject to some training. It is through training that students can develop some self-managerial skills that help them benefit from self-learning opportunities they may come across inside or outside the university. The notion of learner training goes back to Confucius (551-479 BC) who wrote "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime" (quoted in Ellis and Sinclair (1989:2). What may be understood from this quote is that teaching students is not enough for preparing them for life, for such students will always depend on their teachers. Therefore, instead of teaching students, tutors can help them develop some tools or strategies that would enable them to take control of their learning wherever and whenever they want.

At the Moroccan university, training may be important for some EFL students may resist detachment from tutors. Such students do not like to take charge of their own learning because they feel secure with the 'spoon-feeding' by tutors. However, there are other students who may like to take some control, but they may not know how to proceed in developing

it. For the above reasons, I suggest training should start with developing positive attitudes towards autonomous learning by introducing this mode of learning as a bridge to success at university and life in general. Students can be informed that autonomous learning is not total detachment from tutors, but allows for more flexible and various opportunities that would suit their needs and styles.

#### IV. THE LEARNER-BASED APPROACH TO AUTONOMY

Some students may be motivated to develop autonomous learning, but they may not be able to know how to promote it. For this reason, tutors can support them in developing autonomy through some training processes. Benson (2001) describes some of these approaches, but in this article only the learner-based approach will be discussed. Following this approach, students can promote autonomy when they can develop the following three metacognitive strategies: planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation, according to Wenden (1991), among others. The learner based approach is chosen in this article for if students are equipped with these strategies, they may take charge of their own learning inside the university as well as outside. Moreover, such strategies may enable them to benefit more from internet technology outside the language classroom. If students can develop these three strategies, they may be able to decide on appropriate topics, web pages, monitor their progress and evaluate their plans, the tools and strategies they used for independent English language learning.

##### A. Planning

Tutors at university can help students make some plans. They can ask them to set specific achievable goals. For instance, they can help them decide on the content, the resources and the time needed for meeting pre-set goals. In the beginning, students can be helped to make short and/or long term plans that would supplement what is done in the language classroom. Gradually, students can be encouraged to decide on what to study, the materials they may use and the time they may need for completing their assignments or projects.

##### B. Self-monitoring

It is the second metacognitive strategy for promoting autonomous learning. Students are not only supposed to make some plans for independent learning but also to monitor this learning process. For instance, in case of difficulty or ambiguity, students can decide on what to learn and how to learn based on their metacognitive knowledge. In other words, the students can consider the level of difficulty of the task, the materials available, the time allowed, etc. before making decisions on alternative tools and strategies for overcoming difficulties. The promotion of this self-monitoring strategy will certainly help students reflect on the way they learn and question which tools/resources, etc. would be appropriate and

more effective for independent learning.

##### C. Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is the third metacognitive strategy for promoting autonomous learning. Before being assessed by others, students need to understand that they can begin with some self-assessment. Self-assessment may be criticised for being subjective, but for the purpose of developing autonomy, tutors can help students use objective self-study quizzes from previous exams or from the internet. Students are supposed to gauge their efforts, the techniques they employ, the resources they need, etc. so as to decide on new plans and new alternatives.

Training students in developing strategies for autonomous learning has been experimented in different contexts. Sbaihi (2010), among other studies attempted to promote the three metacognitive strategies: planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation for autonomous learning among a group of thirty Second Year Baccalaureate students for a period of six months. Analysis of the results demonstrated some evidence in favour of the effect of training on the promotion of autonomous learning among the experimental group.

Since some of these secondary school students may reach university, but unprepared for the autonomous mode of learning prevailing at universities, it is suggested that tutors at universities should experiment the promotion of strategies for autonomous learning with their students through assigning homework or project work for independent learning of English.

#### CONCLUSION

In short, if one of the ultimate goals of the educational system in Morocco is to help students develop and assume responsibility for life, then it is important for educators and tutors to rethink some traditional teaching practices and switch to promote autonomous learning among students. The promotion of autonomous learning is not something that begins at university, but normally should start at home and at kindergarten or primary school. Since some students may find it difficult to take charge of their own learning at university, It is suggested that their tutors can help them develop strategies for autonomous learning; bearing in mind the fact that students at university, most of the time, need to do assignments and research projects outside the university.

Assuming that there is some interdependence between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy, It is also suggested that future teacher education programmes at university should focus more on training students in developing strategies for autonomous learning as well as training them in using the internet for practicing English outside the university boundaries. Such training may be effective only if both tutors and students can collaborate and assume new roles. Tutors can reduce control and transfer some of it to students. For such

purpose, they become facilitators of learning rather than purveyors of information. I think with some consciousness-raising and scaffolding from tutors, Moroccan EFL students can develop as lifelong learners who may benefit from different resources at convenient places and times; and therefore, can assume responsibility for their own learning at university and life in general.

This paper has attempted to reflect on the promotion of autonomous learning among Moroccan university students of English, but I hope that more research on learner autonomy at university can be conducted. I think through reflection and researching learner autonomy that the Moroccan university becomes a bridge to development not only for university students but for the human capital as a whole.

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