LEARNER AUTONOMY:

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH FROM REGURGITATION TO CREATIVITY

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is a newly born phenomenon which has made teaching learning process an interesting, rich experience to both teachers and learners who are no longer considered as two separate components within the classroom, but they are two unified actors who share mutual responsibility in relation to the way learning and teaching is carried, and what capacities to be used to reach full responsibility in their learning and to end up with as a dynamic learner and a highly conscious citizen. This concept has been introduced in various contexts either in western or Arab contexts and it has been subject to various contexts which interpreted it locally and among these Algeria whose educational system witnessed series of reforms mainly the Competency Based Approach in primary , middle and secondary schools and the LMD system at the university level . Both of them advocated a philosophy of learner centered , thus learner autonomy is the core feature which made and is still making a revolution in the field of teaching and learning in Algeria. This paper explores the current teaching practices in Algeria and the place of autonomy within them. It aims to make series of suggestions to bring about change so as to make an autonomous based approach a stable , easily implemented pedagogy in a context like Algeria by means of making the Algerian classroom a modern space where it is characterised by the use of technology and making the learning process highly motivating and individual with the presence of the wise man or the teacher whose expertise and experience lead learners to be critical and not easily manipulated.

1.INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is a hot topic nowadays as it provides both teachers and learners with new roles that of teachers as facilitators and students as being active independent actors who are in charge of their learning, and this is due to the phenomenon of globalisation which is characterised by "shrinking space, shrinking time and breaking down borders' (Karamavadivelu 2003: 6 as cited Bensemmane, 2017). This paves the way for the implementation of learner autonomy which seems quite challenging in a context like the Algerian one where the students are likely to be brought up with the idea of overdependence on teachers which lead us to understand the essence of this innovative teaching practice whose implementation presents a real shift from what is known as teacher centred approach to the students' centred approach and teachers are used to spoon feed the students. Thus, this paper tries to shed light on the various definitions and its main types. Also, it tackles the current teaching practices that are marked by the two educational systems that of the Competency Based Approach (CBA) in the primary, middle and secondary schools, while the second one is the aims at exploring the issue of learner autonomy within the current teaching practices in the Algerian context and particularly, the way this concept is implemented within the two prevailing educational systems in Algeria as well as the constraints or the obstacles that face teachers from implementing this concept and the students' reluctance to become autonomous .Also, this paper

attempts to present the ways for the applicability of autonomous learning in schools as well as at the university level. Lastly, this paper, therefore, argues for a gradual change which aims at making both teachers and learners autonomous, open and tolerant towards their new roles as instructors who are facilitators, and learners as active, responsible ones.

2.DEFINING LEARNER AUTONOMY

The field of second and foreign language instruction is significantly marked by the emergence of a new concept which is learner autonomy that has been a subject for various definitions and interpretations. The debate regarding this issue of learner autonomy started mainly with the pioneer Holec (1981) who defined it as *"the ability to take charge of one's own learning...... this ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by "natural" means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, in a systematic , deliberate way"* this definition shows that autonomy is the ability of the learners to be involved and responsible on his or her own learning by or without the assistance of the teacher and developing a kind of knowledge which he uses to solve any raising problem. This view is further reinforced by what Young (1986:19) who said: "*the fundamental idea in autonomy is that of authoring one's own world without being subject to the will of others*" this shows that autonomy is promoted through the learners' readiness and making use of their various abilities and strategies to take charge of their own learning . These two views can be viewed as extreme ones as they present a complete denial of the teachers' presence is important to make the learning process dynamic and his guidance is of great contribution in assisting the learners to be highly involved in their learning .Also, another definition has been suggested by Boud (1988:23) who believes that *" the main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction" this shows that this definition highlights the idea of some learners' control of their own way to learn and to be involved within their learning and similarly the teacher is present within the teaching process. Other aspects are the core features which mark learner autonomy that of "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (Little, 1991:4)* it can be understood from this definition that being autonomous is having a highly critical, independent learner whose will and readiness leads him or her to think attentively of his own capacities. In the same vein, Wenden (1991:15) described autonomous learners as intelligent ones through this following statement :

"…. *'Successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learnt how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous"*

This definition tries to provide us with a profile of an autonomous learner who has the capacity to identify his strategies which can are both cognitive and metacognitive to facilitate one's learning process and thus developing the ability and the eager to become highly self-confident, open- minded, dynamic and reflective when doing an action, and on action. In fact, one prerequisite to become autonomous is not to be pushed by the teacher but it is the product of the learners 'own will and readiness to bear this responsibility of being aware of their capacities and strive to become independent, as it is explained by Dickinson (1992:330) who said "...*an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take responsibility for his own learning"*. A further feature which highlights the importance of learner autonomy whose presence marks a revolution within society as it is depicted by Benson (1996:34) who views it as "*autonomization is necessarily a transformation of the learner as a social individual.......autonomy not only transforms individuals, it also transforms the social situations and structures in which they are participants*" through this statement , it can be understood that developing autonomy is not only concerned with the development of an independent learner but it goes beyond school to create a generation of critical , creative citizens who can bring about change within their societies . Additionally, being autonomous provides the learner with to justify their choices regarding the way they learn as it is pinpointed by Sinclair (1999)who made this statement: *"the learners' capacity to make informed decisions about their learning" (cited in Al Saadi , 2011:98)*. All these definitions provide us with a profile of an autonomous learner who is a responsible self-reliable individual who uses his various skills and strategies to learn how to learn, to act wisely and

intelligently in any raising situation not only in one's own educational environment but being able to question anything and everything so as to transform what is wrong into what is suitable. This can be done through various types of learner autonomy which will be discussed in the following section.

3.TYPES OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

As learner autonomy is mainly concerned with the learners' deep involvement within the learning process, this led Benson (1996) to identify three types of learner autonomy:

a).Technical autonomy: is marked by the whole independence of the learner who studies without the assistance of a teacher. This refers to the learner complete reliance over one's self and the teacher is absent

b).Psychological autonomy: is the learner ability which makes him or her involved within their learning process, and it is generally supported by situational autonomy. This type of autonomy is context or situation subject thus; learners become autonomous depending on the raising issue.

C).Political autonomy: having control or manipulation regarding the processes and the subject matter of learning. This is a highly challenging type of autonomy as it presents a type of rebellious learners who go beyond what is presented to them and to reject all what is unsuitable for them.

Other types of autonomy have been identified by Little (1999) that of:

a).Proactive autonomy: the learner sets his agenda on his own without any assistance from the teacher. The learner follows a self-directed process in the learning process and this is mainly through self-study centres.

b). Reactive autonomy: the teacher guides the task and acts as a scaffolder to the learners. It is the teacher who sets the agenda for the learning situation. Here is the teacher plays a role of a guide who through various stages and hints helps the learner to move from fully dependent to less independent.

These types of learner autonomy present a set of characteristics which are common to it that of aiming at

independence, flexibility, criticality, developing a set of strategies that of cognitive and metacognitive which guide the learners to know how to learn. However, the contextualisation of this concept in a context like the Algerian one faces various obstacles and this will be further explained in the following section which tackles a brief overview of the Algerian educational system which would demonstrate the educational phases which marked the Algerian schooling.

4. A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN ALGERIA

The Algerian educational system has been subject to various changes and dilemmas as there was a clash between the two main pedagogies that of the Islamic and western one. After the independence (1962), the Algerian government encouraged the Arabicisation regime in various fields that of society, education or culture. This regime which aims at the promotion of a monoculture policy which neglects any languages or cultures within the same country by means of The revival of standard Arabic as the only means of instruction in the Algerian context . Therefore, the revival of the Islamic pedagogy which is based on a view that the teacher or the "cheikh" who is considered as "a prophet" or the provider of unquestionable knowledge and the only source of reliable information. Significantly, this pedagogy has some features in its principles and teachings which foster learner autonomy such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, group discussion, and learning by doing or in other words learning which is constructed by learners themselves. Thus, knowledge is no longer exclusive to teachers, but it is negotiated and built by the learners. Also, teacher is a scaffolder or learners with various prompts or hints to move from the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills into experiential knowledge or the knowledge which they experience in real life situations. Additionally, since it was taught in Islamic schools or madrassas and masjids thus, it focuses mainly on reading because of Quran teaching and practices, storytelling.

However, this created a kind of folk pedagogy where teachers are highly conservative and consider themselves as the only providers of knowledge. Added to this, this policy was the product of the Islamic identity which was based on the notion of AL Ummah (the Muslim nation). This movement of Arabicisation created

a conflict between the conservative Islamic supporters and the Francophone elite. This resulted in the failure of the Arabicisation due to the diversity and the complexity of the Algerian multilingual context (Classical Arabic, Algerian Arabic dialect, French), the lack of infrastructure, as well the shortage of teacher training. Although the Islamic education was widely spread, French was gaining power and control (Milliani, 2012). From 1830 to 1962, the French educational Model was followed, and Algerian University was its sample place. In 1971, the Western Educational Model was introduced as it promoted the development of teacher apprenticeship and the quality of training which the teachers receive. In 1976, another reform was marked by Polytechnic Curriculum Theory that was imported from Germany and it advocated the emphasis on the professional subjects or a combination between theory and practice. All these reforms presented different phases within the history of Algerian educational which presented a conflict between two main pedagogies the Islamic and the Western ones. This conflict was finally solved when the two main huge reforms were issued that of Competency Based Approach and The LMD systems which are the main concerns of the following two sections.

5.CURRENT TEACHING PRACTICES IN ALGERIA

5.1. Background for two reforms of (CBA and LMD)

After the reforms of 1971 until 2000, another reform of national education was launched and its main promotion was the competency based approach (CBA) for the primary , middle and secondary schools and in 2004 another reform was issued at the university level which is known as LMD or (Licence- Master –Doctorate) in a context which seems to reject (Milliani, 2011)

The reform of the Bologna or the LMD system came as a blessing to solve the bad conditions in the social, political or economic fields in countries like Algeria, Morocco. Also, the higher education was in a compete chaos because of the weak infrastructure, the insufficient and ineffective materials, the bad conditions for both teachers and students, the emigration of the elite

The objectives of this reform are:

-To ensure the mobility in higher education either for teachers or learners

-To create a kind of competition within the European higher teaching institutions so as to attract the non-European Students

-To serve the demands of a new raising global world and to lead Europe to this inevitable change (Khelfaoui, 2009)

Other pedagogical reasons have been identified to demonstrate the philosophy behind these reforms: firstly, they are meant to make the learners develop their critical capacities. Secondly, they are vehicles to help learners to reflect to question themselves as well as their practices, and also they become dynamic and develop high self-esteem. Lastly, they encourage the learners to be self-directed, and they view themselves as active, and able to act critically in a world of competition (Bensemmane, 2011:132).

5.2. The Competency Based Approach

It is defined as "a know how to act process which interacts and mobilizes a set of capacities, skills and an amount of knowledge that will be used effectively in various problem- situations or in circumstances that have never occurred before." (p. 4) as cited in Benadla, 2012:146)

This approach aims to promote learner autonomy, criticality, helping the leaners to develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies within the middle school cycle. It is a learner –centered approach whose interest is the learner. Also, it encourages learners to develop a sense of analysis then synthesize and eventually makes their own evaluation. Lastly, CBA is meant to 2develop the communicative competence which permits the leaners to interact effectively.(Benadla, 2012:147). It is a student centered approach since it focuses on the student as a whole with all his needs, abilities in use. This reform is a leading one in primary, middle as well as the secondary schools, while; another reform which is the LMD system is one significant reform which revives the university from its gloomy, chaotic situation. The background of this new system at the higher education will be the subject of discussion in the following section.

5.3. The LMD System

It is an innovation at the level of the university which has been following the classical system until 2003, this latest reform which was launched in the Algerian universities in order to make the Algerian degree universal, and to bring about a generation of Algerian learners who are highly critical, not easily manipulated as well as developing higher levels of learning. Also, it is the crossing bridge into the business world as they develop specific strategies which are long life ones which help them to reflect, to act in any raising situation in the field of work. Besides, it is a reform which has assigned teachers who are viewed as facilitators who assist the learners with enough guidance so that the latter can build their knowledge by themselves, while, the learners are encouraged to act on their own through the use of their potentials or capacities to build up their knowledge. Another positive aspect about this new system is regarding assessment procedure which relies mainly on a continuous rhythm or by a final exam or doing tests then exams , meanwhile, the privilege is always given to continuous assessment which is the core of this whole new regime.(Bouhadiba et al, 2012:181-182).   These two reforms whose concern is the promotion of learner autonomy used through different pedagogical aspects mainly project work for the Competency Based Approach and while for LMD various tasks were presented such as assignments, hand outs, study skills and tutorials .The application of learner autonomy turns from a blessing to a course in the eyes of the majority of teachers and learners and this will be further explored in the following section.

6.LEARNER AUTONOMY AND CURRENT ALGERIAN TEACHING PRACTICES

Learner autonomy which is an innovation in the field of second or foreign language as it stipulates a revision of the whole educational system which has been overloaded with the teachers' dominance and learners who are in a state of dependence following the lead of the teacher, and this is the case of the Algerian context which seems to reject all what differs from its principles regarding this issue. Hence, the implementation of learner autonomy through various school systems will be subject to difficulties and even sometimes failure. This section will explore its ways of implementation and it will end up with the various obstacles in its implementation.

6.1. Implementation of Learner Autonomy within the Competency based Approach

Regarding the CBA, the teachers tried to implement this innovative concept through the use of project work which is considered as a multifaceted activity which triggers a set of various competencies and it has main objectives that of mainly teaching the learners to become accustomed with the learning on their own or in collaboration with their peers or with the teacher, also learners will develop their cognitive and thinking skills. Moreover, learners will develop a sociocultural competence which allows them to communicate with others within or outside the formal settings and being able to adapt and develop some agency regarding any raising issue (Bensemmane, 2011:135). Regarding the teachers' method, teachers' use an inductive way of teaching when delivering the content, that is to say, it is no longer a transmission approach but instead it is a transformative approach which aims to realize the whole potential of teachers as well as learners. Additionally, the integration of ICT in the teaching learning process with an objective of presenting authentic materials which are likely to mirror real world situations (Benadla , 2013:146-147). However, the use of project work proves to fail due to the following factors: firstly, this type of work has been carried out at home, thus there is no teacher supervision or control. Secondly, this project is generally copy paste from the internet which lacks formal structure and content richness as teachers only care about the final product and neglect the process. Thirdly, it fails to provide learners with enough time and space to make use of their own cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Next, it seems to be trivial to the learners as they are not enriching experiences. Lastly, the learners are unable to use the acquired knowledge on their own as there is no assistance.(Bensemmane, 2011:135).

To sum up, project work fails to make learners autonomous in an era which is immersed in globalisation and the use of the internet which has created a new type of manipulation and dependence. Similarly, other types of tools have been used to introduce learner autonomy within the university, and this will be the essence of the following part.

6.2. Implementation of learner autonomy within LMD System

In an attempt to bridge the gap between the theory or the conceptual view of learner autonomy and practice or the teaching context at the university, teachers tried to apply it through various means like the use of hand outs or providing learners with opportunities to prepare ahead their lessons in order to share the responsibility of the teaching learning process together, and to be accustomed to prepare and to study on their own by using their own reasoning and to learn new ways to rephrase and give meaning to their learning process. Also, the university witnessed the introduction of Study Skills Course which is concerned by the teaching of various learning methods or it teaches the learners of means and strategies to know how to learn and which ways to be used. Additionally, Student Tutoring Scheme (Tutorat) was introduced which involved sessions where both teachers and students are present in a counselling process where teachers are here to explain the new tasks which are assigned to learners and to sensitize them about the context which is the university and not previous schooling any longer. This meeting is once a week and it takes place in a relaxing, cooperative atmosphere where the learners' voices are emancipated regarding themselves, their learning experiences. The teacher plays a new role that of facilitator, guide and counsellor where he or she co learns with his students. Conversely, this scheme failed to reach its objectives as it is not practical as it is time consuming and it led to a very stressful schedule of learners and even timing failed to provide learners with enough practices in a self-directed way. Moreover, teachers were faced with the problem of time management since their tutorial sessions became their office hours. Lastly, these sessions were not obligatory thus, not all students were present and not all their wants and needs were discovered. Finally, assignments were used as tools to provide learners with opportunities to work on their own and make use of their cognitive and metacognitive, knowledge and skills to present original works which exhibit their complete involvement and dynamism, but these assignments were done in groups or by using internet, thus they lost their reliability and credibility (Bensemmane, 2011:136)

All in all, all these tools of project work, assignments, hand outs and even tutorials present daring attempts to revolutionise , revisit and revise a whole agenda of learning and teaching and to find a new educational regime whose essence is making learners active , aware , self-conscious intelligent enough in their learning and later in their professional life . The application of learner autonomy has been faced with various challenges which will be discussed in the next section.

6.3. Challenges for its implementation

There are several obstacles which prohibit the prosperity for this educational innovation in the Algerian schooling context in general such as: the teachers' perceptions regarding autonomy, and the notion of "cheikh" as it is deeply rooted within the Islamic pedagogy or the "folk pedagogy", as teachers view themselves as providers of knowledge (Miliani, 2012).Also, within another Arab context that of Oman, Al Saadi (2011: 107) identified a similar reason through what he calls as the teachers and students' mistaken assumptions or perceptions of this autonomous based approach and their new roles within this learner – centred approach. In the same vein, Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) did a study regarding teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy and they find that implementing learner autonomy is challenging as teachers have low expectations of their learners' degree of achievement. Additionally, the students are brought up with the idea of overreliance on the teachers , and they are used to their role as passive recipients , and they think following these two proverbs (he who doesn't listen to his older people's advice will get into trouble"

"The one who teaches me one word, I will become his slave"

"He who was born one night before you, knows one trick more than you" (Bensemmane-Ihaddaden,F, 2011:134). Within The Omani context, Borg and Al Busaidi (2012:287) through their study teachers fail to implement it because of the learners' shortage of motivation and they are deprived of specific skills and strategies to become independent, and self –regulated learner. In line with this idea of students' dependence on teachers, Ahmed and Abdul Majid did a study in the context of Malay in order to investigate any relationship between the will to apply learner autonomy and the culture values of Malay. The findings of this study indicated that culture influenced positively or negatively

the way learner autonomy is implemented thus Beamer and Varner (2008) said: "In a collectivist society such as Malaysia…, members of groups do not speak up, or even express a contradictory point of view, instead social harmony is maintained and it is the hidden goal of every communication" (cited in Missoum, 2016:68). Moreover, learner autonomy has been introduced in the Algerian educational context in its various phases without any previous teacher training or an apprenticeship framework which would have guided them to adapt and to adjust their practices to push the learners to become independent. Besides, teachers were following a "folk pedagogy" (Miliani, 2012) or they are copying their teachers' old practices which are generally based on a transmission model of teaching where the teacher is viewed as the bank of information and learners are vessels to be filled with knowledge. Thus, the implementation of learner autonomy presents a threat to their power as it has been explained by Little(2002) in this following statement : "Despite the ever-expanding literature, learner autonomy remains a minority pursuit, perhaps because all forms of 'autonomisation' threaten the power structures of educational culture"(as cited in Missoum, 2016:67). Also, other aspect like the assessment procedure and the lack of enough materials and the necessary infrastructure has been absent from this innovative framework. Lastly, the perceptions of the parents who showed resistance for this innovation in a context which thinks traditionally of the teacher as almost "a prophet" and competition is the only factor to succeed. All these obstacles faced the application of learner autonomy which is introduced without any previous stable and prepared ground in relation to the way it should be implemented, how to make teachers autonomous so as to transfer their independence to their students, and to make use of technology which can help the students to use their skills and potential to know how to learn and the way to reach success as well as change. Due to all these aspects and practices, change becomes an emergent solution with a view towards not only creating autonomous learners, but highly aware, critical citizens. This change will take various forms which will be discussed in the following section

7.CHANGES WITHIN THE CURRENT TEACHING PRACTICES

Having a closer look on current teaching practices in Algeria which are marked by the Competency Based Approach in primary, middle and secondary schools and the LMD system at the university level where there is an attempt to reinforce a learner centred approach and to give birth to a newly born pedagogy which is learner autonomy that is subject to various interpretations within the Algerian educational context and thus its implementation has been challenging. Therefore, the strive to bring about change that is emergent, and this can be done through various steps that of mainly the integration of ICT or technology within the teaching learning process especially at middle, secondary and university level so as to make the Algerian classroom a modern or a 21 st century one and match what learners master in their everyday life to their classroom as a tool to motivate them to study within the classroom and to learn on their own.

Also, teachers need to be autonomous in order to transmit it to their learners by means of encouraging them to develop basic skills and strategies to study to some extent on their own and know how to learn. Besides, change needs to be perceived with a common view thus, it will be attained commonly. Additionally, sufficient planning and training needs to be set forth to help the teachers assimilate this new pedagogical approach in order to foster it in their learners. Also, learners need to be aware regarding the importance of being autonomous and this can be done through teachers' encouragement of group work, pair work, self-assessment and peer assessment .Furthermore, teachers need to push the learners to hold positive attitudes regarding learner autonomy by means of reinforcing their self - esteem , using some creative activities , real world activities in order to help them to develop a set of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to face real world problems as well as being able to reflect , question their own practices and others in aspects like assessment , the content .

Lastly, bringing about change is a gradual process which is marked by the interrelation between all the components in the educational system like teachers, learners, curriculum designers, and training programs, and the whole community which has been brought up

with the idea of dependence and reliance on others generally and learners on teachers in particular in a one way teaching or in other words teachers as powerful , knowledgeable , highly respectful people and learners who lack responsibility, will and the readiness to give up their obedient status and to embrace a new role that of autonomous , flexible , intelligent , highly motivated individuals who want to know how to learn , with this transformation process the teachers' presence is important as they are the ones to achieve autonomy and to assist the learners y to develop criticality , self-awareness to face any raising situation with an aim of developing long life learning .

8.CONCLUSION

Exploring the implementation of learner autonomy within the current teaching practices in Algeria either the Competency Based Approach or the LMD system at the university level, it can be said that beyond these two reforms lies a will to make the whole educational system open to change which is a gradual process that starts from the early years of schooling so as to develop a set of metacognitive skills to know how to learn and thus become autonomous. A set of solutions are provided to achieve this goal of learner autonomy is through pushing the teachers to be highly responsible , free and paves the way for them to exercise their talents and skills to make the teaching learning experience an interesting and enriching one especially with the integration of technology which is controlling people's life in general and learners in particular , thus making use of it is one way to implement and inculcate self –directed learning in the learners' minds and ways of thinking . It is high time learners show a huge amount of involvement and responsibility in and outside the classroom by means of self –assessment, peer assessment, group work and collaborative learning which are the core features to create a new generation of highly aware, critical learners. All this can be done by an organised, well prepared training program for teachers whose presence is still of an extreme value and contribution in an era which needs the expertise and wisdom of teachers so as not to let the learners' views and opinions be manipulated by all what is new and attractive like technology and beyond it may be serving unethical, hegemonic reason for the benefit of the fittest or the world leading power or the US. This paper attempted to shed light on all the current practices in Algeria and to scrutinise the position of learner autonomy which is apparently gaining status and power within teachers as well as learners' practices

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