

Fostering Learners' Autonomy: The case of Moroccan University Students

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Students absolutely need to be given opportunities to take in charge their own learning to have the ability to enhance their quality learning and to transfer their acquired knowledge to future situations. This article reports on a study conducted among students at the university Hassan II, Casablanca. It seeks to reflect on the main pre-requisites and practices needed to achieve a successful teaching/learning experience within Moroccan universities through fostering students' autonomy. The current paper will try to answer the following questions: Are learners ready to accept responsibility? And are teachers ready to give responsibility? Both questionnaires and interviews were employed to collect, analyze and discuss data. Preliminary results have shown that the more actively engaged and involved students are in their learning, the more they participate fully in the learning opportunities that are presented to them. More than this, the more teachers are willing to change their traditional roles and the more learner centered the classroom environment is, the easier the transition from non-autonomous to autonomous learners becomes.

Keywords: learner autonomy responsibility motivation quality learning

Introduction

Teaching at the university level faces varied challenges. Understanding how learners' autonomy can foster learning, what practices teachers/ students should adapt to step forward towards autonomy and how to help learners become more engaged and more motivated in taking in charge their progress is one of these challenges that this paper tends to investigate.

The main aim of this study is to investigate to what extent Moroccan university students are willing to take responsibility of their learning. Moreover, the study also seeks to find out whether Moroccan university teachers are ready to give responsibility to students so as to take

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in charge their academic growth. The study will reflect upon how students' skills and knowledge develop if autonomy is fostered within their learning environments.

Review of the literature

Autonomy helps learners understand the goals of their learning and have the ability to evaluate what remains to be learnt. It is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning. Holec (1981) has given a more concrete and tangible definition of the concept. According to him, an autonomous learner is capable of 'determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc); evaluating what has been acquired' Holec (1981: 3). Learners should take their decisions and make their own choices according to their targets and motivations. This is a priority in the teaching process because it installs life-long learning.

Following the same line of thought, Dam (1995) argues that the development of learner autonomy entails five necessary considerations

1. A shift in focus from teaching to learning
2. A change in the learner's role
3. A change in the teacher's role
4. Evaluation as an integral part of the learning process, including teacher/learner and learner/learner interactions
5. A view of the language classroom as a rich learning environment

Dam (1995:78)

Dam (1995) goes further and specifies that a prerequisite for developing learner autonomy is a feeling of confidence, trust, acceptance and respect on the part of teachers and learners alike' Dam (1995: 79). Put differently, the willingness to take in charge the learners' progress stems not only from their belief in what they can do but also from a collaboration between teachers and students so as to attain their aim.

Scharle & Szabó (cf. 2000:9) have clearly stressed the fact that learners need to be provided with tools that pave the way towards their autonomy since they cannot become autonomous overnight but rather in stages. The first step towards autonomy is raising the awareness of learners and making them get in touch with different approaches and multiple viewpoints. Once they are conscious that their initiative will be welcomed to choose and decide on their own way of working, they will be willing to take in charge the process. The last step will establish their decision-making skills, and their involvement in their learning. Then they will work on the

ability to transfer their acquired knowledge to future situations. Dam (1995: 76) states that ‘the development on learner autonomy seems to depend primarily on getting learners personally involved in the learning process. This engagement will bring about the ability to take in charge their own learning.

Closely linked to this notion of responsibility is motivation. Autonomy and motivation nourish each other. Reeve’s (2012/2013: 151) defines motivation as “a private, unobservable, psychological, neural, and biological process that serves as an antecedent cause to the publically observable behaviour that is engagement. “ If students are motivated to engage in learning for its own sake, they will be able to take in charge their own learning and will be empowered with the confidence to participate, critically and creatively in this learning which cannot be reached overnight; it is “a process in which we learn to become increasingly critical” (Leicester, 2013: 3). Indeed, a pre-requisite to learner autonomy is a learning environment that favours critical thinking through “recognizing assumptions, taking account of context, imagining alternatives and developing scepticism” (Leicester, 2013: 3). Clearly stated, learner autonomy entails that learners are fully engaged as agents of their own learning, with individual and collective responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating (Holec, 1979; Little, 1991; Little 2009).

Worthy to mention that students ‘with a greater sense of autonomy in school have better outcomes such as classroom engagement, persistence, enjoyment and achievement” (Wang & Holcombe, 2010: 635-636). These elements are likely to lead to learner independence and growth. Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004: 80) state it clearly when they say that “individuals have fundamental psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy and competence. The degree to which students perceive those needs determine how engaged or disaffected they will be in school”

One last element to add is the fact that ‘the criteria for evaluating any learning achievements must be made transparent to students to enable them to have a clear overview both of the aims of their work and of what it means to complete it successfully.’ (Black & William, 2006: 15). In this way, they will be aware of how they learn, have the ability to evaluate what remains to be learnt, and can find the right way to overcome any gaps in the process of achieving their objectives. This will equally develop in them an understanding of the whole learning process.

Methodology

Initially, a group interview with a focus group of a 15-student class (professional bachelor) was conducted for about an hour to decide on the important aspects to be focused on

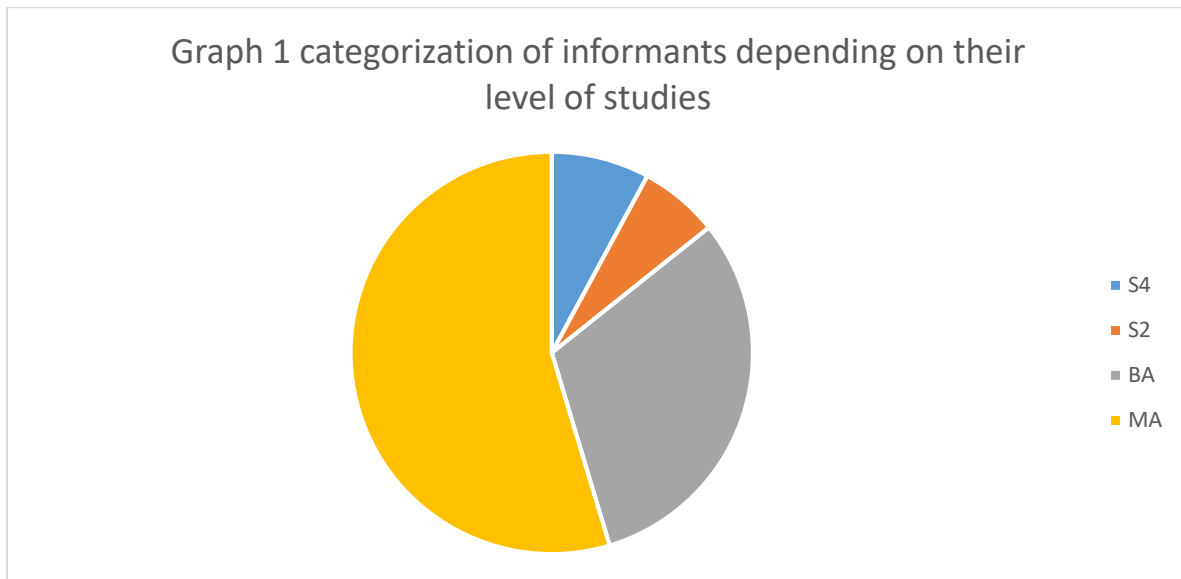
during field-work. They, later, helped in interviewing teachers and in administering questionnaires.

The second instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers from different university departments. They were chosen depending on their availabilities. They were supposed to answer both research questions namely,

- Are Moroccan University students ready to take responsibility for their learning?
- Are teachers ready to give responsibility to their students?

Then a questionnaire was conducted with 203 (69% Females and 31% males) participants to collect data for the quantitative analysis of the current study. The informants' levels range from S2 to master degree. We did not include S1 students because we supposed they would not be able to answer our questions appropriately since they had just enrolled at the university life.

Participants were categorized as follows:



Participants had to answer two main questions, namely

- Are Moroccan university students autonomous learners?
- To what extent are Moroccan university teachers ready to help the transition towards autonomy?

Each question was supported with a number of different activities and approaches (closed subquestions) that are linked to the learning environment. (See appendix 1).

Students were not explicitly told that the main concern was investigating their autonomy. The questions asked revolve around the different aspects that may be implemented in class so as to create a learning environment where students and teachers collaborate to pave the way towards life-long learning. The first part includes the purpose of the study then gathers information on the students' gender and level of study. The second section gathers data on whether Moroccan university learners are ready to accept responsibility and on how autonomous they are. The third part is concerned with the question of the willingness of teachers to participate in the growth and independence of their students through fostering their autonomy.

The questionnaire was administered in both English and Arabic so that it would be easier for the participants to understand the items and fill them in properly.

Results and discussion

The section will report on the findings from the qualitative and quantitative methods used in this study. We will start with the results from interviews then we will tackle those from questionnaires

Results of Interviews

All teachers interviewed agree that the shift to learner-centred approach has been and remains a pre-requisite towards learners' growth and autonomy. They have confirmed that autonomy is the key to success. They all agree that the shift is to be prepared from home, through primary and secondary school to reach or to be able to speak about autonomous learners at the university level. This is understandable since "A culture which reduces pupils to passive receivers of knowledge is likely to reduce teachers to passive receivers of curricula" (Barnes 1976: 188)

Here are some statements agreed upon by teachers who were interviewed

- *Autonomy should start from childhood. We cannot have autonomous learners if once back home they do not necessarily develop this skill.*
- *As far as autonomy is concerned, we do not have a real environment that can develop student's autonomy. We rely fully on teachers to provide materials and orient the learning experience.*
- *Evaluation within universities does not foster creativity. They push students to rely fully on the teacher for information.*

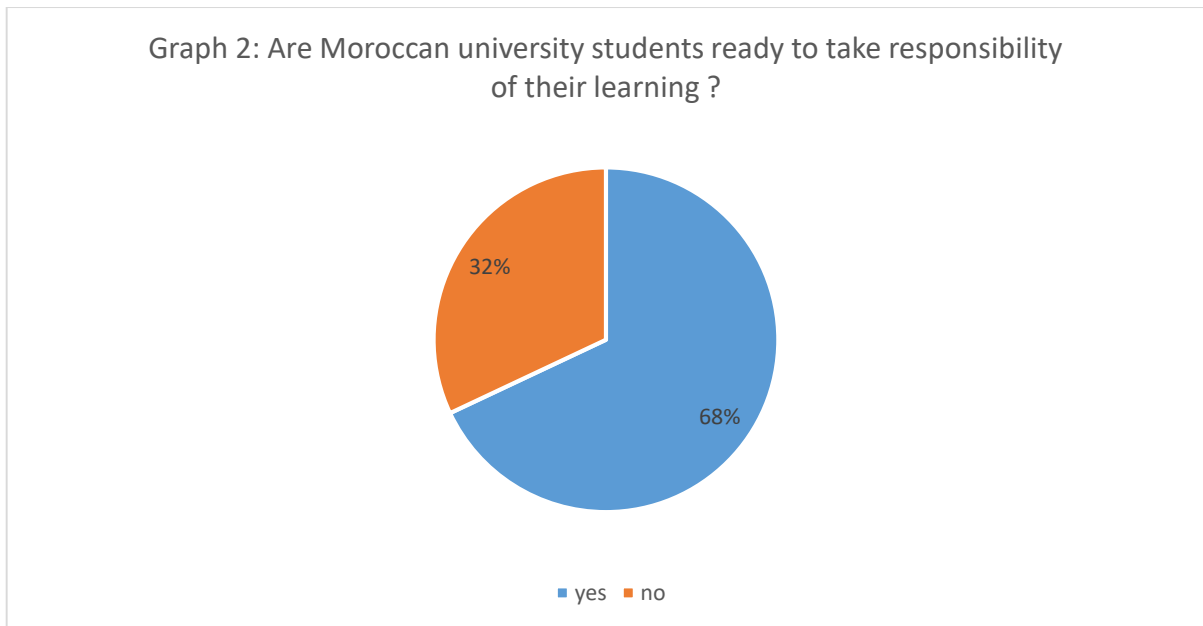
Fostering Learners' Autonomy: The case of Moroccan University Students

- *Group work and interactive teaching lead to autonomy because students learn better from each other.*
- *Children are not educated to be independent later. They rely on their parents and suffer from a lack of confidence.*
- *Media destroys completely the personality of learners. social media have led to laziness and have not boosted creativity. Students are no longer autonomous because all needed information is available*

Most teachers agree that the best way to engage their learners is by addressing individual needs. They admit that this is difficult, though not impossible. When they feel their teachers are aware of their flaws and are addressing them, students will be eager and more engaged to learn. One of the teachers proposed addressing group major needs in case of having big size classes. Others claim that in order to develop autonomy, we are to embark on active learning through project opportunities because Learners do teach their peers and, in this way, the culture of learning together will be enhanced and will create an atmosphere in which a lot of interaction, negotiation and learning are taking place. One more thing to add is that if teachers admit that autonomous learners do better than non-autonomous ones then it is an aspect of education that should be urgently put forward. Part of it is to allow and help students keep a critical eye on what is taught and this is an important step towards their independence. Roles should change. Teachers are to monitor and help, no longer dictate or control the whole learning environment. Students should no longer be considered passive receivers but participants that can even choose topics and learning materials for their course, of course taking into consideration the learning objectives. Once they are actively involved, they learn better and will be able to transfer their knowledge to future contexts.

Results of Questionnaires

In response to the question on the willingness of the Moroccan students to learn how to learn, 68% of respondents confirm that learners are ready to take this responsibility (see Graph 2)



The results in the graph above are not surprising if related to the elements asked about in table 1. A nearer percentage (54 %) has been attributed to the question of students' engagement in their learning.

Graph 3

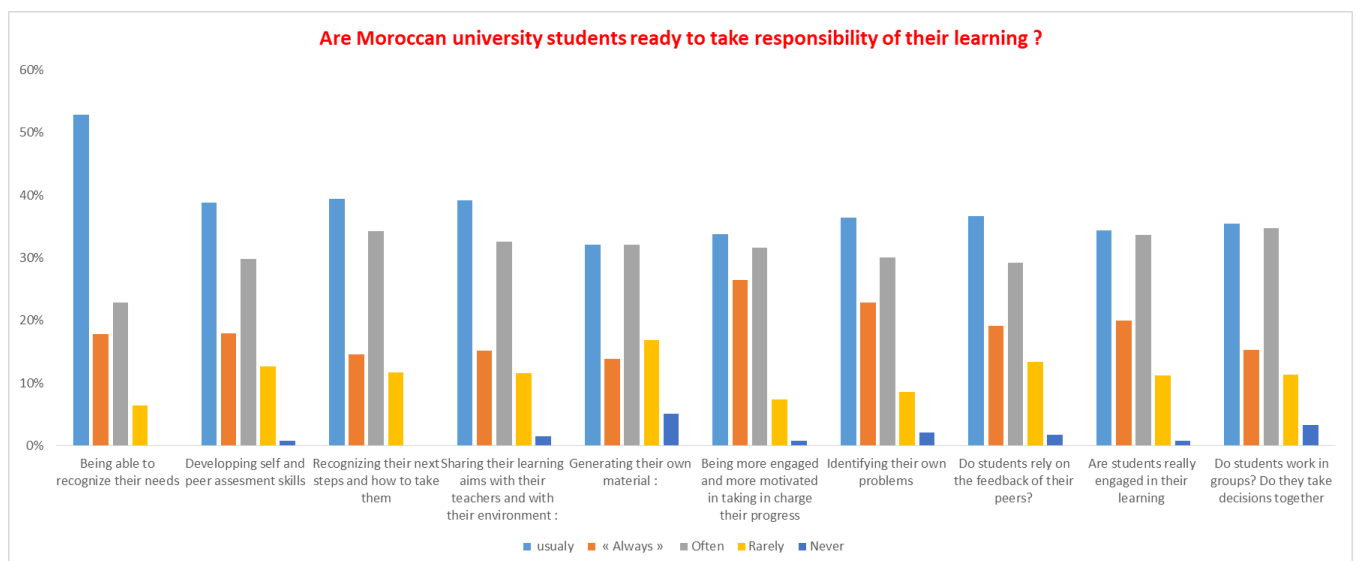
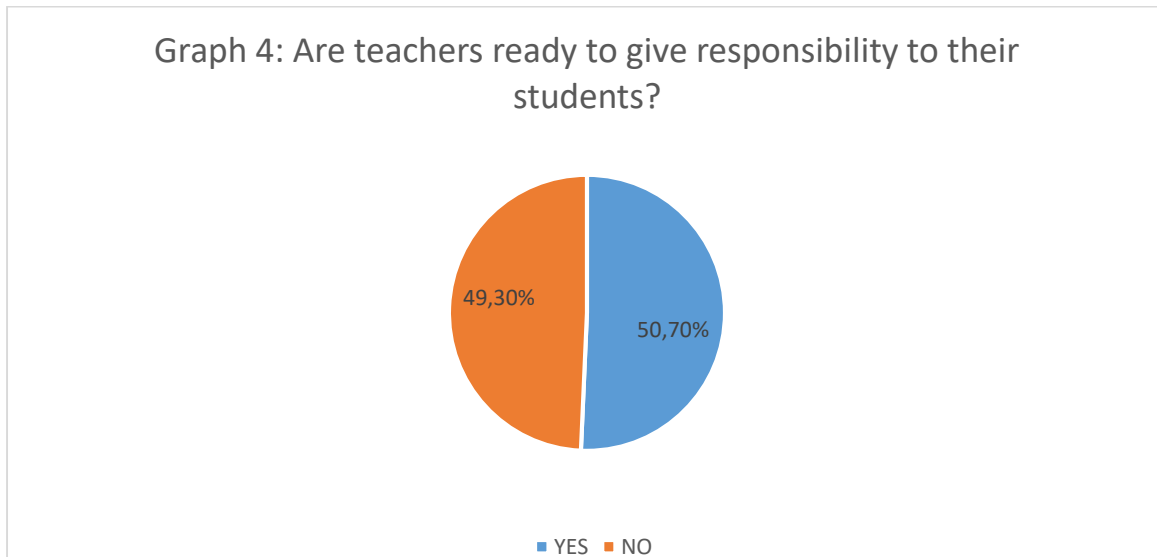


Table 1: Are Moroccan University students ready to take responsibility of their learning?

Questions	usually	« Always »	Often	Rarely	Never
Being able to recognize their needs	53%	18%	23%	6%	0%
Developping self and peer assesment skills	39%	18%	30%	13%	1%
Recognizing their next steps and how to take them	39%	15%	34%	12%	0%
Sharing their learning aims with their teachers and with their environment :	39%	15%	33%	12%	1%
Generating their own material :	32%	14%	32%	17%	5%
Being more engaged and more motivated in taking in charge their progress	34%	26%	32%	7%	1%
Identifying their own problems	36%	23%	30%	9%	2%
Do students rely on the feedback of their peers?	37%	19%	29%	13%	2%
Are students really engaged in their learning	34%	20%	34%	11%	1%
Do students work in groups? Do they take decisions together	35%	15%	35%	11%	3%

About 71% of students (53% Usually, 18% Always) claim they are able to recognize their needs. Which is a first step to settle their objectives and work on them. This is widely confirmed by our informants who believe that 59% (23 % Always, 36% Usually) are capable of identifying their own problems and 54% Moroccan students can recognize their next steps and how to take them (15% Always, 39% Usually). Apparently, 50% of Moroccan university students are able to negotiate meaning and take decisions while working in groups, which is a good class arrangement for the development of their autonomy.

In response to the question about whether Moroccan university teachers are ready to give responsibility to their students, the answers are as follows

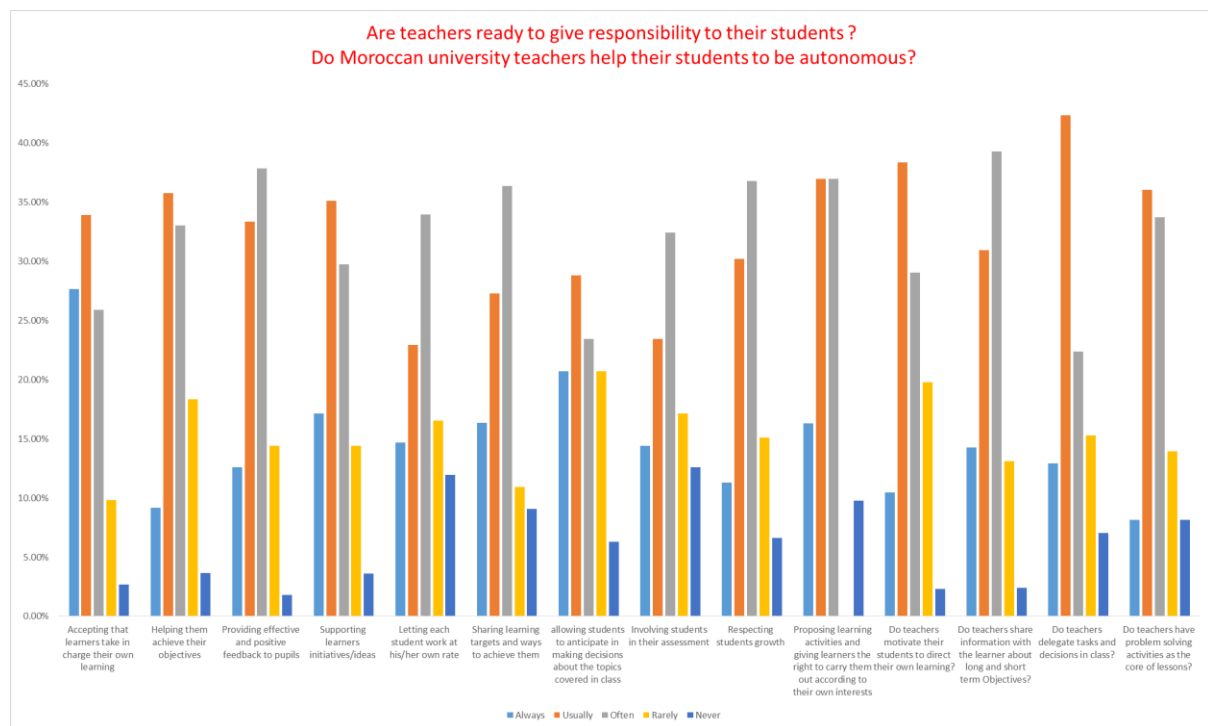


About 50% of Moroccan university teachers help their students to be autonomous. This is largely confirmed when asking students about various classroom practices.

Table 2: Do Moroccan university teachers help their students to be autonomous?

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Rarely	Never
Accepting that learners take in charge their own learning	28%	34%	26%	10%	3%
Helping them achieve their objectives	9%	36%	33%	18%	4%
Providing effective and positive feedback to pupils	13%	33%	38%	14%	2%
Supporting learners initiatives/ideas	17%	35%	30%	14%	4%
Letting each student work at his/her own rate	15%	23%	34%	17%	12%
Sharing learning targets and ways to achieve them	16%	27%	36%	11%	9%
allowing students to anticipate in making decisions about the topics covered in class	21%	29%	23%	21%	6%
Involving students in their assessment	14%	23%	32%	17%	13%
Respecting students growth	11%	30%	37%	15%	7%
Proposing learning activities and giving learners the right to carry them out according to their own interests	16%	37%	37%	0%	10%
Do teachers motivate their students to direct their own learning?	10%	38%	29%	20%	2%
Do teachers share information with the learner about long and short term Objectives?	14%	31%	39%	13%	2%
Do teachers delegate tasks and decisions in class?	13%	42%	22%	15%	7%
Do teachers have problem solving activities as the core of lessons?	8%	36%	34%	14%	8%

Graph 5



About 60 % (28 % always, 34 usually) of participants confirm that their teachers accept the fact that learners take in charge their own learning and 42% support their initiative to develop their autonomy (17 % always, 35 % usually), 50% allow students to anticipate in making decisions about the topics covered in class (21 % always, 29% usually).

Nevertheless, only 37 % of teachers systematically involve students in their assessment. Apparently, most teachers do believe that assessment is a teacher’s responsibility and that

students do not have the capacity to assess their learning. Not only should assessment be consistent with the learning objectives, clearly set at the beginning but it should also involve students by teaching them methods of self- evaluation to learn how to learn and to be able to rate their own progress. Brooke (2015: 18) makes it clear when he says that 'assessments can and should be a truer reflection of ongoing learning that can be used to guide further instruction.' He believes it to be a way to communicate growth and progress. Here we are building a bridge between learning and teaching.

It should be stressed that developing learner autonomy 'demands constant effort on the part of teacher and learners, not only as individuals but in collaboration with one another' (Dam 1995: 6), A successful learning experience necessitate that both cooperate to address the learners' needs and to work forward to their growth. The recommendation is that teachers should accompany their students in their journey towards autonomy. A prerequisite for learner autonomy is the ability to accept this change in roles and this change in focus to the learner. As Benjamin Franklin once said, 'Tell me and I'll forget, teach me and I'll remember, involve me and I'll learn'.

Limitation of the study

One of the limitations of our study is the fact that the questions were direct and non-exhaustive. Students were not given enough space to express themselves and speak about other activities that are practised in their environment but have not been mentioned in the questionnaire. Moreover, no gender difference has been dealt with in the findings. Male and female students might have shown different results as far as their autonomous behaviour is concerned. Future research should examine this issue from other perspectives. Observation, for instance, would lead to more concrete findings. It would also be interesting to analyse the effects of various contexts that interact with the university context such as the family. The results would be more thorough and more significant if life outside the classroom is taken into consideration.

Conclusion

The present study contributes to a better understanding of the students' involvement in their learning. We have worked on the different facets of autonomy within university context for the sake of deriving from these results clear principles that would underpin the application of pedagogical practises to foster autonomy. Undoubtedly. Learner autonomy cannot be taught and cannot have a one-fit-for all approach to be implemented. It is a continuous and a bundle

of different layers towards the implementation of ‘small steps’ that operate together towards a change of a whole teaching/learning experience. As has been stated by Little (1991) and confirmed by Dam (1995). The ‘growth’ of the learners is mainly conditioned by the collaboration of both teachers and students to achieve their objective. It is high time that university teachers revisited their pedagogical approaches and place the learner in the centre of redesigning their classroom activities and assignments. The learning environment is to recognise the learners as its core participants if life-long learning is to be promoted. Roles have to change. Teachers are now to be simple moderators/facilitators and learners are to be responsible for every and each step of their learning, fully involved to witness and enjoy the growth.

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