

## Fostering Learner Autonomy through a Creative-Writing Project

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**Abstract:** The present study aims at fostering learner autonomy among EFL learners through a lengthy, creative-writing project. To fulfil such an objective, a group of third-year students of English at Mentouri Brothers University has been engaged into a multiphase, story-writing project in an out-of-classroom setting, namely a writing centre. The Learner Autonomy Profile Short-Form (LAP-SF) was the instrument used prior and subsequent to the experiment to measure the subjects' degree of autonomy. Self-assessment and reflection forms have also been employed in this study to examine the participants' development as autonomous learners. The obtained results have shown that the students who have received the experimental treatment could develop a learning autonomy, while those who have not undergone the experiment remained largely non-autonomous. These findings confirm the hypothesis and demonstrate that learner autonomy can be successfully implemented through extracurricular, creative-writing projects.

**Key words:** Learner Autonomy, Creative Writing, Attitudes

**الملخص:** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى زرع روح المسؤولية وثقافة الاستقلالية في التعلم والاعتماد على النفس، لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الإخوة منتوري بقسنطينة. ولتحقيق هذا المبتغى، تم إشراك مجموعة من طلبة السنة الثالثة لغة إنجليزية في مشروع أكاديمي، طويل المدى، يتمحور حول كتابة القصة والكتابة الإبداعية بشكل عام. ولقد تم استعمال أدوات وتقنيات دقيقة وحديثة لجمع المعطيات وتحليل النتائج قبل وبعد التجربة أو العلاج التجريبي الخاص بهذا البحث. وبعد التحليل والاستنتاج، أثبتت النتائج صحة الفرضية والمتمثلة في فعالية مشروع الكتابة الإبداعية في زرع ثقافة الاستقلالية في تطوير الذات، في حين أن أولئك الذين لم يخضعوا للتجربة ظلت إلى حد كبير غير مستقلة. وتؤكد هذه النتائج الفرضية وتبين أن استقلالية المتعلم يمكن أن تنفذ بنجاح من خلال المشاريع اللامنهجية والإبداعية.

**Introduction:**

There has been a noticeable shift towards learner-centred approaches in the field of foreign language education over the last few decades, especially in Europe. This major change has led to an increased focus on learner autonomy as a critical factor for learner growth and success. Accordingly, a growing body of literature has explored the notion learner autonomy

in language education, and several approaches to fostering it have emerged. Many researchers (e.g. Dam, 2001; Benson, 2001; Sinclair, 2000; Smith, 2000; Little, 1991) argued that autonomy is an effective component in the development of learners. In the same vein, this article pivots on an experimental study conducted at the University of Constantine to implement learner autonomy through an out-of-classroom, story-writing project.

### 1. Statement of the Problem:

Through extended and frequent teacher observation and based on this study's pre-test findings, a large number of students of English at the University of Constantine seem to exhibit negative attitudes towards learning in general and writing in particular. In fact, they appear to be passive, demotivated, and teacher-dependent, and such unfavourable attitudes exert a huge and far-reaching impact on their overall competence and academic achievements. Put differently, our students' low language proficiency and academic failure is probably the after-effect of such inapt and destructive attitudes, alongside numerous other pedagogical and non-pedagogical shortcomings. Therefore, to empower learners and help them persevere and excel within the sphere of academia – and the professional sphere subsequently –, learner autonomy should be actively encouraged.

### 2. Aims of the Study:

This study aims at fostering learner autonomy among EFL learners through an extensive, creative-writing project during which a metacognitive training is administered. It also seeks to adjust students' negative attitudes towards writing, as both a substantial language skill and a prerequisite for professional success, through practically the same educational project. Furthermore, this study aims to highlight and demonstrate the significance of writing centres and extracurricular activities within university.

### 3. Theoretical Background

#### 3.1. What Is Learner Autonomy?

A proliferation of definitions for the notion 'learner autonomy' has unfolded through the years as many researchers and educators have attempted to describe it from a multiplicity of perspectives (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). Yet, the debate on its exact meaning is still open and intense (Benson, 2013). Hence, learner autonomy, as a notion, is quite controversial (Little,

2005), and teachers or researchers who have an interest in it seem to be compelled, in a way or another, to opt for one category of definitions.

Holec (1981, p. 3), who coined the term, described it as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning.” To put it differently, autonomy in learning refers to learners’ capacity and readiness to shoulder responsibility for their learning, thereby demonstrating less reliance on the teacher. Holec’s definition, which is the most frequently cited of all definitions existing in the autonomy literature (Benson, 2007), encompasses four major characteristics of autonomy in language education. First, autonomy is related to learners’ beliefs and attitudes towards learning and not to the place and mode of learning. Second, it is not a single behaviour, but a set of interrelated behaviours that are manifested, by learners, throughout the learning process. Third, it is not an innate skill but one that is acquirable and can be implemented in learners through various means and in different contexts. Last but not least, the idea of autonomy embraces the learners’ right to make choices and reflections at the level of the content being taught to them as well as the method adopted by their teachers or institutions (Dam, 2001).

One of the few definitions which seem to summarize the mainstream of the above-stated definitions is that of Little (2007, p. 6) who defines autonomy as “a learner’s willingness and ability to take responsibility, to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning with tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher.” Little’s definition seems to cover almost all the essential components of autonomy, namely capacity, readiness, responsibility, involvement, evaluation and self-direction, with a clear recognition of the teacher’s role as a counsellor and facilitator.

Dickinson (1992), on the other hand, adopts a different viewpoint and excludes the teacher’s role, educational settings and formal learning materials (e.g. course-books) from the gist of autonomy, when a learner reaches what Dickinson called “full autonomy”. In simpler terms, autonomy in learning, for him, has to be developed by the learner himself and in total independence of a teacher and any formal institution of education.

It is noteworthy that up till now, there has been no clear consensus among educators and researchers on the nature and characteristics of autonomy due to its association with

other complex philosophical notions (e.g. freedom, independence and control), educational terms (e.g. self-access, out-of-classroom learning) and attitudes (e.g. reflection and evaluation).

### 3.2. Learner Autonomy and Writing:

Although writing, as a language skill, appears to be the most self-directed of all language skills, little has been written in the literature on a potential relationship between writing and learner autonomy. Foster (2006, p. 27) pointed out the importance of autonomy in the writing development of young learners and invited the American universities and educators to regard learner autonomy as an essential component for the growth of student-writers. Foster (2006) states that:

To develop creativity and voice in their writing, we believe children should not only be introduced to a rich range of existing expressive domains, but should also be given the time and the space to explore these for themselves, making choices, taking risks, and developing their preferences and independence as writers (p. 28).

He argued that the majority of children, who took part in a survey- called We're the Writers- he conducted to investigate young learners' beliefs and needs in the writing class, showed a strong desire for decision making, monitoring, evaluating and taking control over their learning in the writing classroom. To put it differently, Foster brought to light autonomy as a crucial element for the successful writing classroom, and urged writing teachers to allow their students some freedom, agency and responsibility that are pivotal to the development of student as writers. Contemplating Little's (2007, p. 27) definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take responsibility, to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning..." one can easily notice that it covers all the major steps of the writing process; from planning, through monitoring to revising and editing. One may deduce, therefore, that there is a potential relationship between autonomy and the writing process, and that the former seem to help students perform better at the latter.

## 4. Methodology of Research

### 4.1. Research Population and Sample:

The target population of the present study consists of adult learners attending educational institution in their final undergraduate year at the tertiary level. The sample (N =56) represents roughly 275 undergraduate students divided into six equal groups, and are third-years of Applied Language Studies at the Department of English Language at Mentouri Brothers University in Constantine.

A sample of 56 students has been randomly selected. Afterwards, the selected group has been divided into two equal groups: one control and the other experimental. In addition to their ordinary classes, the participants within the experimental group have received an experimental treatment over a period of seven months in a writing centre, while the control group continued to attend regular classes.

### 4.2. Tools of Research:

The Learner Autonomy Profile Short-Form (LAP-SF) was the instrument used prior and subsequent to the experiment to measure the subjects' degree of autonomy. The statistical analysis of the LAP responses was calculated via the IBM SPSS Statistics, version 24). Additionally, self-assessment and reflection forms have been employed in this study to observe the participants' advancement towards autonomy.

#### 4.2.1. The Learner Autonomy Profile Short Form:

The Learner Autonomy Profile Short Form (LAP S-F) is constructed upon the idea that learner autonomy can be interpreted through the learners' behavioural intention. In this instrument of research, respondents are asked about their perception of self and how they would react to various selected situations associated with learning. A Likert scale (ranging from 0 = never to 10 = always) is used to determine the respondents' degree of agreement with the 66 items which the LAP-SF comprises. On a scale of 10, the mean of the scores obtained in each construct represents the degree of autonomy of each participants.

#### 4.2.2. Experimental Design and Treatment:

In light of the existing literature on language learner autonomy and the various approaches to implementing it within and beyond the language classroom, an extracurricular

writing project, labelled iStory, has been carefully designed and implemented at the University of Constantine. Before that, a writing centre had been created to host the aforementioned project. The experimental group received four hours of tuition every week for a period of seven months (a total of 28 weeks/112 hours).

#### 4.2.2.1. The iStory Project:

The iStory is some sort of an extracurricular activity or mission that revolves around engaging a group of EFL learners in a seven-month, story-writing process. It was designed to foster learner autonomy among the participants within the experimental group of this study. The project consists of six major phases.

##### 4.2.2.1.1. Phase One: Creating a Word Bank:

After introducing the student participants' to the project and raising their awareness about its significance and potential outcomes, they were divided into small groups. Afterwards, each group was asked to collect words/expressions connected to story-writing in particular and creative writing by large, under such headings as 'action verbs', 'adjectives', 'speech tags', 'character traits', 'idioms', 'literary devices', 'names', 'nicknames', 'professions', 'countries', and 'psychological/mental disorders'. The collected lists were then categorized and stored on a computer or DVD for later access.

##### 4.2.2.1.2. Phase Two: Making Creative Choices:

At this stage, the students started planning their stories by making creative choices and decisions concerning the genre, target reader-age/culture, moral of the story and so forth. Using examples from literature, the participants were taught how to use the ordinary (words) to create the extraordinary (art), and they seemed to have greatly enjoyed it. In fact, they were directing, monitoring and reflecting upon their learning both independently and cooperatively with a limited assistance from the teacher/researcher. As expected, the students came up with scores of creative plots and interesting cast of characters.

##### 4.2.2.1.3. Phase Three: Reading for Inspiration:

This stage pivots on exposing the participants to a wide range of stories as a way of inspiring them before they actually start writing their own stories. To ensure a degree of freedom and foster autonomy, the students participants were motivate to select the stories

they want to examine. Students are also motivated to ask questions such as, why did the author choose certain expressions, adjectives, or verbs? How did he emphasize that idea? What makes a description vivid and appealing? What was written and what was actually communicated? These questions were expected to help students detect the best aspects of each story and try to incorporate those elements into their own writings.

#### 4.2.2.1.4. Phase Four: Writing the story:

During this lengthy stage, students began to write their stories by describing characters, creating dialogues, narrating and so forth. The major part of the learning and teaching took place during this phase; the teacher had the opportunity to teach tenses, word choice, punctuation, sentence structure and similar constructs along with the narrative techniques. The students, on the other hand, went through the unique experience of writing a whole story; they set short-term goals and worked hard to meet them. According to the feedback and reflection forms, this stage was challenging, enjoyable and worthwhile.

#### 4.2.2.1.5. Phase Five: Revising:

Revision is a major step in the writing process, and is beneficial to both the writer and his product (Kissel, 2005). Therefore, there student participants were repeatedly engaged in this task through various methods to enhance the quality of their writing. Editing, proofreading, peer reviewing and reading aloud are a few techniques the students have employed at this stage. We kept reminding them that Earnest Hemingway admitted to rewriting the ending of 'A Farewell to Arms' 39 times!

#### 4.2.2.2. The Evaluation and Reflection Breaks:

The iStory Project was characterised by regular intervals of evaluation and reflection after the end of each stage. Questions such as: what have you learned? How it is relevant to your overall learning experience/plan/goals? What was worthwhile? What seemed to be unnecessary? How can you do it better? What was not interesting to you? The answers were often given in a form of reports to make it possible for the researcher to analyse them carefully, and for the learners to go back to them, as learning records, when necessary.

### 4.2.2.3 Discussion of Findings

#### 4.2.2.3.1 The Pre-test (Whole Sample)

The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the experiment to both the control and experimental groups to measure their autonomy and see whether they are autonomous or not. The participants' were informed a few days earlier about the test, and were given enough details about it, along with clear instructions on how to accomplish the task.

**Table 1: The Participants' level of autonomy in the pre-test as measured by the LAP**

Participants (N 56)	Desire	Resourcefulness	Initiative	Persistence	Mean
S1	2.1	3.2	1.9	3.2	2.6
S2	2.3	2.9	2.7	2.2	2.52
S3	2.5	3.2	3.4	3.7	3.2
S4	2.3	3.1	3.8	3.3	3.12
S5	2.1	2.5	2.6	1.9	2.27
S6	1.9	1.9	2.4	2.6	2.2
S7	4.1	3.2	2.7	2.7	3.17
S8	3.2	3.0	2.3	3.4	2.79
S9	3.4	1.1	4.3	4.1	3.22
S10	2.6	2.0	5.6	2.8	3.25
S11	2.5	3.6	3.7	4.1	3.47
S12	2.3	3.1	4.3	3.3	3.25
S13	2.1	2.5	2.6	1.9	2.27
S14	1.9	1.9	2.8	2.9	2.37
S15	4.1	3.2	2.7	2.7	3.17
S16	2.3	4.3	4.5	2.9	3.5



S17	2.7	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.22
S18	2.9	1.9	2.4	1.9	2.27
S19	3.0	4.2	2.9	1.7	2.95
S20	4.1	3.2	5.6	3.2	4.02
S21	2.1	1.9	2.3	2.6	2.22
S22	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5
S23	2.7	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.5
S24	1.6	1.8	1.4	1.1	1.47
S25	2.1	3.2	1.9	3.2	2.6
S26	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.3
S27	3.3	3.6	3.7	4.1	3.67
S28	2.7	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.5
S29	2.0	1.6	1.7	1.9	1.80
S30	2.1	3.2	1.9	3.2	2.6
S31	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.3
S32	2.5	3.6	3.7	4.1	3.47
S33	2.3	3.1	4.3	3.3	3.25
S34	2.1	2.5	2.6	1.9	2.27
S35	1.9	1.9	2.8	2.9	2.37
S36	4.1	3.2	2.7	2.7	3.17
S37	3.2	3.0	2.3	3.4	2.97
S38	3.4	1.1	3.3	4.1	2.97
S39	2.6	2.0	3.6	2.8	2.75
S40	2.1	2.0	3.2	3.2	2.62
S41	3.0	2.8	2.3	3.1	2.8

S42	3.2	2.7	3.1	2.3	2.82
S43	2.3	3.0	1.4	2.9	2.4
S44	1.8	2.0	2.3	2.3	2.1
S45	2.3	4.3	4.5	2.9	3.5
S46	2.7	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.22
S47	2.9	1.7	2.4	1.9	2.22
S48	3.0	4.2	2.9	1.7	2.95
S49	4.1	3.2	5.6	3.2	4.02
S50	1.6	3.9	5.2	3.2	3.47
S51	2.3	2.8	3.1	2.4	2.65
S52	2.8	2.6	2.9	2.1	2.6
S53	3.5	3.1	3.4	2.8	3.2
S54	2.9	3.6	3.1	3.0	3.15
S55	2.7	3.1	2.9	2.3	2.75
S56	2.4	2.8	3.2	2.5	2.72
Total Mean	2.63	2.77	3.07	2.79	2.81

Table 1, exhibits the results obtained from a pre-test conducted in mid-October 20013 to measure the autonomy of the whole sample, i.e. both the control and experimental groups. The vast majority of participants (97%), as the figures above indicate, obtained very low scores of autonomy as measured by the Learner Autonomy Profile Short Form (total mean = 2.81/10). This may be due to a variety of factors such as the lack of learner-centred approaches in the EFL context in Algeria and/or the pedagogical tenets of the Algerian educational institutions, which seem to focus on traditional methods of teaching in which the teacher is made fully responsible for his learners' learning.

#### 4.2.2.3.2. The Post-test

##### a) The Control Group

As predicted, the subjects' making up the control group remained mostly non-autonomous (total mean = 2.75), see table 2 below. This implies that many students of English at Constantine University are passive learners, and that the teacher-centred approaches adopted by the teachers are unproductive when it comes to promoting learner autonomy.

**Table 2: The control group's level of autonomy in the post-test as measured by the LAP**

Participants (N 25)	Resourcefulness	Initiative	Persistence	readiness	Mean
S1	2.3	1.7	2.6	2.0	2.02
S2	2.3	2.1	2.7	2.9	2.5
S3	2.7	2.6	2.4	2.3	2.5
S4	1.6	1.8	1.9	1.7	1.75
S5	2.1	2.2	1.9	2.7	2.22
S6	2.7	2.3	2.8	2.2	2.5
S7	2.8	3.1	3.4	3.0	3.07
S8	2.3	3.1	3.3	3.0	2.92
S9	2.7	2.3	2.6	1.9	2.37
S10	2.1	1.9	2.8	2.9	2.42
S11	4.1	3.2	2.7	2.7	3.17
S12	3.2	3.0	2.3	3.4	2.97
S13	3.4	1.9	3.3	3.1	2.92
S14	2.6	2.5	4.6	2.8	3.12
S15	2.1	2.0	3.0	3.2	2.75
S16	3.0	2.8	2.3	3.1	2.8
S17	3.2	2.9	3.8	2.3	3.05
S18	2.3	3.0	1.8	2.8	2.47
S19	1.7	2.0	2.3	2.3	2.07
S20	3.3	4.3	4.5	2.9	3.75

S21	2.7	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.22
S22	2.9	1.9	2.4	1.9	2.27
S23	3.0	3.2	2.9	1.7	2.7
S24	3.1	3.2	3.6	3.2	3.27
S25	2.6	3.9	4.2	3.2	3.47
S26	2.8	2.9	3.1	2.7	2.87
S27	3.1	3.3	2.9	3.4	3.17
S28	2.8	3.0	2.9	2.7	2.85
Total Mean	2.69	2.68	2.95	2.69	2.75

## b) Experimental Group

**Table 3: The experimental group's level of autonomy in the post-test as measured by the LAP**

Participants (N 25)	Desire	Resourcefulness	Initiative	Persistence	Mean
S1	4.0	5.1	6.6	6.4	5.52
S2	5.2	4.9	6.9	6.2	5.8
S3	6.0	5.9	5.4	5.8	5.77
S4	4.9	4.2	4.4	3.8	4.32
S5	5.9	6.1	7.0	6.8	6.45
S6	5.4	4.9	5.8	4.7	5.2
S7	4.7	5.6	5.2	6.2	5.42
S8	5.5	5.4	6.5	5.7	5.77
S9	4.2	5.2	5.8	4.4	4.9
S10	3.9	3.3	4.2	4.1	3.87
S11	5.7	5.4	5.7	5.9	5.67
S12	5.1	5.2	5.9	6.3	5.62
S13	5.3	4.2	5.2	6.7	5.35
S14	5.6	4.7	6.0	4.8	5.27
S15	3.9	4.1	5.2	4.9	4.52

S16	4.3	4.5	4.4	5.5	4.67
S17	4.6	4.4	4.9	5.0	4.72
S18	5.0	5.3	4.7	5.4	5.1
S19	4.5	4.3	4.5	4.1	4.35
S20	4.5	5.6	6.1	6.2	5.6
S21	4.7	5.4	5.0	4.4	4.87
S22	5.1	3.8	5.5	4.9	4.82
S23	5.7	6.5	6.3	5.7	5.92
S24	6.2	5.3	5.9	6.2	6.05
S25	5.2	5.6	4.4	4.8	5
S26	5.3	5.7	5.9	6.1	5.75
S27	5.8	6.1	6.4	5.6	5.97
S28	5.9	6.0	5.5	5.3	5.67
Total Mean	5.07	5.09	5.54	5.42	5.28

As table 03 demonstrates, almost all of the student participants (98%) within the experimental group obtained remarkably higher scores (total mean = 5.28) in comparison to what they have scored in the pre-test (total mean = 2.81). The construct of initiative came on top with a total mean of 5.54, followed by that of persistence with 5.42, then resourcefulness (5.09), and finally the construct of desire with a total mean of 5.07. It is evident that there is a noticeable balance among the achieved scores as the differences among the total means of the LAP constructs are insignificant. The post-test results confirm that the experimental treatment was highly effective. In other words, the student participants' autonomy has been successfully fostered through a creative-writing project.

Unlike the control group and as anticipated, the experimental one achieved substantial degrees of autonomy in the post-test, as shown in table 3. That is, engaging the students in a carefully designed, elaborate, story-writing project has helped them to develop a capacity for taking control over their learning, and more importantly, to accept responsibility as learners. To put it differently, they planned, organised, directed, monitored and reflected upon their learning. Furthermore, the experimental treatment, as the results evidence, made the students

persistent. During the project, they were often instructed to stay on task until the learning goals are accomplished. In time, those students realized that perseverance is a distinctive feature of successful learners, as concluded from the participants' reflection forms. Likewise, the students' desire to learn have been intensified (see Table 2 & 3), for it is deemed crucial for the promotion of learner autonomy among foreign language learners. Pushing the participants to make initiative associated with their learning (e.g. suggesting an alternative way of performing certain tasks, writing essays or poems without being asked to do so, bringing learning materials into the classroom, etc.) was also among the outcomes of experimental treatment introduced in this study. As demonstrated earlier, the experimental treatment addressed various aspects of learning to ensure that learners are well-equipped with a set of practical skills to response to the challenges that foreign language learning may pose. By the end of the project, the participating students appeared to be more mature as learners, motivated, focused and more cognizant of their learning process and mechanisms.

#### **Conclusion:**

The findings of the present study demonstrate that learner autonomy can be fostered by means of a well-designed, extensive, creative-writing project. They also indicate that a great part of language learning can occur beyond the classroom walls, in different settings including writing centres. The study, furthermore, confirms the significance of learner autonomy in foreign language education. Therefore, EFL teachers are recommended to adopt learner-centred approaches in their teaching to help their students become autonomous.

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