

Learner Autonomy in the Department of English in Algerian Universities: Re-exploring Students' Learning Goals

استقلالية المتعلم في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بالجامعات الجزائرية: إعادة

استكشاف الأهداف التعليمية للطلاب

Abdelkader CHETOUANE

PhD candidate at Manchester metropolitan University (UK)

Abdelkader.chetouane@stu.mmu.ac.uk

Received:25/09/2022

Accepted:22/11/2022

Published:31/12/2022

Abstract

Learner autonomy research in the department of English in Algerian universities often focuses on students' language learning. However, students in such context do not only learn the English language, but they also learn academic content knowledge delivered in particular modules. Therefore, language learner autonomy in this context is investigated in a place where language learning may not be the main or the only concern. In this respect, the current article which makes part of a larger PhD project aims to articulate the various and changing learning objectives of students according to which learner autonomy research should be tailored. The findings of this study revealed that students in the department of English aim to develop both language skills and knowledge about the academic content that makes part of their pursued degree. Such findings aim to help researchers become more aware of the complexities of students' learning objectives before promoting a form of learner autonomy that may not be compatible with the educational goals that students and teachers aim to achieve.

Keywords:

Learner autonomy in language learning- subject matters- contextual variables-
learning objectives- the department of English in Algerian universities

المستخلص:

تركز البحوث الجامعية الجزائرية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية -خصوصا- لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية على موضوع "استقلالية المتعلم". لكن الملاحظ أن طلاب هذه المرحلة التعليمية المتقدمة، لا يتعلمون أساليب التواصل باللغة الإنجليزية فقط، بل تتمحور دروسهم حول برنامج أكاديمي موافق للتخصص المنتقى. في هذا الصدد، فموضوع "استقلالية المتعلم" تم تناوله - العديد من المرات - كمهارة لاكتساب اللغة الإنجليزية بعيدا عن البرنامج الأكاديمي الموضوع لطلبة هذا التخصص.

و من هنا، يهدف هذا المقال، الذي يعتبر جزءا من مشروع دكتوراه الى تسليط الضوء على الأهداف التعليمية للطلبة والتي تشمل كل من: تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية واتباع برنامج أكاديمي يصب في تكوين الطلبة في تخصصاتهم المستهدفة. وقد كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن طلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية يسعون إلى تطوير مهاراتهم اللغوية وكذا معارفهم الأكاديمية التي تشكل مساحة من مساهمهم التعليمي. إذن تسعى هذه الورقة - في مجملها- إلى مساعدة الباحثين لإدراك الأهداف التعليمية للطلبة وذلك لتجنب الشروع في تطبيق تعليمات تحت على الاستقلالية بأساليب لا تتماشى مع المسار التعليمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

استقلالية المتعلم في تعلم اللغة؛ المحتوى الأكاديمي؛ عوامل متغيرة؛ الأهداف التعليمية؛
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات الجزائرية.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The concept of learner autonomy has received much attention around the world in the field of language education in the past four decades. However, it has only gained currency in the Algerian Higher Education context after the implementation of the Licence/Masters/Doctorate system (LMD) in 2004/2005.

This interest was shown by many academics concerned with language learning issues in the department of English at the level of university. In this specific context, works like students' readiness for learner autonomy (Ghout-Khenoune, 2015; Hadi, 2018) and the cultural appropriateness of learner autonomy (Lakehal, 2021; Missoum, 2015) took place. The main issue that this article draws attention to is that the literature about learner autonomy is mostly found in the domain of foreign language learning. Therefore, the use of such literature should be in contexts where the language learner autonomy is investigated. The immediate problem here is that students in the department of English in Algerian universities have a variety of modules in which English is a means of communication rather being an end goal itself. Therefore, it is hypothesised that students in the department of English in Algerian universities, especially in later stages in their course, they have both language and non-language-related learning objectives. In the absence of any research that addresses such fundamental problem, a need to re-evaluate students' learning goals raised in the horizon. This can be addressed through asking the following two questions which will work as the guidelines of this research:

- a. What learning goals students have in the department of English in Algerian universities?
- b. In what ways the identified learning goals reflect students' learner autonomy?

In the end, learner autonomy can only be properly promoted when the intended learning objectives are transparent, clear, and perfectly understood. In

fact, it is fundamental to examine the learning contexts and both its concealed and openly stated objectives for the effort to promote learner autonomy not to face the risk of being misplaced or going in vain.

2. Literature review

2.1. About the concept of learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy is extensively researched in language learning domains. In fact, the interest in learner autonomy was first sparked by Henry Holec, the author of "Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning". Holec (1981) defined the concept as "taking charge of one's own learning" (p.3). Although this definition sprouts out from the context of adult language learning, the same definition is often perceived as overarching, and it was projected in many non-language related domains like mathematics (Sachdeva, 2019), physics (Hall & Webb, 2014), and music (Cheng, et al). Definitions of learner autonomy varied between academics depending on their backgrounds. For instance, Holec's (1981) definition explained that taking charge of one's own learning entails students taking responsibility over their learning objectives, the materials and strategies they use, and the evaluation process. This view of learner autonomy was criticised for seeming too ideal to work in a formal learning environment where classroom regulations inherently impose restrictions which certainly clash with ideas of students' full independence from the teaches and the curriculum (Holmes, 2018).

Little (1991) proposes a definition for learner autonomy in which he announces that autonomy is never absolute and that realising autonomy in

learning is conditioned and constrained by the learning environment. Little (1991) says:

“Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action ... The concept of autonomy ... implies that the learner enjoys a high degree of freedom. But it is important to insist that the freedoms conferred by autonomy are never absolute, always conditional and constrained.” (p 4-5).

The definition given by Little (1991) somehow gives a holistic and more realistic view of what the concept entails. To Little (1991), learner autonomy is a humanistic capacity that learners could have but can only exert within the limitations of their learning environment. This definition acknowledges the high degree of independence and freedom that learner autonomy implies. However, with respect to the contextual factors that can determine the extent to which one can be autonomous.

Because learner autonomy gained so much momentum especially in the 90's, it was considered as a desirable educational goal, and it became a quality that academic institutions need to equip their students with. However, what is worth mentioning at this point is that most of the literature about learner autonomy is identified in the domain of language learning. In this regard, Little (2017) described language learner autonomy as a “special case of learner autonomy” (p. 12) because of the complexity of the process of learning a language. Nevertheless, the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning was questioned by Benson (2013) who mentioned that `learner autonomy` in general is now used as a

shorthand to language learner autonomy which sometimes create a confusion between how this concept manifests in different non-language related domains. Although, learner autonomy possesses some defining features that make it a recognisable quality across domains, it would be absurd to neglect the effect of learning contexts, objectives, individual differences, and the nature of the subject being learnt/taught which influence what autonomy means and how it is characterised. Therefore, it is very important to assess the learning context before attempting to promote a type of autonomy that may not properly comply with the circumstances and the goals that students and teachers aim to achieve.

2.2. Studies about learner autonomy in the department of English in Algerian universities

As indicated earlier, research on learner autonomy in the department of English at tertiary level in Algerian universities is mostly associated with language learning. In this study I highlight that although students are majoring in a degree in English, this does not necessarily mean that their main goal is only to learn the English language. In fact, this is considered a shallow evaluation of a context that is more complex than that. In this section I shall bring attention to the research conducted in the last five years about learner autonomy in the department of English. Such investigation would help shedding some light on the bias towards the area of language learner autonomy.

Table 1. A list of learner autonomy research in the department of English in the last

5 years

Autor	Research title	Students Sample
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Lakehal (2021)	Autonomy in Advanced Language Education: Considerations of the Sociocultural Dimensions and their Impact on EFL Algerian Students' Learning Expectations and Attitudes	3rd year students
Belaidouni (2021)	Autonomy between Teachers Attitudes and Learners Aptitudes the University of Hassiba Benbouali/ Chlef Department of English as a Case Study	2nd year master students
Hadi (2018)	Investigating Learner Autonomy among EFL Students and Teachers: Readiness and Concept Perception	Mixed sample 1st/2nd/3rd Year students
Hasna (2019)	A Tutoring strategy for promoting learner autonomy in learning English as a foreign language	1st year Students
Missoum (2016)	Culture and Learner Autonomy	2nd year (masters) students
Senouci (2018)	a tutoring course to improve students;' autonomy in language learning	2nd year Students
Djoub (2017)	Portfolio training for autonomous language learning	1st License students

All studies in the table above took place in the department of English in different Algerian universities across the country. What is common amongst them is that they all investigate language learner autonomy. The studies presented in the table are only a sample of a common research practice that only focuses on language learning when researching the notion of learner autonomy in the department of English. Indeed, some research like Djoub (2017) and Senouci (2018) specifically targeted language modules "written and oral expressions" which are language modules that seem compatible with language learner autonomy definitions and theories that most literature around this topic discuss. However, other research like in Hadi (2018) involved observations of modules of specialized academic content like linguistics and literature to investigate

autonomous language learning. Such investigations highlight the language aspect in modules that prioritise content knowledge that students are meant to graduate with.

Perhaps, the question that should be asked is why language education? Why learner autonomy research in the department of English in Algeria solely addresses language learning issues? There are several answers to this question. For instance, the research in this context is subsequent to the myriad of research about language learner autonomy nationwide. Another answer is that such research is conducted in the department of English where students are often addressed as EFL students (English as a Foreign Language). Therefore, it is almost obvious to have research revolving around English language learner autonomy in a context where learners are addressed as foreign language learners. However, this might seem logical at first sight, but looking at the modules that students have (see section 5.1), one can tell that it is not only language learning that students are meant to develop in their course. While the English language makes an important aspect of the students learning, their progress also depends on the academic content that students have in their respective modules.

3. Methods

3.1. Research instruments

The current investigation employed two research instruments namely, document analysis and a questionnaire. These two instruments give the research its mixed method stance by using both qualitative and quantitative data. The instrument employed for data collection that will shortly be explained are deemed

appropriate and handy to elicit data that helps in answering the proposed research questions.

a. Document analysis

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents which contains texts and sometimes accompanied with tables and, or images (Bowen, 2009). Documents are often used to provide context, generate questions, supplement other types of research data, track change over time, and corroborate other sources (Dalglish et al., 2020). The document used in this research is the compliance framework which shall be referred to in this article as (CANEVA), the latter is an official document often publicly held by Algerian universities. This document contains the details about a specific course i.e. the objective of the course, the number of hours taught, the teaching and the administrative staff, and the materials available for the conduct of the course.

After reviewing the CANVAs of four universities namely; the university of Bordj-Bou-Arréridj, the university of Saida, the university of Mostaganem, it was assured that CANEVAs for undergraduate students (License degree students) are similar to a great extent in terms of the underlined learning objectives for students, and the list of modules that they study. After this realisation, the CANEVA from the university of Sidi Bel Abbes was used as a sample to be examined and analysed in the current study.

b. Questionnaire

Questionnaires are one of the most common and widely useful quantitative research instruments. Their main benefit lays in reaching out to a large number of

participants hence enabling to collect versatile and rich data. Moreover, the various software on offer like SPSS and Excel can help the researcher analyse the data effortlessly in a short time (Harlow, 2010). Questionnaires became more convenient and cost-effective than ever since they could be distributed online. In fact, online questionnaires are particularly powerful now that people have access to the internet more than ever (Ball, 2019)

The questionnaire employed in this research make the second data analysis tool. The questionnaire consists of seven (07) items that aim to elicit answers from students about what learning goals they have, and how they arrange learning priorities in the course they are enrolled in. The sample of students in the questionnaire were approached online via Facebook groups of students in the department of English in 4 universities namely, the university of Relizane, the University of Batana, The university of Oran2, and the university of Oum El Bouaghi. The students' participation was completely voluntary and out of their good will to help in the making of this research. In the end, the questionnaire was answered by 75 students who make the study sample of this work.

3.3. Data analysis procedures

Firstly, the CANEVA document is analysed through the "READ approach" which is a document analysis approach that entails the following steps:1) ready your materials, 2) extract data, 3) analyse data and 4) distil your findings (Dalglish et al., 2020). Using this approach, relevant data are identified, analysed, and translated into useful findings that aims to answer the proposed research questions. The data extracted from the CANVA document involved two tables.

These tables are analysed through cross-table analysis which is one type of content analysis that compares all columns and variables of one table with another (O'Leary, 2014). Comparing and contrasting columns between the given tables allow the researcher to identify areas of similarities and differences upon which results can be established. As for the data collected from the questionnaire, they are analysed and transformed to descriptive data using Microsoft Excel software. To increase the questionnaire validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three educators currently employed as full-time teachers in the department of English in one of the Algerian universities.

4. Data analysis

5.1. Students' learning goals as prescribed in the CANEVA document

The CANEVA document consisted of three sections that entailed indications of the students' learning goals in the "English language, literature, and civilization" course that they are enrolled in. The first section is entitled *the training objectives*, the second is *profiles and targeted skills*, and the last section is *the distribution of modules and study hours* which make the plan that leads to the actual realisation of the underlined learning objectives.

To begin with, the first section clearly indicates that the major objective for students is to qualify them as eligible candidates who can participate in teaching contests in high schools and middle schools. Moreover, the training should enable students to admit to Masters courses. Given the fact that teaching English or admitting to a Masters course taught in English requires a mastery of the English language, this leads to a subsequent objective yet equally important which is to

enable student to practice the English language and become familiar with its rules and technicalities. (See below, both the original and the translation excerpts from the CANEVA document)

B - Objectifs de la formation (Champ obligatoire)

(Compétences visées, connaissances acquises à l'issue de la formation- maximum 20 lignes)

La création d'une licence académique de langue Anglaise répond à un besoin spécifique de formation pour les étudiants désirant se présenter aux concours de recrutement d'enseignants des lycées et des CEM ainsi que pour les candidats aux Masters académiques (Recherche) et professionnalisant.

L'objectif de cette licence est de dispenser un enseignement de la langue anglaise durant lequel les étudiants se concentreront sur :

- La pratique de La langue anglaise
- L'étude scientifique de la langue
- L'utilisation de la langue (enseignement, contextes spécifiques)
- Les autres langues étrangères optionnelles choisies

(CANEVA sidi bel abbes, 2005, p.6) (Original excerpt)

The creation of an academic license in English responds to a specific training need for students wishing to take the recruitment competitions for high school and middle school teachers, as well as for candidates for academic (research) and professional Masters.

The objective of this license is to provide teaching of the English language during which students will focus on:

- The practice of the English language
- The scientific study of the language
- The use of the language (teaching, specific contexts)
- The other optional foreign languages chosen"

(CANEVA sidi bel abbes, 2005, p.6) (Translated from French)

While learning the English language is underlined as one of the overall aims of the course, the actual conduct of the course bears other academic objectives that students are required to achieve. This is indicated in the Target and Skills section, where the objectives that students need to have achieved at the end of their course are discussed. (See below, the excerpts from the CANEVA document)

C – Profils et compétences visées (Champ obligatoire) (*maximum 20 lignes*) :

A l'issue de cette formation l'étudiant aura acquis :

- Une connaissance et maîtrise de la langue à travers le développement des compétences linguistiques (compréhension et expression écrite et orale)
- Avoir suffisamment de connaissances en littérature et britannique et américaine.
- Une pré-spécialisation en linguistique, littérature et civilisation pour accéder au master

(CANEVA sidi bel abbes, 2005, p.6) (Original excerpt)

Target profiles and skills:

At the end of this training, the student will have acquired:

- Knowledge and mastery of the language through the development of linguistic skills (comprehension and written and oral expression)
- Have sufficient knowledge of British and American literature.
- A pre-specialization in linguistics, literature, and civilization to access the master's degree

(CANEVA sidi bel abbes, 2005, p.6) (Translated from French)

As previously indicated, students are indeed expected to have developed linguistic skills. This involves comprehension, writing, and speaking skills. However, students are also meant to gain sufficient knowledge about linguistics, and British and American literature and civilization. These subjects are not necessarily about the English language, but they are taught in English. Moreover, students' knowledge about the content modules they study (linguistics, literature and civilization) is expected to offer a pre-specialization in these domains to access a Masters course.

Perhaps, a more functional way to examine the learning objectives that students have is by reviewing the actual modules that they study because they inevitably indicate the objective that students are meant to achieve. In this respect, the current CANEVA document consisted of a list of modules that make students course. The first thing that could be noted in this list of modules is that they change

over the three years. While some modules are introduced in later stages, others are abandoned or reduced in coefficient and number of hours in the final year of the course. The process of manipulating the number of hours and the coefficient for each module is not in vain. In fact, the number of coefficients indicates the value of the module in the course. In other words, the higher the coefficient and number of hours is, the more important a module is in the course and for the students' success in their degree. In this regard, the last section of the CANEVA analysis will examine two tables 1 and two that presents the number of modules that students have in year 1 and in their final year (year 3) respectively.

Table 2. The list of modules of first year students

Annexe : Programme des enseignements du socle commun
Socle commun domaine "Lettres et Langues Etrangères"

Semestre 1

Unités d'enseignements	Matières Intitulé	Crédits	Coefficient	Volume horaire hebdomadaire		
				Cours	TD	TP
UE Fondamentale Code : UEF1.1 Crédits : 10 Coefficients : 6	Compréhension et expression écrite 1	6	4		4h30	
	Compréhension et expression orale 1	4	2		3h00	
UE Fondamentale Code : UEF1.1 Crédits : 8 Coefficients : 4	Grammaire de la langue d'étude 1	4	2		3h00	
	Phonétique correctrice et articulatoire 1	2	1		1h30	
	Initiation à la linguistique 1 (concepts)	2	1		1h30	
UE Fondamentale Code : UEF 1.1 Crédits : 4 Coefficients : 2	Initiation aux textes littéraires	2	1		1h30	
	Culture (s)/ Civilisation(s) de la Langue 1	2	1		1h30	
UE Méthodologique Code : UEM 1.1 Crédits : 4 Coefficients : 1	Techniques du travail universitaire 1	4	1		3h00	
UE Découverte Code : UED11 Crédits : 2 Coefficients : 1	Sciences sociales et humaines 1	2	1	1h30		
UE Transversale Code : UET 1.1 Crédits : 2 Coefficients : 1	Langue(s) étrangère(s) 1	2	1		1h30	
Total semestre 1		30	15	1h30	21h00	

* travail complémentaire en consultation semestrielle

(CANEVA sidi bel abbes, 2005, p. 15)

Table 3. The list of modules of final year students

Semestre 6 :						
Unité d'Enseignement	VHS	V.H hebdomadaire				Coeff
	14-16 sem	C	TD	TP	Autres	
UE fondamentales						
UEF1(O/P)						
Matière 1 linguistique	45	1h30	1h30			3
Matière2 Etude de textes littéraires	45	1h30	1h30			3
Matière 3 Etude de textes de civilisation	45	1h30	1h30			3
UEF2(O/P)						
Matière 1 Compréhension & production écrite	45		1h30			3
Matière2 Compréhension & production orale	21h30		1h30			2
Matière3 Traduction & interprétariat	21h30		1h30			2
UEF3 (O/P)						
Matière 1 Introduction à la didactique	21h30	1h30				1
Matière 2 Introduction aux langues de spécialités	21h30		1h30			1
UE méthodologie						
UEM1(O/P)						
Matière 1 Techniques de recherche	21h30		1h30			1

Etablissement :

Année universitaire : 2014 - 2015

Intitulé de la licence : Langue Anglaise

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(CANEVA sidi bel abbes, 2005, p. 21)

To begin with, both tables (1) and (2) indicate that students have three fundamental units classified according to their importance in each semester. The importance of the learning units is reflected in the amount of study hours, the number of coefficients assigned to each module, and the assessment method used. In semester 1, written and oral expression modules made the first fundamental unit for students in the department of English. This was at 112:30 hours of teaching and a combined coefficient of 6. The high coefficient and number of study hours assigned to students in these two modules confirms what Khenoune-Ghout (2015) said about the importance of language learning as the main goal for students and teachers in the beginning of the license cycle.

In semester 6, what is considered as a fundamental unit that consists of oral and written expression falls to second place after specialized academic content unit, which includes the modules of linguistics, literature, and civilization. These modules seem to out-value the language modules (oral/written expression) i.e., linguistics, literature, and civilization modules count for 135 hours of teaching, a combined coefficient of 9 and they are credited 12 points in the evaluation system. On the other hand, teaching hours for language modules decrease to 66:30 hours by semester six as noted in figure (2). To emphasise this change even more, unlike in semester one, students in semester six do not need to sit for exams in language modules as this is replaced by students' continuous evaluation.

The presented two tables from the compliance framework are just samples about how language modules become less important by the end of the first learning cycle LMD. In Master's degree, these language modules completely disappear which is an indication that students at this level should have gained a good command of the language skills of the target language. Therefore, supportive modules for that purpose are not needed. Such remarks bring us back to the research about learner autonomy in the department of English in Algerian universities and how it addresses all students as merely English language learners regardless of their level in their course or the academic domains that they are specialized in. As a result of this unclarified vision about learning goals, understandings of learner autonomy as in language learning are often projected on subject specialist students whose aim is not only to improve on their language skills but also to further their knowledge about academic domains that make part of their aspired degrees. More evidence

about this matter shall be presented through the questionnaire findings in the succeeding section.

5.2. Students' self-perceived learning goals

The current investigation did not only make use of the data elicited from the CANEVA document, but it also benefited from a questionnaire that aimed to give voice to students about the issue addressed in this research. The questionnaire was answered by 75 students enrolled in an English language, literature, and civilization course at the department of English. 52 of them were final year students while only six (6) and four (4) students were in their first and second year of their course respectively. These students' self-perceived learning goals were mainly elicited from five core questions that explicitly addressed the issue under investigation. Students' responses to the questions are analysed, illustrated, and discussed as follows.

The study participants were asked about the focus of their course. In that regard, the students were given three options namely; developing good language skills, developing the information they study in different modules, or both developing their language skills and the information that they study. Students' responses to this question are demonstrated in figure below.

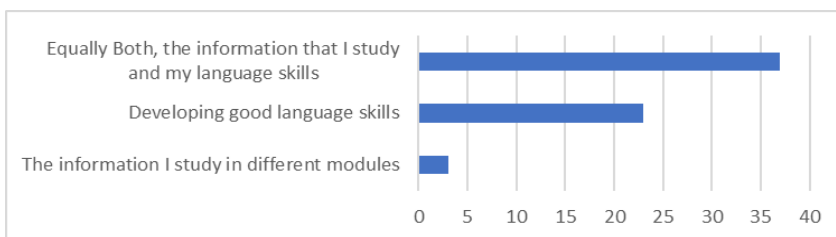


Figure 1. Students' perception of the focus of the course they are enrolled in

To begin with, there were 23 students who believed that their focal objective of their course is to solely develop their language skills, while only three (3) students thought that the objective of the course is to develop their knowledge about the academic content that they study. Interestingly, these two numbers combined come no near the majority of 47 students who noted that their objective is to equally develop good language skills and to expand on the information that they study in academic content modules. Students' initial responses in the questionnaire evidently matched the findings from the CANEVA document where both of these learning goals were highlighted as part of the students' course of study in the department English in Algerian universities.

In a relatively similar question, the study participants were also asked what makes them successful in their course. The students were required to demonstrate which of the learning objectives that they noted earlier is more important to them. Students were given two options, their good language skills, and the information they study in the different modules they have. And their responses were as follows

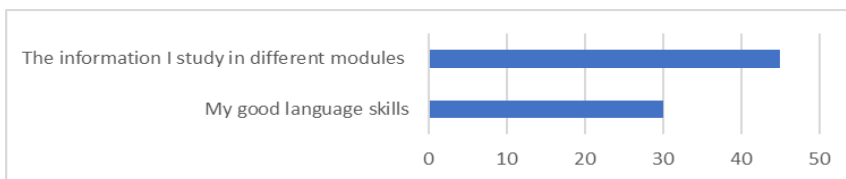


Figure 2. Students' perception of their success in the department of English

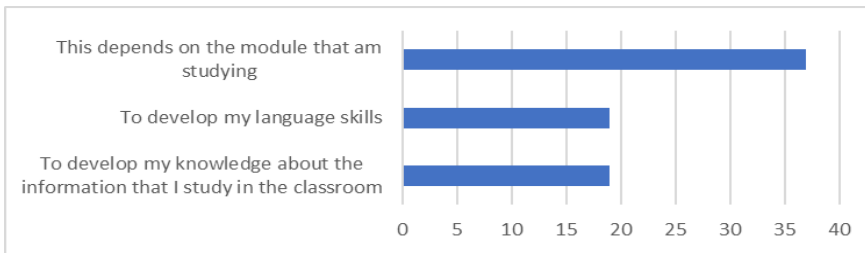


Figure 3. Students' learning objectives in course at the department of English

Once more, some students expressed divergent views when it comes to what to prioritise as their learning objectives in the department of English, whether it is the language skills that they need to develop of the academic content knowledge that makes part of their degree, and they are meant to graduate with. However, a majority of 37 students opted for the third option which is that their learning objectives depend on the modules that they study. In other words, whether it is improving their language skills or expanding their knowledge about the academic content that they study, all depend on what the module is about. For instance, if a module is about American literature, then it is self-evident that it is the students' concern to learn about topics that address issues that this module revolves around. To elaborate even more, the students were furthermore asked if there is a relationship between the importance of a module for them and the coefficient allocated to it. Students' responses were as follows.

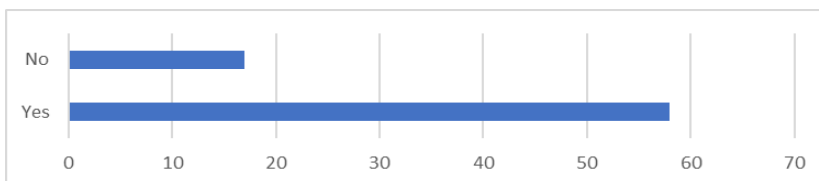


Figure 4. The role of the coefficient in dictating the importance of modules

As expected, the importance of the module is dictated by the coefficient given to it. In other words, the higher the coefficient, the more impactful the module is to students. Students elaborated on this by saying that the coefficient can significantly impact their grades, therefore it is necessary to prioritise the most important modules. Students-participants were allowed some space to elaborate on their answers in which they explained:

“I wouldn't prioritize other modules with 1 coef and forget about methodology for instance which has 3 coef”

(Student number 67)

“If I give all my energy to the module with the highest coefficient I won't worry about my overall average, and can even afford not succeeding in other modules”

(Student number 33)

Evidently, students were very pragmatic in the way they dealt with the modules they study. Students 67 and 33 explained that it is not logical for them to miss out or not to prioritise modules with high coefficient as these can significantly boost their final marks and general grades. Students' responses in this regard, match the findings from the CANEVA document where it was indicated that academic content modules are with the highest coefficient, hence more significant by the end of the students' course. Although such modules are taught in the English language, their main objective remains to equip students with research skills and academic tools and knowledge, hence serving as pre-specialisation for a proceeding Masters course. Nonetheless, the debate that is raised about academic content modules is whether their importance lays in the language or the information that they teach to students. This question is particularly important in

this research as it addresses what students' objectives are in these modules. To address this issue, the students' participants were asked if academic content modules are more concerned with the information rather than the academic content taught in these modules. Student' responses were as follows.

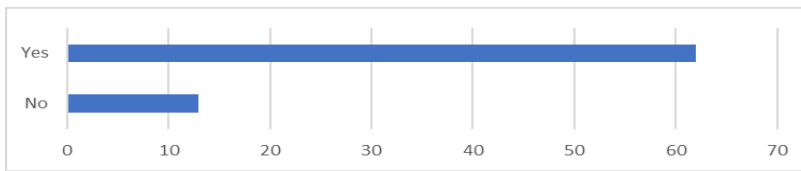


Figure 5. Students' perception of the focus of academic content modules

The figure above shows that the vast majority of students believe that modules such as civilization, literature, and methodology are more concerned with the academic information taught rather than the language aspect. These findings seem to confirm the previous data in is research about the importance of academic content modules for students and that their success lies in figuring which modules have the highest impact on their grades.

5. Discussion

The current research explores students' learning objectives in the department of English. Firstly, the CANEVA document explicitly indicated that the overall objective for students is to provide them with an English language training to be able to participate in teaching contests, and to advance to Masters courses. Although this was the overall aim, when digging deeper in the same document, one could find that the accomplishment of the students' course in the department of English depends on developing both, good language skills and the attainment of

specific academic content that makes part of the students' course. The current research did not only examine the objectives underlined in the CANEVA document. However, it furthermore investigated the modules through which students' learning objectives are fulfilled. In this vein, it was noted that students' modules changed over their course of study. While students start with a list of modules that emphasize on their language skills, in the end of their study course, language skills modules like written and oral expressions are reduced in coefficient and in study hours. On the other hand, academic content modules like literature, civilization and linguistics seem to be given more classroom hours and higher coefficient. In this respect, the students in the survey revealed that they are more concerned with the information taught in academic content modules simply because succeeding in these modules increases their chances for better overall grades.

When writing this paper, it was not easy to find resources that investigate similar fundamental issues about students learning objectives in the department of English. Perhaps, to many, it is almost self-evident that students in the department of English are mainly concerned with the learning the English language. Given the lack of resources, the research employed a survey to project the students' voices about the issue under investigation. In the end, both the survey and the CANEVA document revealed that students in the department of English have language learning objectives which are important to have developed throughout and by the end of their course. However, language itself is not the only criteria based on which students' success is determined. In fact, students need to acquire some specialised academic content that makes an integral part of their course.

It is one of the aims of this article to explain in what ways the identified learning objectives of students reflect their autonomy in learning. To answer this question, the discussion shall proceed to the next section where the notion of “subject matter autonomy” is introduced as a potential alternative to “language learner autonomy” which is mostly appropriate when addressing language learning issues.

5.1. Thoughts on subject matter autonomy

To reiterate, in the context of this article, learners have a set of academic content modules that dictate specific learning objectives which are not necessarily language related. In this regard, students can also be autonomous in learning the academic content that makes part of their degree. However, it is not necessarily in the same way that language learner autonomy is recognised. In this respect I shall re-introduce the term of subject-matter autonomy as presented by Candy (1988) who used it to refer to non-language related autonomy. This term has been absent from learner autonomy discourse because it does not address language learning issues. According to Candy (1988) “an autonomous learner -in subject matter learning- is the one who knows enough to be able to distinguish defensible from indefensible knowledge claims in the area of his/her expertise” (p.75). In his definition, Candy does not look at autonomy primarily from the lens of involving students in the process of learning. However, to him “autonomy is equated with critical intelligence, independence of thoughts and judgement” (Candy, 1991, p. 103). Subject matter autonomy is furthermore elaborated by Candy (1988) when he says that “learners are active makers of meaning: not that they are, or should be, active in the learning situation, but that learning itself is an active process of

constructing and transforming personal meanings" (p. 74). Such argument cancels the need for students to make fundamental decisions about their learning like sharing the responsibility of creating content for one to be autonomous learners. However, it is the independence of thoughts that should be encouraged and appreciated so that learning can occur. After all, what matters the most in learning is not necessarily what learners do, but it is what happens in their minds when they face new information and experiences and how they assimilate and retain that knowledge when it is called for.

In the end, the type of autonomy in subject matter that Candy identified seems more compatible with the academic content modules of students in the department of English, where the main goal of students is to develop their knowledge in a particular area of expertise. Therefore, it is safe to say that Candy's proposal of subject matter autonomy is more convenient when researching learner autonomy in contexts where subject knowledge learning is prioritised.

6. Conclusion

The rationale behind the current study is that learner autonomy research is only addressed in the domain of language learning, especially when such investigations take place in the department of English in Algerian universities. Such research endeavours may not properly reflect the context of students where they also have non-language learning goals that they aim to achieve. The immediate problem that rises when addressing this issue is the sheer amount of academics who consider students at the department of English as mainly language learners. In this regard, the current research explored the learning goals that students aim to achieve in

their three years course at the department of English in Algerian universities. To do this, mix-method research was conducted in which both a CANEVA document was analysed, and questionnaires were distributed to students enrolled in a licence degree course in the department of English in Algerian universities.

In the end, the current research demonstrated that developing language skills is neither the main nor the only objective that students in the department of English aim to achieve. Therefore, investigations about learner autonomy in this context should not solely be about maximizing students' language learning, but also about the maximizing the attainment of the academic content that they are meant to graduate with. Consequently, the current article paves the way to more studies about learner autonomy in the department of English and beyond in ways that encourage exploring the underlined learning objectives of learners for more purposeful and goal-oriented research with potential practical impact.

7. References

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